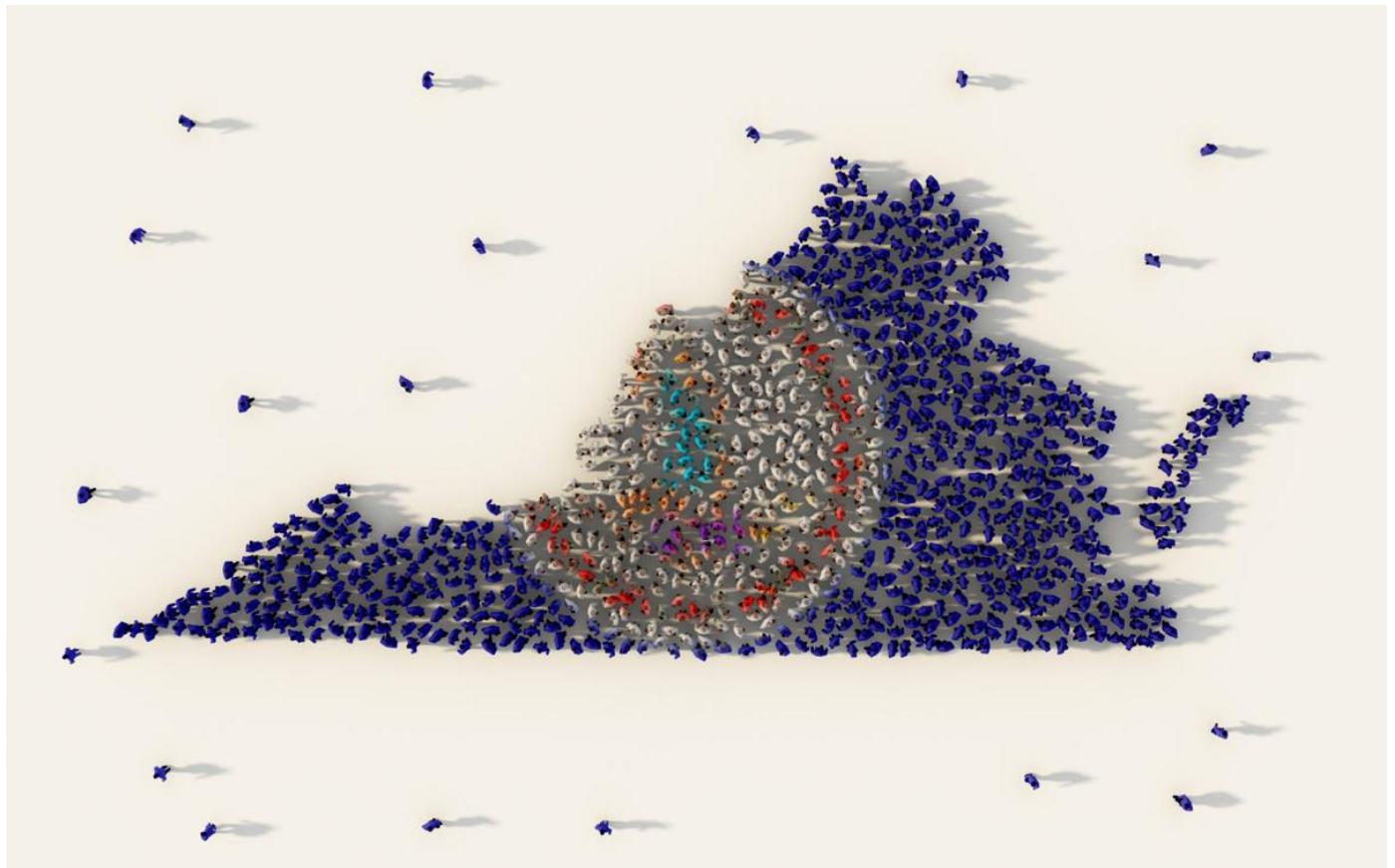


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Community Connections

Margaret Cowell and Sarah Lyon-Hill column: As election dust settles in Virginia, don't forget the urban-rural ties that bind us

By Margaret Cowell and Sarah Lyon-Hill
Dec 4, 2021



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A blue banner for the Chase Mobile app. On the left, there is a white rounded rectangle containing the Chase logo, the word "Welcome", and a "Today's Snapshot" button with a right-pointing arrow. To the right of this rectangle, the text "Do more with the Chase Mobile app." is displayed in white.

The glass-half-empty types may be tempted to see the 2021 election as yet another reminder that Virginia remains a politically contested constellation of people and places. While suburban areas continue to determine which shades of purple best suit them, the usual divide — at least in recent decades — between the deep red of our rural areas and the bright blue of their urban counterparts was clear.

And while this election certainly highlighted divergences, inequities and tensions between urban and rural, the glass-half-full types might see these results as a call to action, a chance to highlight the possibilities afforded by a more holistic understanding of who and what Virginia is. After all, for every election or policy that divides us politically, there are countless ties that bind us.

In a new book from Virginia Tech's Center for Economic and Community Engagement, authors from across the commonwealth consider the different socioeconomic tethers that connect our regions. The urban planners, historians, economists and other experts who contributed note that families and communities across the commonwealth rely on an overlapping system of public health, transportation, broadband, child care, and other forms of social and physical infrastructure.

The importance of these institutions has never been clearer, given the overlapping threats from COVID-19, economic upheaval, and regional and racial inequalities that have challenged communities in recent years.

The authors' efforts to better understand Virginia and its urban-rural ties have left us inspired by a number of holistic solutions to challenging problems, including innovative responses to substance use disorder and opioid use disorder. Inspired by Beth Macy's book "Dopesick," which chronicled the emergence of the opioid epidemic in the Roanoke Valley, the Roanoke Valley Collective Response was formed in 2018.

RVCR represents stakeholders from across the Roanoke Valley and across various sectors, including policy, medical, mental/behavioral health, peer recovery, research, faith-based community, treatment/recovery, law enforcement, EMS, social services

and public health. RVCR hosts monthly steering committee and stakeholder meetings at which participants present and discuss new information to address the evolving addiction epidemic.

Other encouraging collaborations can be seen in the emergence of multidisciplinary and multisite networks supporting equity in STEM education and workforce development. Both rural and urban school districts face challenges in achieving quality science, technology, engineering and math education, including limited access to resources and field trip opportunities. Rural Virginia schools struggle with teacher recruitment and retention, while urban schools are least likely to be taught by well-prepared teachers and are regularly challenged by teacher turnover.

To address these issues, professionals organized the Virginia STEM Summit in 2019 at Virginia Commonwealth University to take the first steps toward a public-private partnership and network of pre-K-12 schools, informal education systems (e.g., libraries, museums and after-school programs), colleges and universities, government and employers. Organizers of the event and follow-on activities noted that their ability to incorporate jurisdictions from urban, suburban and rural areas was essential because it allowed for a diversity of inputs, and also serves as an effective dissemination strategy for best practices that emerge.

These collaborations are not easy, and they do not happen overnight. They inevitably require patience, determination and even a bit of gumption. As new (and returning) legislators make their way to Richmond come January, our hope is that they will not let geopolitical divides dictate policy.

Indeed, we all would be wise to remember that Virginia is a commonwealth full of places that are economically, conceptually and physically interdependent. When comparing levels of fiscal stress and net tax revenue/distribution across the state, for example, the resulting maps are mirror images of each other. More rural localities and urban cores experience greater fiscal stress while also receiving a net tax inflow from the state. More suburban localities have tax revenue surpluses and experience less fiscal stress.


One could conclude from this interdependence between suburban regions and their urban-rural counterparts that many types of communities could benefit from forming political coalitions. Legislators (and their constituents) might find it is in their best interest to leverage their respective political power and voice to collectively address these many, shared socioeconomic challenges.

Margaret Cowell is associate professor of urban affairs and planning at Virginia Tech, teaching courses on economic development, urban economics and public policy. Sarah Lyon-Hill is senior economic development specialist at the Virginia Tech Center for Economic and Community Engagement.

They are co-editors of "**Vibrant Virginia: Engaging the Commonwealth to Expand Economic Vitality and Inclusivity**," available in January from Virginia Tech Publishing. Contact them at: mmcowell@vt.edu and sarahlh@vt.edu

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