In 1950’s “All About Eve,” Bette Davis utters the famous quote: “Fasten your seat belts. It’s going to be a bumpy night.” Considering the fractured nature of the country and the continuing toll being taken by the aftermath of the Great Recession, state and national lawmakers might want to think about fastening their own seat belts.

That was the message of Dante Chinni, one of the authors of “Our Patchwork Nation,” who spoke at The Council of State Governments’ Midwestern Legislative Conference Annual Meeting in Indianapolis July 19.

Although states tend to think of themselves as individual entities, Chinni said, it’s not that simple. Using a wide variety of data, Chinni and his colleagues have broken America down into 12 different types of communities. Service worker centers, for instance, are small towns that have been hit hard with the loss of small manufacturers, are not necessarily agricultural, but are reliant on people from wealthier areas to spend money on tourism.

“These places have been hit particularly hard,” Chinni said. “… There are a lot of them in the Midwest. I think economically, going forward, these places are a big challenge and we’ve got to figure out how to handle them as a country.”

Swing states also are home to many service worker center areas, Chinni said, and their political allegiance is up for grabs.

“Nearly every state has about 10 percent or more of their population in those areas,” he said. “... These places end up being very important. They tend to vote conservative, they’re culturally conservative, they don’t like big government, they don’t like big cities very much. But they will switch their vote. Their vote is up for grabs and they’ve been hammered in the recession. Their vote is going to be very important in 2012.”

Chinni believes manufacturing jobs will not be coming back to the U.S. and those that remain will require fewer workers who will need more education to be able to operate increasingly complex machinery. The biggest chance for economic growth, he said, is in areas called college and careers. These communities are centered around a university, have unemployment rates lower than the national average, have a lot of young people, an educated workforce and have ridden out the recession fairly well.

Chinni said the Midwest has a big advantage: It’s home to Big 10 universities.
“That’s something to really work off of. There’s a lot of intellectual capital in those places,” he said. “If I were in the Midwest, I would take the leading one or two universities and do what I can to build business around them. I would build as much as I could of my economic base around these centers of higher learning.

“... The economy is not fixable. We’re in the midst of a long decade trying to figure out where we’re going. The thing that does make sense is you’ve got to fund education. It’s the only thing you can do.”

Chinni said policymakers should remember the public is angry. In six of the 12 types of communities that make up the “Patchwork Nation,” the median family income has shrunk from 1980 to 2010. This will eventually lead to a populist movement, he said, which isn’t necessarily a good thing, since they often can become “really weird.”

“They can be isolationist; they can be nativist,” he said. “I don’t think the Tea Party is a real populist movement yet. ... Something is coming, I just don’t know what it’s going to look like yet.”

‘Patchwork Nation’ Communities:

- **Industrial Metropolis** | Densely populated, highly diverse urban centers; incomes trend higher than the national average and voters lean Democratic. This area was hit hard by the recession from loss of factory jobs and foreclosures.
- **Boomtown** | Fast growing communities with rapidly diversifying populations. These communities did well from 2000 to 2005-06, but suffered during the recession when the housing crisis hit.
- **Campus and Careers** | Cities and towns with young, educated populations; more secular and Democratic than other American communities. These communities have ridden out the recession well, generally have lower-than-average unemployment numbers and are well positioned for when the economy recovers.
- **Emptying Nests** | Home to many retirees and aging baby boomer populations; less diverse than the nation at large. These areas took a big hit economically with manufacturing declines.
- **Evangelical Epicenters** | Communities with a high proportion of evangelical Christians, found mostly in small towns and suburbs; slightly older than the U.S. average; loyal Republican voters. Primarily based in the South, these areas typically have lower-than-average incomes and slightly lower education levels. Due to strong ties of residents to churches and their pastors, there are many centers of power.
- **Immigration Nation** | Communities with large Latino populations and lower-than-average incomes, typically clustered in the South and Southwest. These areas have been hard hit by the recession and may start spreading more to Emptying Nest areas.
- **Military Bastions** | Areas with high employment in the military or related to the presence of the military and large veteran populations; likely Republican voters although Democratic President Obama gained ground in 2008. Economies tend to seize up when country is at war and troops go off to fight.
- **Minority Central** | Home to large pockets of black residents but a below average percentage of Hispanics and Asians. These areas are primarily in the South, have much lower-than-average incomes and are tense politically with groups fighting for jobs.
- **Monied Suburbs** | Wealthier, highly educated communities with a median household income of $15,000 above the national average for counties. These areas are located around the nation’s biggest cities, have a high number of white collar and professional jobs, not highly impacted by the recession.
- **Service Worker Centers** | Midsize and small towns with economies fueled by hotels, stores and restaurants and lower-than-average median household income by county. These areas have suffered greatly during the recession and rely on money from tourism.
• **Tractor Country** | Mostly rural and remote smaller towns with older populations and large agricultural sectors. These areas have had little unemployment or foreclosures; their housing market was not affected by the housing bust because they didn’t get a big bump during the housing boom.

• **Mormon Outposts** | Home to a large share of members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints and slightly higher median household incomes. Areas are very conservative, but don’t have a lot of power centers like Evangelical Epicenters.

Source: Patchwork Nation [3].

**Additional Resources:**

• Patchwork Nation [3]

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**Also in this Issue:**

• Disparity in School Discipline [4]

• From the Expert: The Power of Fixing People Rather than Filling Prisons [5]

• State Economy by Region [6]

• Western Waters and the Clean Water Act [7]

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