



Our Patchwork Nation: The Surprising Truth about the "Real" America

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A revolutionary new way to understand America's complex cultural and political landscape, with proof that local communities have a major impact on the nation's behavior-in the voting booth and beyond.

In a climate of culture wars and tremendous economic uncertainty, the media have often reduced America to a simplistic schism between red states and blue states. In response to that oversimplification, journalist Dante Chinni teamed up with political geographer James Gimpel to launch the Patchwork Nation project, using on-the-ground reporting and statistical analysis to get past generalizations and probe American communities in depth. The result is "Our Patchwork Nation," a refreshing, sometimes startling, look at how America's diversities often defy conventional wisdom.

Looking at the data, they recognized that the country breaks into twelve distinct types of communities, and old categories like "soccer mom" and "working class" don't matter as much as we think. Instead, by examining Boom Towns, Evangelical Epicenters, Military Bastions, Service Worker Centers, Campus and Careers, Immigration Nation, Minority Central, Tractor Community, Mormon Outposts, Emptying Nests, Industrial Metropolises, and Monied Burbs, the authors demonstrate the subtle distinctions in how Americans vote, invest, shop, and otherwise behave, reflect what they experience on their local streets and in their daily lives. "Our Patchwork Nation" is a brilliant new way to debate and examine the issues that matter most to our communities, and to our nation.

Our Patchwork Nation: The Surprising Truth about the "Real" America Details

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From Reader Review Our Patchwork Nation: The Surprising Truth about the "Real" America for online ebook

Jeff Raymond says

A surprisingly great read about modern demographics and how they affect culture and politics. I figured a lot of it would be a rehash of what we see in the media, but the book really drills down into what the communities mean and how they impact each other and themselves. Definitely recommended on a number of levels.

Caren says

Some very interesting ideas here. Rather than the simplistic red state/blue state scenario, the authors have divided the country into twelve community types with representative examples of each. In the back of the book is a list of every county in the USA and the first and second choice of what type each may represent. The authors are quick to concede that life is more complex than twelve "types" can reveal, but upon looking at my own county, I thought their description was spot-on. The twelve types are: 1) boom towns 2) campus and careers, emptying nests, evangelical epicenters, immigration nation, industrial metropolis, military bastions, minority central, monied burbs, Mormon outposts, service worker centers, and tractor country. After descriptions of the places used as examples of each type, the end of the book turns to an evaluation of what these communities may expect in future developments for their economy, political outlook and the culture of each place. The authors speak of the challenges and strengths for each type and make tentative predictions about directions each community could take. My only very small quibble is the poor editing of the book, leading to some awkward sentence structures and even a few words left out...The book is meant to impart information, though, so whether it is elegantly written is, in the end, of no great consequence.

Patrick says

Dante attempts to answer what makes America, America by demographic challenge. I give this book a 3.5 stars because though full of interesting information, it does not fully engage the reader. I think the most informative part of the book is the political section and the culture section especially how religion plays in their cultural milieu. Although I prefer living in a megalopolis due to the diversity that is available and the Campus&Career Centers due to the forward thinking intellectual energy of the place, I tend to identify with the Tractor Country values the most.

1) Boom Towns - were overwhelming fueled by the real estate bubble with all that it brought. They tend to be white 30ish Americans who are raising children and thus think social values and education are important. They tend to be Catholic or mainline Protestant and tend to be more educated and conservative due to the growing families. They also want to be outside city life but not leave city amenities completely. They want to recreate city lifestyle out of nothing and tend to be over-leveraged. The best example of this type of family would be Southlake and Nat and Jim.

2) Campus and Careers - Since they are in college towns, these people tend to be young and forward looking. They are activists especially in the environmental front. Environmental activism is forcing business to cater

to this demographic which in turn forces local government to respond. They like change and are active participants of the New Economy; thus making them strong democrats. They tend to be adopters of technology and change. Whereas government used to be their biggest benefactors now they look to private industry to fund R&D and thus are a big economic engine for communities. I still think there is an important role the government plays in funding basic science and defense research. They are less likely to be rocked by financial catastrophes. Political debate thrives in this area.

3) Empty Nesters - They are predominantly retirees from the industrial era who do not like change, development, roads. They tend to like living in rural areas where change and development are less likely. They think Obama is a socialist because he is proposing massive curbing of the rate growth in Medicare and do not trust any sort of comprehensive reform. They distrust immigrants and think because they look different they are illegals. They belong to civic clubs. They overwhelmingly vote Republican. The only reason Obama made inroads with them in '08 was due to their shrinking investment accounts.

4) Evangelical Epicenters - The people who are attracted to this group are heavily social conservative voters who are anti-abortion, anti-gay marriage; thus they are staunchly Republicans. They dislike secular authority and doubt the validity of secularism in government in that they dislike the division between church and state. What surprises me about this group is that their anti-government sentiment extends to local government with its emphasis on anti-spending in schools and roads and any secular services. They view investments as a waste of money. Their lack of concern for education shows in that people are not going to colleges. Bottom line, they would rather give to their church rather than to government. Economically, they tend to thrive in small factories and light production. They are the home of showtune's Mega-churches with self-contained social systems that re-enforces their belief systems. They tend to be absolutist in their fervor.

5) Immigrants - Although Hispanic immigrants are naturally more socially conservative, Republican nativist tendencies are pushing them away. Business owners like the Gomez will vote Democrat just because they are afraid of being hassled by law enforcement officials even though they are citizens. Economically, they tend to work in agriculture and not manufacturing. Illegals tend to compete with unskilled high school drop outs for work. The counties tend to be evenly split as nativist want to have stricter enforcement of the "other" because they are perceived as endangering the "American way of life" though their towns have a distinct immigrant feel to them. While the "other" will vote for the party that is perceived to welcome them, Democrats. They tend to rely on the ER for care and askew health insurance altogether as unnecessary.

6) Megalopolis - They tend to be democratic bastions of the diverse, multi-ethnic, multi-racial, multi-cultural types. Manufacturing as a percentage of the job market is falling rapidly taken over by healthcare/education, financial/real estate. Because of the decrease in manufacturing jobs due to overseas competition, good jobs for unskilled workers are growing with an issue on racial/educational/wealth inequality rising. While a quarter of the people here pursue post-graduate training, at least a quarter are functionally illiterate. The issue here is where does one find the money to retrain unskilled workers in an economic downturn? There is twice the national average of executive/professional workers. The challenge of the cities are what challenges America will face in the 21st century.

7) Military Bastions - They tend to be based around military bases. They also tend to not like long drawn out wars because economically they suffer from the soldiers not being in town to their family being more fiscally conservative during deployment. Although the military itself is more diverse than the national average, the bases surrounding it tend to be more conservative. Also, military bases provide military contractor services and R&D. Military R&D spending can be the Republicans answer to the Democratic bastion of academia.

8) Minority Central - Mostly found in the deep south with a high of 40% blacks in the population. Whites

and Blacks live in separate but parallel universe. Because they are so divided in their interaction, they are divided in their politics too. They are the poorest in the nation with a perpetual degree of unemployment and lower than average enrollment in college; they rely on a rapidly diminishing manufacturing sector for employment. Race politics plays into every sort of politics here from education to wage differentiation. The issue here is that both races are consigned to this separation and the lack of opportunities for black people. Both races here do not want to interact with the other. White flight into private schools make taxing for better public schools for blacks not popular. But, how else are you going to raise the standard for the Black race?

9) Monied Burbs - When people think of the American dream as a land of plenty, they think of the monied burbs. This is the place where the vast majority of middle class live and is highly demographically represented of America as a whole. What is telling is that these regions have one of the highest educational and thus financial achievements of all of America. There is an even split between religious people and non-religious people here with people who are religious evenly split between all major Christian denomination. They are also the proverbial SWING VOTE with a reported 39% of the voters saying that they are independent. They only care about the economy in their voting politics and especially as it effects the stock market. This is where the spirit of entrepreneurship reign and thought-leaders live.

10) Mormon outpost - LDS are the most reliable Republicans out there with the way they value traditionalism and askew anything perceived as the "other". They value individual responsibility and law&order. Economically, they seem to be average for the country. They are super white in make up and agriculture tend to make up a bigger percentage of their economy. Despite the increasing influx of Hispanics due to agriculture, they have a tradition of welcoming them because of their deliberate isolationist policies this is not a surprise. The real test is when Hispanics begin to outnumber white mormons; at that point will they still be welcoming. But as of now, Mormons tend to value a harmonious, ordered union with intelligent cooperation.

11) Service Centers - These are tourist places that are wedded directly to the economic forecasting. They are the first to feel the pinch when a recession is brewing. They economically driven by small-scale economic trade that is trading with once neighbors. The three main employers for this region are service a la tourism and neighborly trade, education, and light manufacturing. They are losing a lot of young people due to the lack of long term work and since these are tourist towns they are more likely to be wage-earners not salaried. Though Republican-leaning, they do not vote along ideological lines usually but rather by economic outlook.

12) Tractor County - This is what one imagines when people speak of small-town America. They are largely old white Republican that seem to concentrated in the Midwest. People who live here cherish the small town feel and the fact that you can always count on your neighbors for a helping hand. For example, regional banks will loan people money based on their relationships not based on a credit score; thus they were not as effected by the financial meltdown and cannot fathom why the federal government would risk going into debt to fund the mistakes of others who choose to be overleverage People here where frugality as a badge of honor and look at federal debt with dismay. Despite there distrust of federal spending, they do not look at government as the enemy like evangelical centers do but prefer local government who only spend what is needed to make society work. The people here are heavily into agricultural as the main industry. Even though they will vote for social conservative positions, they are not activists about it like the Mormons or Evangelicals because they dislike talking about controversial issues that will cause discord.

Patchwork Nation: economics -

Here is a shocking statistic: Since 1972 American productivity has risen 90% but his real wage has decreased by 11%. No doubt a lot of it is due to technology that has allowed productivity to increase globally and thus has allowed the same amount of work to be done at a faster time and since the markets are now global has depressed real wages in the US. But the question now becomes, is there a way for real wages to increase or will continue to remain forever flat?

The Great Recession hits different areas differently for example

1) Unemployment hit the places where education is the worst such as megalopolis where there is a stark inequality in educational achievement as well as minority central, or service worker central. Add to the fact that both minority central and service worker central are in the middle of nowhere that provides a disincentive for companies to move to these places.

2) Foreclosures and down housing market are hitting Boom Towns the hardest along with Mormon Outpost and Immigration nation

3) Stock Market shakiness hurts the monied burbs and empty nesters the most. The best people to position themselves against long term effects of the recession are monied burbs due to higher incomes and education

From all of the patchwork nation, the best to come out unscathed from the Great Recession is tractor country because of their aversion to debt and their economies rely on agriculture not on manufacturing.

Patchwork nation: Politics

Obama's election was historical change but not a political realignment that so many thought it would be. The only time there is such a clamor for political realignment was during the Great Depression.

Turning out the base:

Megalopolis tend to vote heavily democrat because demographically they have high minority population, urban poor, and wealth liberals. They also see the real effects of federal government in their lives from transportation to poverty programs.

Tractor Country - tend to be socially and fiscally conservative. They prefer local government to solve their problems and see federal government as too intrusive.

Mormon Outpost - with their call for individual liberty and social conservatism also tend to be reliably republican though the influx of people who do not subscribe to those values can certainly change the demographics

Evangelical Centers - primarily vote on social conservative issues not economic ones. They feel it is their duty to evangelize the rest of the nation to be a Christian Nation. They voted for John McCain because of Sarah Palin.

Hard Sell:

Military Bastions - Although they tend to be Republicans due to the heavy emphasis of patriotism, there vote is primarily influenced by military pork spending and stopping long-drawn out wars

Empty Nesters - they are socially and fiscally conservatives and dislike any change but they respond the most to status quo on the entitlement programs of social security and medicare as well as fluctuations in the stock market

Campus&Careers - they are more attuned to democratically social policies for change such as environmental protection. Although staunchly Democrat, inroads can be made by the libertarian wing of the Republican party.

Republican-leaning window shoppers:

Boom town tend to be more conservative due to their relative wealth compared to the general population and the fact they wanted to escape the liberal reach of urban and suburban areas in favor of area with a small town feel. Although they leaned less Republican due to the high foreclosure rates, this area has also given rise to the Tea Party movement due to government largesse seen as helping the big banks not them

Service Worker Center - Although they resemble the Tractor Country in their desire to preserve the small town feel, the economy based on tourism is hit the hardest and thus their population might feel that they need federal government assistance the most and maybe enough to switch small town Republicans to Democrats

Free Agents:

Monied Burbs - are not politically ideological but rather driven by the economic weather and specifically their stock portfolio. They vote based on the party the gives them most economic advantage

Immigration Nation - Although immigrants are traditionally social conservatives (W won them), the current GOP anti-immigrant stance has pushed immigrants toward the Democrats for the foreseeable future. For people in immigration nation, it will be nativist who are threatened by immigrants vs citizen immigrants who are tired looking over their shoulders and the businesses who higher illegals to decrease their fixed costs.

Minority Central - will continue to vote based on their race but seeing the vast majority of them will be in Republican states their votes will continue to be disenfranchised

Populist movements of today distrust both the government and big business elites as well as immigrants who they perceive as taking jobs away from them.

Patchwork Nation: Cultural

Today's cultural influences both represents and reinforces that particular environment where they live. Marketers really did their homework in bringing content where it is wanted such as Organic supermarkets which are predominantly located in upper income places such as the monied burbs, boom towns, megalopolis, and campus&careers.

Radio talk shows are divided by NPR with its emphasis on global facts and conservative partisan radio shows that reinforces preconceived notions.

It is interesting to read about Faith and its cultural impacts on politics

- 1) Evangelicals tend to center on faith&salvation with highly personal experience which pushes them to favor politics that emphasize individual liberty and focus on their congregation at the exclusion of government intervention of any kind. But interestingly enough, they think that faith should be the defining factor in public service.
- 2) Service Worker Centers even though they are small towns are surprisingly un-religious which explains why Maine votes independently of party
- 3) Tractor Country tends to be populated with mainline Protestants and Catholics who have an ecumenical view to solving local problems. They also tend to have a top-down hierarchy to doing common things for the community predominates
- 4)Empty Nesters tend to go to church only out of habit and tend to vote based on who can help elderly concerns the most
- 5) Mormon Outpost- although they are most threatened by Hollywood and liberal media, they are the ones who cherish the separation of church and state due to being prosecuted by the state in its earlier age

Conclusion:

Chinni states that Patchwork Nation proves there is no such thing as 1 single American identity but he states that the American outlook strikingly one of optimism. Americans as a people thing that they have control over their destiny. It seems the more downtrodden a group is the more optimistic their outlook is as can be seen from Minority Central to Immigration Nation. Unlike other countries, we except the validity of the political process and disdain the use of violence as an act of intolerance.

Amy K says

An incredibly dense book containing a lot of data. Not a page turner, but interesting.

Jay Roberts, CFP®, CRPC ® says

This book is an analytic rundown of the nation's differences, taken down to a county by county level. The findings show that there are 12 types of communities that make up the basis of our nation. Good insight is given into the history, politics, and economies of each location.

The book is an enjoyable read about why we are different. The author hopes that our society is one in transition rather than one that is falling apart. However, a common theme emerges from the most economically depressed areas in our nation. These regions are the least educated of the 12 social groups, their median income is typically below the national average, and the majority of residents adhere to a philosophy of self imposed ignorance.

These groups chose opinion over fact. They focus on preconceived world views rather than interaction with an easily accessed outside world. And while I did note some lessons the other social groups could learn from them, the behaviors were driven more by a desire for homogeneity.

While each of the 12 social groups had people from across the spectrum within their classes, only the aforementioned groups placed no value on cultured intellectual prowess. I was comforted by the fact that these backwater folks were few in number, but I also have come to accept the fact that they are a force of ignorance that has learned to project their power quite well in our political arenas. A sad fact remains... There's no hope for democracy when ignorance is celebrated.

Xin says

Nice book. Still reads more like non-fiction than a scientific dissertation.

John says

I had hopes that this book would be along the lines of an updated The Nine Nations of North America. The first section, outlining various American "segments", seemed similar, though a bit dry. After that things became too wonky and technical for me to follow, so I bailed.

Emily says

A random library pick-up, this is an attempt to provide a more nuanced picture of America than just "red and blue," using statistics and narrative. The authors, a journalist and a professor of government, analyzed factors like income, gas prices, church attendance, etc. by county and found twelve clusters. They gave the twelve types of communities cute names like "Evangelical Epicenter" and "Boom Town." The book consists of brief profiles of a representative of each community type followed by comparisons of the economies, political leanings, and culture of each kind of place.

I like the idea of clustering the data in this way and using it to as background for better political analysis. That said, it didn't make for a very interesting book--there was something sort of bland and too-carefully measured about all the discussion here. One thing that did persistently strike me was how low the proportion of college graduates is nationally, and especially in some of these types of communities. I knew that my personal acquaintances reflected a higher-than-average level of college attendance, but had no idea by how much.

Check out the project's website, which has a lot of best information up front. Only if you find yourself wanting to go beyond it should you bother with the book, and in that case, avoid the ebook, in which the tables are too small to be read easily.

Steven S. says

Just a really smart way of breaking down the differences in America. It takes you to different places and explores different communities without being judgmental. And helps explain a lot of the oddities in opinion in you see on the news and read in the paper. A great read.

David R. says

Chinni and Gimpel's answer to the "American nations" blitz (e.g. Garreau's "Nine Nations", Woodward's "11 Nations") is underpowered and unconvincing. That Americans are readily divisible into computer-detectable geo- and psychodemographic clusters has long been known to market researchers, and anyone else who can perceive that various counties, zip codes, census tracts and neighborhoods may differ in consumer behavior (i.e. some are wealthy, some not). But to assume that these congeries of clusters are "nations" is a reach. And in fact Chinni and Gimpel's county-by-county overlays look suspiciously similar to the more plausible "nations" laid out by the others--nations based, it should be noted, on the basis of settlement and cultural antecedents. A last point: the book was written prior to the 2010 midterm congressional elections and the authors' political prognostications poorly matched electoral reality. This one was slightly interesting, but doesn't deliver the goods.

Robert says

Trying to analyze the country by breaking it into communities based on shared socioeconomic and religious factors is a very good idea. However, this book approaches it in a way that feels very simplistic. They only spending a few pages describing one location in each of the 12 communities they describe, and give only the most basis demographic information for each type.

One primary argument of the book is that you can't essentialize red states and blue state into one set of stereotypes, but the authors do that a lot for the community types they define--in many cases they give one-sentence answers for why a broad economic trend is affecting dozens of counties from Florida to North Dakota. This in spite of the fact that the authors admit it was extremely difficult to classify many counties that align strongly with more than one community type.

One other piece that was sort of odd is that they don't give any of their methodology until the appendix at the very end. This means that the divisions feel somewhat artificial while reading the book, since there is no explicit explanation of why exactly they differentiate (for example) one set of rural farming counties as "Emptying Nests" and another set of rural farming counties as "Tractor Country".

Svelteassassin says

Does a great job of explaining differences in American culture, politics, and economics by classifying counties in America into 12 different community types, instead of just Red State/Blue State. Sounds dry and boring, but it's actually an easy read and quite fascinating. It follows the Freakonomics model of research done by an academic but the writing done by a journalist, so it's rigorously researched but is not a boring academic tome.

Rachel says

If you've read *The Nine Nations of North America*, this book's premise will seem somewhat familiar. The authors attempt to define Americans through an ocean of cultural and economic data. Using this data they designate twelve different community types, from Industrial Metropolises to Mormon Outposts, offering some explanation of how Americans experience the same country differently, which ultimately guides them to make different political choices. While Chinni expresses concern about the splintering of national goals, he does offer suggestions of how the federal government could offer targeted solutions based on the needs of the community type. This is already happening to some degree, of course, with programs like Head Start, but the problem is convincing the people in community types that don't have those needs to spend their tax dollars on communities that do.

While Chinni effectively argues that the need for this kind of cooperation is increasing, he doesn't offer much to help to the politicians who would actually have to create the programs and maneuver the money to support them. While "pork" and "earmarks" are popular dirty words to throw around during election years, politicians will continue to shy away from conducting the kinds of deals necessary to make sure each community type gets what it needs. Plus, the communities that hold the most swing voters will necessarily get the most attention, and according to Chinni, the community with the largest number of independents is also one of the wealthiest. The kind of financial attention lavished on that community type to continue to woo those voters will likely increase the gap between rich and poor. At any rate, this book certainly gives its readers a lot to digest and discuss.

Nathaniel says

Good theory, bad statistical presentation.

I've lived in seven states in all four continental US time zones, and understanding regional behavior in this country is a personal interest of mine. I also have graduate-level research methods training, making me the perfect person to critique this book. And I really wanted to like it. Unfortunately, it just doesn't pass the smell test once the methodology is poked at even a little.

The basic premise of this book is to counteract the sweeping and inaccurate trend of the news media and those who follow it to paint a state's entire population based entirely on state-level "red" and "blue" behavior. To this end, the authors have attempted to divide the nation into demographic groups based on primary traits, such as "Immigration Nation" (Latino-dominated counties), "Monied Burbs", etc. These "types" are then profiled using one county as an example, which is supposed to be representative of all counties in this category. (There's also an analysis of economic, cultural, and political factors in the back, but I mostly skipped over this for being way too general).

There are two problems with the authors' approach, a big problem and a little problem. The little problem is that profiling one county is assumed to represent all counties in this category when, in some cases, counties in the same category may be broadly similar, but widely different in specific variables. This is not adequately captured in the infographics for each county type, which misleadingly just give the demographic grouping instead of accurately stating that these are statistics just for the "representative" county. It would be accurate, for example, to say that Philadelphia is an "industrial metropolis" that is 70% Democratic, and has certain age distribution, income distribution, and immigration variables. It is not accurate to say that "all industrial

metropolises are 70% Democratic and have the same other variables as Philadelphia", which is what the heading implies; for example, Indianapolis, while definitely an "industrial metropolis" as defined in the description of that county type and identified as such, is much less Democratic and has different other variables, and most other "industrial metropolises" are somewhere between Indianapolis and Philadelphia in Democratic affiliation, and have variables of their own in the other categories. This would seem to just be a problem with a lazy editor putting the wrong heading on these charts, but it seriously distorts the analysis by implying that data for one county is an average when those tables should be presenting an actual average of all of the counties in that sample, not just a mislabeled demographic profile of one arbitrary-picked "representative" county.

Now for the big problem, which is that the assignment of category only makes sense about half of the time, and usually only in cases where it makes sense to anyone with a very basic understanding of US geography and urban growth patterns, e.g. counties that are very conspicuously suburban and anchoring major cities are always "monied burbs" (except for Washington County, Oregon, where all of the richest people in Portland live, which is inexplicably a "boom town".)

Using the list found in the appendix, I checked Chinni's primary and secondary categorization of every county I've ever lived in (a geographically balanced "convenience sample"), as well as several other counties that were experiencing demographic growth, such as Multnomah County, Oregon and Harris County, Texas. I then compared Chinni's results to how I would classify these counties as a demographer, and in most cases as an actual onetime resident. The results were night and day. As with the Oregon example above, about half of Chinni's primary, secondary, or both categorizations make absolutely no sense whatsoever to someone actually familiar with that county, with the results being particularly bad in developed areas surrounded by rural ones. For example, Chittenden County, Vermont (Burlington), the largest county in an educated state and home to the University of Vermont and about 6 other colleges, is inexplicably described as a "boom town" instead of "campus and careers" despite not having had a significant population explosion in about 35 years and meeting the "campus and careers" description to a T. Missoula County, Montana, another college town located at 3,200 feet in the middle of the Rockies, is bizarrely given "Tractor Country" as a secondary category. Major cities aren't exempt from this process, either - who'd have known that Multnomah County (Portland), Oregon, had the secondary category of "industrial metropolis" along the lines of Pittsburgh and Cleveland because they had a little bit of industry 60 years ago, despite having basically none of the same racial or economic demographics today? Worst of all are cases where the map in the book doesn't match the appendix. Burleigh County, North Dakota (Bismarck), is identified as "tractor country" on the "tractor country" map, which is accurate, but is inexplicably listed as a "monied burb" in the appendix, despite having an average per capita income of \$28,350 and encompassing a small city with no suburbs surrounded for hundreds of miles by farmland.

The categories are also inconsistently defined. For example, "campus and careers" as a secondary category seems to be used to denote any location, regardless of actual college presence, that has an educated population, except, oddly, for certain actual college towns such as Burlington. The "military bastions" category manages to miss Martin County, Indiana, home of the third-largest naval installation in the country (which covers 33% of the county's land area); Martin County is instead an "emptying nest" and an "evangelical epicenter", both accurate categories, but not the *most* accurate. And the "boom town" category seems to be completely random, encompassing a group of towns that have very little in common except for an arbitrarily-defined economic upswing at the time of the analysis. This is especially interesting because nowhere in eastern Montana or western North Dakota falls into this category by Chinni's analysis, despite the Bakken shale oil boom really making this region the *only* group that falls into this category in actuality. Admittedly, other groupings, such as "Immigration nation" (plurality-Latino counties, mostly) and "evangelical epicenters" are pretty accurate, but these are the ones that are most obvious because they focus

on one inelastic statistical measure (e.g. ethnicity or religious affiliation) rather than several, and do not really change from region to region.

In short, this book's profiles of the different regions are useful, and the effort to go beyond black and white (or in this case red and blue) is commendable, but Chinni's methodology really leaves something to be desired. He has really only replaced the sweeping and willful inaccuracy of Election 2000's black and white stereotyping with a different, more nuanced kind of inaccuracy borne of not putting enough effort into categorization before this was published. This is an emerging field of knowledge that still has a long way to go, and while this book has made a noteworthy contribution, we're still not even halfway there yet.

Ryan says

The book starts with an interesting premise: The tendency to try and divide the US into red and blue states misses out on the variety of American experiences that in fact exist. Unfortunately the authors of Our Patchwork Nation don't really accomplish their goal of showing that the categorization of red and blue states is insufficient because they go on to make 12 hard categories of different American experiences. The problem is not that the red-blue dichotomy doesn't account for the purple in between. The problem is trying to categorize the American experience at all and it doesn't matter if you split it up 2, 12, or 2000 ways.

There is also something rather unsatisfying about applying these categories at the county level. I understand the limitations of data at larger scale levels such as census tracts or blocks, but experiences within a single county can be so varied that in many cases you might have several experiences represented. It's one of the weaknesses of the choropleth mapping approach they took. You can only show each county as one category. This effectively disregards the nuance of experience the authors were supposedly trying to explore.

Finally, the reader is asked to put a lot of faith in the categories these authors come up with. I can't say I've visited even a quarter of the counties in the US and certainly not in a way that is meaningful. Nonetheless, when I look at how the counties I know well were categorized, in some cases I was left scratching my head. I wasn't surprised that most of the counties surrounding Marion County, Indiana (where Indianapolis is located) would be considered Monied Burbs. The one that got me really questioning their metrics was Delaware County, Indiana. Delaware County is home to Muncie and Ball State University. I spent 5 of the 7 years there. I was quite surprised to see Delaware County being called a Boom Town. Even from the text it's a bit unclear what the authors are calling Boom Towns, but from what I gather these are largely exurban outposts that experienced rapid housing growth in recent years. They had the rug pulled out from them when the housing bubble popped and the future of development in these places seems uncertain. Delaware County, while certainly a place that has opened up to long distance commuters to Indianapolis, was not some expansive plot of farmland prior to exurban expansion. There's a 20,000+ student campus, cities and town that have fairly well established industrial legacies, and an economic planning that is not entirely dependent on Indianapolis. I would have expected Delaware County to be a Campus and Career, Industrial Metropolis, Service Workers Center, or even Tractor Country before a Boom Town. The problem is the authors created a statistical metric that is only superficially grounded in just a few case examples.

I'm rambling a bit, but my point in this is that once you start comparing these categories to personal experience it can be quite difficult to have faith in their categorization of places you haven't personally experienced. Even if you accept that broad categorizations are fine and dandy, I have no faith in these categories being generally on target because they don't reflect the situation in the places I know.

This was a book best left unwritten.
