
THE PRAIRIE PROGRESSIVE



a newsletter for Iowa's Democratic Left

April 2022

Iowa's maudlin pastoral fantasy

Iowa's 2020 Census marked Black Americans as roughly 4.1% of the state's population, similar to the 4.5% of the state who are farmers. However, agriculture—and images of white farmers—predominate in messaging about the composition and values of the state, perhaps most saliently seen in elections where candidates of both major parties consistently parade in overalls and rubber boots to see who can be the most authentic hay-thrower of them all. Racial and ethnic minorities are relegated to tokens or ignored entirely. Short of campaign ad visuals, this also has a tangible impact on which constituents receive the most support from the state government, usually to the detriment of ethnic minorities and immigrants, who are largely concentrated in the state's larger cities.

One cannot choose to have relatives who farm or not—by definition, one does not choose their relatives. Even with my commitment to understanding the history and politics of the state, and the time I've taken in advocating my vision for a better state to live in (i.e., more bike lanes), by virtue of being

- Not white
- Not rural
- Not born in Iowa, nor having extended family there

I increasingly felt that I would never be considered as a “full” resident of the state (at least when it came to political decision-making), even by the more nominally inclusive Democratic Party. In this “farmer ideology,” if I wanted to make this appear to be created by some stuffy central European philosopher, I would characterise this as a *weltanschauung der bauern*. Indeed, 40% of Iowans can trace at least part of their ancestry back to the German lands, possibly the single largest place of ancestral origin in the state.

The number of farms and the rural population of Iowa has steadily shrunk over the past several decades, even as agricultural productivity and the population of the state writ large has grown over the same time. I have perceived this “farmer ideology” as a form of wistful nostalgia for a time when the small towns of Iowa were more prosperous, and people like me – non-white, non-traditional, non-rural – were less present on the land. It is worth noting that this “farmer ideology” is largely detached from the actual material aspects of agriculture and rural life, and indeed is best performed with an oversized pickup truck in the driveway of a suburban tract home

with a crabgrass lawn that was once farmland, and before that, tallgrass prairie.

While this nostalgia of varied historical accuracy is a decidedly conservative, if not outright reactionary outlook, progressives can participate in it as well, by highlighting parts of Iowa's history, such as institutional support for public schools and universities, “good Republicans” like the late governor Robert Ray, and legalizing same-sex marriage ahead of the national curve, while making some hefty omissions. At least seven Iowan cities, from Des Moines to Dubuque, had official red-lining maps made in the 1930s; countless more practiced segregation through private covenants. Iowa was one of the first states to enact ‘right-to-work’ laws in 1947; attempts to partially repeal this over a decade ago ultimately came up short. The people for whom this state, river, town, and university are named after, the Ioway, have largely been banished to Oklahoma, Kansas, and Nebraska, through what could most charitably be described as ethnic cleansing.

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Iowa tax cuts: Grover Norquist on steroids

The right-wing activist Grover Norquist many years ago wrote that his goal was to shrink government to a small enough size that he could drown it in the bathtub. Norquist's government-shrinking mantra is at the heart of the Republican philosophy – cut taxes first, forcing cuts to the budget, while targeting the tax cuts at corporations and the rich. The tax bill recently enacted in Iowa is just the latest and greatest in a long string of tax cuts aimed at those goals.

The tax bill slashes the mainstay of state revenue, the income tax, by 40%, dwarfing the 10% cut in 1996 and following on more large cuts in the past decade. When fully phased in by 2026, the bill will cut \$1.9 billion from general fund revenues. To put this in perspective, the entire state general fund budget is about \$8 billion, with over half going to education: community colleges, the three public universities, and state aid to K-12 schools. The rest funds all the other services Iowans depend on: health care, infrastructure, public safety, state parks and recreation, child welfare, enforcement of labor and environmental regulations.

Ironically, it is the success of the Democrats' pandemic legislation that has allowed Iowa Republicans to make such a massive dent in revenues without immediate consequences. The current budget surpluses are largely the result of the stimulus checks, the increased child tax credit and child care credit, and the unprecedented pandemic unemployment compensation provided over the past two years. Those measures, along with aid to state and local

governments, put billions of dollars in the hands of consumers, brought about a swift end to the recession and set the economy back on its pre-pandemic growth path.

These budget surpluses will cushion the impact of the tax cuts this year and for the next couple of years, but a few years down the road this bill is bound to necessitate substantial budget cuts. Already the state is forecasting a drop in revenues in 2023, when the tax cuts are just beginning to take effect. We cannot remove a quarter of state revenue without impacting education. School funding increases will remain below historic levels, below inflation, and below what is needed to provide quality education and decent incomes for teachers. The state share of post-secondary education funding has fallen from two-thirds to one-third over the past 20 years; it will continue to fall and tuition will continue to rise, leaving parents and students with higher bills and higher debt. Funding for other needs – mental health, affordable child care, water quality—will be scarce.

The income tax cuts are so highly skewed in favor of those at the top that it is breathtaking. The bill moves to a flat 3.9 percent rate, of far more benefit to those previously paying the top rate in our mildly progressive tax. As a result, 82 percent of the tax savings go to the top one-fourth of Iowa taxpayers, with income over \$100,000. The average millionaire will save \$62,000 a year. For those in the middle, with incomes between \$40,000 and \$60,000, the savings will average just \$300 – that's about six dollars a week. The majority of those with income under \$40,000, who represent almost 40 percent of taxpayers, will get nothing at all. "Everyone gets a tax cut?" No, they

don't. "The average cut is \$1,300?" Not by any reasonable measure—the average Iowan gets one fourth of that.

How do they justify such cuts? It's the same old refrain: "We have to be competitive." For what, you might ask. For workers, for teachers, for nurses, for families with children, for college grads? Of course not—for business. And that always means competitive on taxes. Never mind that Iowa taxes overall and Iowa taxes on business have been right in the middle of the pack for decades and remain so. Never mind that taxes have little to do with where businesses invest anyway. This isn't about rational economic policy, its about cutting taxes for your friends and contributors.

This obsession with tax cuts will not turn out well. Even when sitting on a billion-dollar surplus the legislature cannot find the money to fund public education, to create affordable housing, to fund mental health, to fix our water quality problem, to make child care affordable. Why will workers want to come here? Why will young people want to stay?

Hang on folks; we're in a race to the bottom, and the hand basket is picking up speed.

—Peter Fisher is the Research Director of Common Good Iowa and is the Economist Laureate of Iowa.

Note: All impacts are from the Iowa Department of Revenue analysis of the tax bill when fully implemented in 2026, with taxpayers classified by federal adjusted gross income.

A force to be reckoned with

I am a homeowner in Golfview Mobile Home Park in North Liberty, Iowa. My rent has increased by 69% since Havenpark Communities, a private equity group from Utah purchased our park in 2019. With those increases, some residents will be paying 49% of their income to a landlord, yet Iowa lawmakers do not consider that people in that situation may lose their homes if they live on disability income that does not increase at the same rate as the rent increases continuing to be levied.

Manufactured home parks were once small mom-and-pop businesses. Residents never saw a 69% rent increase in a three-year span while park maintenance was kept up and these mom and pops were making a profit. As an affordable housing community, residents saw maybe a \$10 increase every few years. The mom-and-pop landlords used to drive through the park, chat with the residents, take a minute to share a story, a joke, or a minute of his time.

Residents know private equity landlords prefer not knowing residents by name because they want no attachment. If they stay at a distance they can remain unaware of the hardships they create for residents and show that their only concern is high profits as they follow the play book being used across the country.

Affordable housing was a new real estate frontier for greedy corporations. They saw this as a real estate market that had not been tapped and could take advantage of the market and the people that live in these homes. This was their opportunity to take from those just trying to have a small piece of the American Dream while being fully aware that most of these homes

are not mobile due to different circumstances. They viewed this as an opportunity to make huge profits by raising rents at exorbitant rates and jeopardizing the residents' small piece of the American Dream.

Our experiences have led residents to learn a lot about what's wrong with Iowa law. We banded together with residents from parks across Iowa in the Iowa Manufactured Home Residents' Association to develop a Residents' Bill of Rights focused on five of the biggest improvements needed in Iowa law. Our Iowa Manufactured Home Residents' Bill of Rights includes:

- Rent protection
- Good cause eviction standards
- Fair fees
- Fair and legal leases
- Resident rights if property go up for sale.

After three years of organizing, agitating, and educating, hundreds have signed our petitions, dozens of legislators have taken an interest in our challenges, and scores of reporters cover our stories in the news. We've even helped move some promising legislation all the way through House committees only to stall before a floor vote.

Republican leaders have blocked progress each time proposed changes start to move forward, using the excuse that park owners (through their lobby group, the Iowa Manufactured Housing Association) wouldn't "negotiate" changes to Iowa law. When did we elect legislators to "negotiate" with predatory out-of-state corporations who are destroying affordable housing and profiting off vulnerable Iowans? Was it when owners like Havenpark began donating tens of

thousands a year to the IMHA PAC, to Speaker Pat Grassley and other Republican leaders?

This year's legislation is more disappointing than ever. A proposed bill contains none of the priorities in our Residents Bill of Rights. At best, along with various legal changes requested by owners, this year's proposed bill may allow an extra 30 days before another rent increase, but no limit on the number of increases or dollar amount per year. It doesn't take a brain surgeon to realize that soon this source of affordable housing will no longer be affordable and will add to the existing crisis in the affordable housing market.

The saying goes that "First they ignore you, then they laugh at you, then they fight you...then you win." The big donations and intense lobbying from corporate park owners show that they know they must fight us. Residents have become a force to be reckoned with in Iowa.

We will continue to do our part to inform influential community leaders, legislators, and their constituents to raise their voices and join the effort to change this broken system. As residents living through this and talking to other residents across the state, we stay informed, and we realize the long arm of private equity reaching into society is taking more than its fair share. We are sounding the alarm with the hope it is heard before it is too late. Please sign our petition at www.iowafairhousing.com and join us in building the strength in numbers we need to win!

—Candi Evans has lived at Golfview in North Liberty since 1998.

Betwixt and between in Ukraine

Two million refugees. In the wake of Putin's invasion, with military strikes leaving piled rubble, that is the number who've fled. Most describe leaving their former lives behind. Just walking—or running—away from everything they'd previously known.

Their plight has inspired a near-unprecedented supportive response in much of the West. Putin's aggression has sparked a matching tsunami of outrage and condemnation, along with concrete sanctions packing a heretofore unheard-of financial wallop. But there are many flashing yellow lights amidst our support for Ukraine and condemnation of Russia. These approach-and-avoidance warning signs merit our careful attention.

First, the fundamental conundrum of the situation, which is quite hellish: Americans support Ukraine and condemn Putin's acts. We want something done. But polls indicate a stubborn reluctance to do much. Roughly 78% of Americans say "the U.S. should do whatever it can to help Ukraine." But only 17% support war as an element of "whatever it will take." This is problematic. Blue and gold Facebook pages and yard signs are not sufficient to the moment. War is hell, and WWII surely would be an apocalypse, but to telegraph that we've no intention of aggressing against Putin on behalf of Ukraine is at best self-defeating. At worst, it's an annihilation of our place on the world stage. Leaving aside the thorny question of whether we were ever worthy of that place, or it was ever worthy of us, the result is clear. We are left to go after yachts, property, and Swiss accounts while two million humans are dazed and wandering. Many wait at borders

while subjected to the West's addled and racist immigration policies.

That is the second point we seem loath to confront. We are now collectively unabashed in our cultural and racial prejudices. In the 24 March 2022 *London Review of Books*, a raft of concise, pithy narratives from various authors hits nail after nail on the head. This, from Jeremy Harding, sums up racially fractured attitudes in France that also apply here:

"So far, a rapid Ukrainian immigration has been greeted with mild-mannered assent from all sides, including the far right." In the next paragraph, however, he ominously quotes a spokesperson for *Reconquête!* – the right-wing group represented by Éric Zemmour, whom he calls "the garrulous xenophobe."

Ukrainians, the spokesman says, "share our civilisational space." That is a spokesman with a bright future, sadly. His words frame the crux of a major problem. And it's not only a problem in France. Now we in the U.S. have a specter worse than Le Pen, worse than Zemmour – we have Trump and his radicalized GOP.

It is a stunning irony that this group of racial thugs has so curbed immigration that America is starved for workers, which drives up prices more than wages and leads to dissatisfaction on a broad scale. They use these issues to criticize our current, relatively sane administration, even while they continue to create barriers to immigration. We've never needed immigrants as badly as we do now, not in modern history. And we've never refused so idiotically to admit and accommodate that need.

Our terminology on Ukrainian refugees belies this racism. Harding points out that "Majority opinion in France, while opposed to Putin's war, is roughly in agreement with the far right on a limited intake of white non-Muslim refugees." Ouch.

This means for now, at borders, refugees from Ukraine wait as racial preferences on the part of the merciful West sift through their ranks, shuffling some to the back of the line, while the white "European" refugees are waved through. It is an indictment of us all.

For now, sanctions are what we wield. And while we have applied them in ways utterly new and, to many, astonishing, their unintended consequences are ferociously awful. Thomas Meaney writes in the *London Review*, "As for the sanctions, it would be difficult to think of a less effective form of retribution for Putin's aggression, but apparently drying up remittances to Kazakhs and denying grain to Egyptians is what heroism looks like on the Western side."

Indeed. Trapped with unthinkable war on one side and ineffectual wrist-slapping on the other, we sit in our discomfort. We want to do the good thing, the right thing. But we are hamstrung by our own unacknowledged prejudices, and what must be called our weakness as a world power. Now saddled with one political party serving as a functional arm of Putin, having embraced Stalinism wholly, our slim political majority appears stunned and inert. In the face of Ukraine's suffering, inertia is both incredibly self-indulgent and dangerous. Maturity and morals demand more of us. We'll need to reach deep within to find it.

—Kim Painter's Myers-Briggs profile is *INFP*.

President Zelensky is no hero

In what nation can a former actor and comedian become president? (Well, I mean other than the U.S.). Ukraine, of course. And that's precisely the career path of Volodymyr Zelensky, President of Ukraine.

Since the invasion of his country by Russia, Zelensky has become an old-fashioned American hero. His face stares solemnly from magazine covers. Across the globe he addresses Congress and Parliaments on Zoom, dramatically comparing Ukraine's situation to that of European Jews during WWII. His courage is celebrated across channels as varied as CNN, MSNBC, and FOX News.

There's just one problem with this characterization: Zelensky is no hero. In fact, the death and destruction experienced by his country is more than a little his fault.

Following the Ukrainian revolution—or U.S. driven coup, take your pick—in 2014, a Russia-friendly government was removed and a year later Zelensky and his party gained control through elections, with a pro-Russian party finishing second. The U.S. government cheered this development, of course.

Soon after, a handful of Ukrainian billionaires sympathetic to Russia banded together to create and fund an opposition party. They owned several TV stations. They owned media outlets. They provided relentless criticism of Zelensky and his party over the airwaves and on multiple platforms. When the U.S. was slow to deliver Covid-19 vaccines to Ukraine, the leader of the opposition party – Viktor Medvedchuk – worked with Putin to provide vaccines to the country, but

this offer was refused by Zelensky and the U.S. State Dept. because it was considered an attempt at 'political influence.' It's important to know that Medvedchuk is not just any opposition leader, he's been a close friend of Putin for decades. They vacation together. Putin is godfather of his daughter.

Constant media criticism of Zelensky began to take hold, and according to his own national security advisor, the opposition party was "eating into the electoral base, just destroying Zelensky." His approval rating plunged from 70% to below 40% in one year, and polls showed the pro-Russian party leading. So, what does any inexperienced eastern European leader do when threatened by an opposition party? Shut it down, of course.

Feeling
emboldened,
Zelensky shut down
opposition party
TV stations...

And that's exactly what Zelensky did. Rather than use the justice system, he issued decrees and seized the assets of individual pro-Russian politicians and supporters. Days after Biden's inauguration in 2021 and feeling emboldened, Zelensky shut down opposition party TV stations, had Medvedchuk arrested and seized his family's assets, including a pipeline that brings oil from Russia to Ukraine. The U.S. embassy cheered every move.

Within two days of Medvedchuk's assets being seized, Putin moved 3,000 troops to the Ukraine border over a year ago. Putin advisors openly admit that Russia wants a pro-Russian Ukrainian government – or at least to have a voice in Ukraine and to compete for election victories. Zelensky's actions toward Medvedchuk and the opposition party made it clear neither of those options would be possible going forward. Putin's advisors privately say he didn't want a full-scale war with Ukraine. He wanted a voice and influence within Ukraine's borders, but Zelensky's pre-emptive actions took those options off the table, which in Putin's mind left only one: military intimidation and/or invasion.

As Biden alerted the world that a Russian invasion was imminent, Zelensky repeatedly downplayed that possibility. He urged the U.S. to not pull out embassy staff and to not encourage U.S. citizens to leave – the same tactic used by the doomed Afghanistan president. Zelensky either took this public position because he didn't want to alarm Ukraine's citizens, or because he simply miscalculated the impact of his decision to take Medvedchuk down. Probably both.

Putin is a heartless, brutal killer and destroyer of individuals and countries. He's a war criminal with blood on his hands. But Zelensky is not innocent in this horrible mess. And he's certainly no hero.

—Dennis Harbaugh lives in Waterloo.

Don't be fooled

On the surface, labor is enjoying a resurgence in the US. According to a Gallup poll, 68% of Americans approve of unions, up 20% since 2009, and the highest in over 60 years. Last fall, over 10,000 United Auto Workers in Iowa and Illinois went on strike and won a new contract with substantial wage and benefits increases. Union drives by baristas are perking along at Starbucks across the country. Organizing movements are sprouting rapidly among younger workers at companies like Google and Apple. Employees at an REI store in New York City last month won a bargaining unit for its 100 retail workers. This month Amazon warehouse workers in Staten Island made history by winning the first bargaining unit in the nation's second largest private employer.

Due to the COVID pandemic, a tight labor market, and a generational change in attitudes, the clouded future of organized labor looks considerably brighter than it did at its lowest polling point thirteen years ago. In Iowa, heroic efforts have kept unions alive despite the evisceration of collective bargaining rights by the Republican-led legislature in 2017. But corporate America remains as anti-worker as ever.

A grim Midwestern example is the Ironworkers struggle at G&D Integrated, a transportation-industry manufacturing plant

near Peoria, Illinois. Last fall, workers there voted to form a union; as is typical, their request for employer recognition was rejected. Since then, workers have filed over 100 charges of unfair labor practices, including surveillance, interrogation, and threats of termination. Ironworker representative Vince Di Donato told *The Prairie Progressive* that layoffs and harassment have shrunk the bargaining unit to two, but the union continues to fight for a contract help laid-off workers find jobs.

The Ironworkers are also asking the National Labor Relations Board to revive what's known as Joy Silk, a long-ignored doctrine that allows the NLRB to force a company to bargain when it has been found to be in violation of federal laws.

If you believe in supporting workers who stand up for their rights, visit www.gdintegratedunion.com and Ironworkers Rising on Facebook for their action alerts. It's your fight too!

—*Prairie Dog*

[See *Prairie Progressive* editor Dave Leshtz's article on the REI union drive in *The Nation* at <https://www.thenation.com/article/society/rei-union-rwdsu-soho/>]

Iowa's maudlin pastoral fantasy, cont'd from Page 1

Even with my own disdain for this thought, I am not completely immune to it. Many of my activities in Iowa have decidedly been associated with commemorating the past, with an implicit lament of the present. I wrote a series of articles in the *Press-Citizen* about the long-gone CRANDIC Interurban and the Rock Island Line, and spent a tenure on Iowa City's Historic Preservation Commission advocating for the preservation of houses I would have been forbidden to live in during their heyday, due to racially-restrictive covenants on their deeds, all in pursuit of a chimera of a bygone era that never really was.

Despite the hold of this *weltanschauung* on Iowa's collective imagination, it is precarious by nature, in the face of inevitable tides from the future. Nothing indicates that the steady forces of urbanization, farm consolidation, farmer aging, and increasing demographic diversity will slow down in Iowa, even if it happens more slowly compared to the rest of the country. The question is whether those seeking power in this state will come to terms with a new phase in the state's history or will consign Iowa and its people to their maudlin pastoral fantasy.

—*Austin Wu writes for the Iowa City Press-Citizen, where he has been told by readers that he "has some of the most idiotic views out there" and should "get a car."*

The Prairie Progressive is proud to announce that every single issue, dating back to 1986, is now available online. Thanks to the staff at the University of Iowa Libraries, you can view our entire archive by visiting our www.theprairieprogressive.com home page and clicking the link to the UI Libraries.

Who are we becoming?

A new documentary film exploring the mobile home housing crisis through the eyes of everyday people who live in mobile homes will be screened around the state of Iowa.

The Iowa City showing will be at 7:00 PM on April 28th at FilmScene. Tickets are available at www.icfilmscene.org.

“A Decent Home” follows the efforts of mobile home communities in North Liberty, Iowa and Aurora, Colorado to organize and fight against unscrupulous and greedy landowners and private equity firms that seek to throw residents out of their homes or to squeeze them for every last drop of their paychecks, life savings, or retirement benefits.

Those of us in Johnson County may recognize some of the people in the film who have been working for the past three years to fight this growing threat to safe, secure, and affordable housing. This documentary brings a fresh set of insights into what is happening across Iowa and the United States.

From the film’s web site: “A *DECENT HOME* is a feature length documentary film by Sara Terry that addresses urgent issues of class and economic inequity through the lives of mobile home park residents who can’t afford housing anywhere else. The film asks, *Who are we becoming as Americans? It centers affordable housing in a broad public forum for debate, discussion and advocacy.*”

In this issue of *The Prairie Progressive* is an article about fighting for economic justice by my mom, Candi Evans. “A Decent Home” tells the human and sometimes heart-wrenching stories of my mom and her neighbors as they have tried to protect themselves from vulture capitalists like Havenpark, an out-of-state company which has now bought up even more mobile home courts in and around Johnson County.

“A Decent Home” will also be screened at the Julian Film Festival in Dubuque and at Drake University in Des Moines.

—Shawn Harmsen represents District B on the Iowa City Council.



April 21

CommUnity Hunger Banquet
Hyatt Regency, Coralville
<https://builtbycommunity.org>

April 28

“A Decent Home”
FilmScene, Iowa City

April 30

Democrats Liberty & Justice
dinner, Iowa Events Center,
Des Moines
ebartlett@iowademocrats.org

May 1

International Workers Day

May 7

Labor Center 70th anniversary
dinner, Iowa Memorial Union,
Iowa City
sarah-j-clark@uiowa.edu

May 14

Johnson Co. Dems Hall of
Fame event, Brown Deer
Country Club, Coralville
<https://jcdems.org/>

May 18

First day to vote early
in person

May 23

Final day to request
Absentee Ballots

June 7

Iowa Primary Election Day

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COMING SOON
Prairie Dog’s Summer Reading List
and more highlights from
The Prairie Progressive’s past!

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