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From The Politics of Resentment: Rural Consciousness in Wisconsin and the Rise of Scott Walker

Cramer dove deep into the Wisconsin countryside to listen to people in rural areas talk about politics and government. In this striking reading, she reveals the complexities of political attitudes among rural people. Many of them feel alienated from government and shut out of national and state conversations about the future direction of the country. She argues that their attitudes, often simplified and ridiculed, and sometimes ignored, deserve to be taken seriously. These people may feel forgotten, but when they find candidates that appeal to them, they make big waves that can roil national and state politics.

**REPUBLICAN AND RURAL:
NOT JUST A CORRELATION**

Scholars and political pundits have known for decades, over a century even, that there is a correlation between votes and rural-urban location in the United States. [Scholars know] very little about the way rural-versus-urban divides function as a perspective through which some people think about politics.

Since the mid-twentieth century, Wisconsin has looked pretty much like national electoral maps: blue cities and red rural places. In Wisconsin, the Democratic Party's success in the larger cities is due in part to stronger union organizing (Fowler 2008, 184) and the concentration of African Americans in those places. Also, some of the Republicanism in the rural areas may be a hold-over from anti-Democratic Party attitudes that rose up during World War I and II. Many Wisconsinites have German relatives somewhere in their family—43 percent of residents claimed German heritage in 2000 (Fowler 2008, 205). German American voters were strongly isolationist during World War I and II and, therefore, likely to vote against the Democrats, especially in rural areas, where unions had little influence (Fowler 2008).

Rural-urban divides have been an important part of Wisconsin's politics for at least a century. One of our famous quirks is that we were home to both

Joe McCarthy and Bob La Follette, two decidedly different characters. McCarthy was the U.S. senator who is responsible for “McCarthyism”—the post-World War II anticommunist scare that led to the interrogations of many Americans, particularly government employees, people in the entertainment industry, and those involved in labor unions. La Follette, in contrast, is the father of Progressivism. He served in the U.S. House, the U.S. Senate, and was governor of the state in the first few decades of the twentieth century.

Some say that rural-urban tensions help explain how both of these folks were successful in the same state. Granted, the fact that La Follette and McCarthy were both from Wisconsin is a little less mysterious when you consider that they both started out as Republicans. Wisconsin was overwhelmingly Republican for much of the first half of the twentieth century (Epstein 1958). But the rural-urban divide helps solve part of the La Follette-McCarthy mystery, too. Both of them tapped into rural consciousness to win votes. When La Follette's Progressivism took hold, Wisconsin was mainly a nonmetropolitan state—as it is now. In that context, skepticism of party organizations among rural residents was a stronger force than was support of political machines among urban residents (Epstein 1958). Some scholars argue that McCarthy won his Senate seat by exploiting the skepticism that small-town residents had of globalization and distant institutions. Even the breakthrough of the modern Democratic Party—the election of Democrat William Proxmire to the Senate in a special election after McCarthy's death—is commonly understood as the result of Proxmire's successful appeal to “rural discontent” (Fowler 2008, 173). Also, he is the senator who devised the monthly Golden Fleece Award, an award he bestowed on a public official who had made an excessive government expenditure. Although a member of the Democratic Party, the party typically associated with “big government,” he was a champion of government frugality.

For some time, then, there has been a correlation in Wisconsin, as in most of the United States, between rural and Republican. But that correlation is not inevitable and is not simply the result of people voting the same way their parents did. People have perspectives and understandings that make support for Republican candidates seem appropriate and natural.

... The perspective I am calling rural consciousness ... had three main elements. First, rural consciousness was about perceptions of power, or who makes decisions and who decides what to even discuss. Second, it showed up with respect to perceptions of values and lifestyles. Third and finally, it involved perceptions of resources or who gets what.

These are the outlines of the rural consciousness I encountered. Every expression of this perspective did not sound exactly the same. As with all identities, people in particular places put their own twist on who they are. . . .

WHERE IS "RURAL" IN WISCONSIN?

... The two main metropolitan areas of the state ... are Madison, the state capital and home to the flagship public university, and ... Milwaukee, the main industrial area of the state. They are both located in the southern part of Wisconsin. The places outside these metro areas are sometimes referred to as "Outstate" or "out-state Wisconsin" (though this name annoys some people who live in those areas of the state) and the northern tier of the state, largely a tourist area, is typically called "up north."

This division of the state into Madison and Milwaukee versus the rest of the state was common knowledge to the people I encountered outside of Madison and Milwaukee. When talking about the big issues of the day, many of the people I visited in small towns automatically referred to this geography.



The rural consciousness perspective I heard was most common in communities one would readily identify as rural—lots of green space, few stoplights, and far from an urban center. But it also emerged in areas best described as nonmetro: more populous areas but beyond the major metro centers of Madison and Milwaukee. Rural consciousness was a matter of degree. Sometimes, for convenience, I use the term "rural" to refer broadly to all areas outside the two major metro areas in the state.

POWER

... The place-based sense of injustice among rural residents [could be] heard ... in many of the groups I spent time with outside the Madison and Milwaukee areas. ...

The rural consciousness perspective ... was more than just identity as a rural person. Besides place identity, it encompassed perceptions of power, values and lifestyles, and resources. ... When I heard people talking about rural consciousness in these conversations, they were often talking about several of these central elements.

... A good place to start is ... education. [The] complaint that Wisconsin's funding formula for education unfairly hurt rural communities was a common concern across groups meeting in rural places. For example, on my first visit to [a] dice game group in central west Wisconsin, I started out with my "what are your big concerns here" question:

KJC: Anything—it can be any kind of concerns—I'll ask you more directly about the UW later on. What kind of issues? Partly the reason I want to know is that we do a phone survey at the UW and usually when we decide which topics to—

MARK: One thing we were bitching about yesterday is that you—is the state's penchant for unfunded mandates—what three times, two times they got a

referenda in the community that was not wanted. And so now—they keep jamming the cost down to the county so they can avoid spending it on the state's nickel, that has to stop.

ERNIE: Things that are mandated should be paid for.

MARK: Yeah, the tax structure in this state is weird. I think that is a fundamental problem with the state is that they have to reorganize their tax structure. Local schools, local municipalities, and of course the state—what they're doing is they're just redirecting tax burden on the local taxes which ends up being more evident to the locals, so they more complain and then what ends up happening is they say it isn't their fault.

RICHARD: We don't have the economic base here to pay the kind of taxes that comes out of Madison. You know I mean down there if things go up 1 percent it doesn't—but 1 percent means a hell of a lot more here than it does in Madison or what Henry calls south of the Mason Dixon Line, the line east and west going through Wausau.

DALE: Or Portage [a city about an hour's drive north of Madison].

RICHARD: Well—

MARK: But I mean you know, right down to the tax form or the support form for the schools—why is a kid worth fourteen thousand dollars in Mequon [a suburban Milwaukee city] and what is he up here, Henry? Seven?

HENRY: Oh yeah—the consistency in schools that we're spending money—ridiculous. ... Why don't they give each school *X* number of dollars per kid? If they want to spend eleven thousand dollars on a kid, tax the school district for the difference.

ERNIE: Have it averaged.

HENRY: Yeah, have it averaged. Everybody gets eight thousand dollars and if you want to spend eleven, tax the local district for it. Comprehensive plan.

MARK: This goes with the schools, in terms of facilities—facilities are gorgeous because they have the money to spend on it.

HENRY: If you take the state of Wisconsin and take a ruler and start at Green Bay and diagonally and just go fifty miles north of Madison, right over to the corner of the state, all your money lies in the south end of the state, your votes weight there. You're never going to get nothing changed to the north.

DAVE: That is absolutely correct.

HENRY: That's it.

MARK: That's not just the schools.

HENRY: We listen to the—being on the school board, we went several times to testify to the legislature to tell you that the formula was wrong, but they don't change it, because we haven't—if anybody on the south end would say change the formula for the schools, they never would get elected another two years and that's why all they are is looking for their own job.

Somebody makes a comment about the University of Wisconsin—Madison, and then Henry offers up his thoughts.

HENRY: And another thing, every time the state has a program, where do they, where do they implement it? Madison, Lake Geneva, in Milwaukee. They give everything to Milwaukee. You know all the programs in education—they want to try a new program, where do they put it? Milwaukee. Dead at the start. Why don't they put it out here where we can do something with it? Dead at the start.

RICHARD: Far as I can—like with—kept their schools up, Milwaukee let theirs fall down, and then they take our tax money to deal with the schools after we kept ours up. And they let theirs fall down.

HENRY: First of all, they oughta take that formula they give Milwaukee—they give Milwaukee a whole wad of money right off the top first and whatever is left, we divide by the other 425 schools in the state, which is wrong. Let Milwaukee do their own—get their fair—same share as we get, don't give a whole wad of it to them and then turn around and divide the rest among the rest of us.

In this conversation, the men complain about taxes and unfunded mandates—complaints that could come from someone in any type of municipality—but then they talk about this unfairness in terms of geography, namely, that a 1 percent tax increase “means a hell of a lot more here” than it does in the metro areas. They perceive that the decision making or the exercise of power in the major cities victimizes people in small towns by giving them less than their fair share of resources. In their eyes, decisions about funding for schools mean that small communities are the victims of distributive injustice.

Across the state, in a north-central tourist town, I asked a group of people at a diner counter early in the morning if they “feel like you're paying your fair share up here? Or heck no?”

NELSON: Well we'd like to keep more of our money for our school districts up here instead of sending it down below.

HELLEN [*The only other woman at the counter at that moment who is somewhat a little apologetic that she is about to leave me alone with them*]: I'm going to leave you with them.

KJC: Nice to meet you.

HELLEN: Good luck with these guys.

KJC: Oh thank you. So I'm sorry [to interrupt]—the schools. . . .

NELSON: They're taking so much of our money away from us. Want to close our schools and that sort of stuff, and the schools in Milwaukee and Madison and everywhere south of us, they've got all the foreign languages and everything else, and they got their curriculum is so much better than what we can give—because the fact that the state is not allowing us to have our money to educate our kids the way we should.

TREVOR: Talking about state schools? I thought that money came from here.

NELSON: Yeah—all of our money goes to Madison gets distributed back down to us.

KJC: A chunk of it—I don't know what percent but a good chunk of it.

NELSON: Yeah—the bureaucracy gets bigger and bigger. Their secretaries have to have secretaries . . .

PETE: Gotta figure with all the out-of-staters here, pay a lot of taxes.

NELSON: Oh sure—exactly true. People come up here to retire, the taxes eat 'em up. They have to move off [the lakes], but that's been their dream to get up here.

KJC: Oh no kidding.

NELSON: You know, as far as I'm concerned, I pay it, I don't protest, but I would like it if the city, the state would get fairer with the money. Why can't we have a foreign languages and that sort of stuff? Prepare for life after high school. They [kids from our community] get down to the colleges [which are almost all located south of this town], they are behind. . . .

Conversations about school funding often echoed the view that the rural areas were not getting their fair share. In such comments, people conveyed their identity as rural folks as well as their sense of injustice over the distribution of power and resources. I heard the claim that people in rural communities are helpless to change these funding formulas because no one downstate is listening to their concerns. They perceived that politicians and government in general are tone deaf to people outside the major cities.

Resentment about a lack of power compared to city people came through on many topics besides education. A group of people meeting in a gas station in a gorgeous hamlet on the Wisconsin River in southwest Wisconsin [was] very critical of what they saw as the state government's concern for tourists from the major cities and the Chicago area rather than themselves . . . :

GLENN: Just like everything else in Wisconsin, the most important thing to politicians in Wisconsin and in the state government is getting the tourists in here and the people out of Illinois. . . . You go to a boat landing around here and hell you can't unload your boat because there will be a dozen Illinois people there and they are top priority to the state and anybody with a supposed tourist label on 'em.

LARRY: Be there with their canoes, bring their food with 'em, their water, all they leave on the sand bars is shit.

[*Laughter*]

Four years later, their animosity toward the state government's neglect of their community's concerns came out as a complaint against unfunded mandates.

GEORGE: And where I see a lot of wasted money is garbage that I receive in the mail that doesn't have . . . I've been on the town board for about thirty-five years already . . .

KJC: Oh bless your heart.

GEORGE: And all the garbage I get, mail that doesn't even have anything to do with this area here whatsoever.

KJC: Huh. What kind of stuff?

GEORGE: Oh, from the state. Mandating everything, you know, do this, do that and our township doesn't have any curbs and gutters, there's so much stuff that the rural area doesn't even have that, you know, people in Milwaukee and Madison think, you know, that it's a big deal, but out here it's nothing.

As far as this group was concerned, city folks sent little to their community but junk mail and poop.

Even in a left-leaning group of retired women in an artsy community in northern Wisconsin, many of the members thought government paid no attention to their concerns.

KJC: OK, "How much attention do you feel the government pays to what the people think when it decides what to do? A good deal, some, or not much?"

[Long pause]

SUE: I think they're starting to get, that they're starting to listen with all this mess [the Great Recession].

KJC: Some. Yeah?

SUE: Before this I don't think. . . . I think it's changing.

DOROTHY: I think it's in the Beltway and out the Beltway. I mean Madison might listen to Madison people. Washington, DC, is a country unto itself. I know it; I spent time there. They haven't got a clue what the rest of the nation is up to, they're so absorbed studying their own belly button.

It is not a stretch to say that people in many places—not just rural areas—feel ignored by the government. But the complaints I heard in rural areas were not simply distrust of government—people in rural areas often perceived that government was *particularly* dismissive of the concerns of people in rural communities. Half of the groups outside the major metro areas expressed that belief. These attitudes were antigovernment thoughts, but they were rooted in residents' place identities.

. . . In a logging town in northwestern Wisconsin, during the run-up to the 2008 presidential election, I had this conversation with the two men remaining that morning out of a group that gathers in the back of the grocery store/gas station/liquor store/gift shop/hardware store:

KJC: Do you . . . what are your hopes for this presidential election? How would you like it to turn out in November?

Both of them laughed in response to the question before answering as follows:

SCOTT: Doesn't make any difference to me . . . Never has. I'm not a big political . . . I can't stand it because I've been around it for thirty-four years. County boards and stuff. I have no use for any of it. I'm sorry, I just—I'm sorry. That may be kind of a horseshit attitude, but I just, I'm sorry, I just don't.

KJC: A lot of people feel that way. The presidential candidates, you know, sometimes Wisconsin—

SCOTT: I can't see the difference it's gonna make up here anyway. We've been in a recession up here for thirty years, forty years. We don't know any different. People talk about recession, you oughta come up here.

KJC: Yeah?

SCOTT: Doesn't get any different.

Scott thought candidates did not care about his community and that his community, his place, had been ignored for decades. This was part of a widespread perception that small towns like his were generally overlooked. A group of women meeting for lunch in a central-west village on the day of the gubernatorial recall election in 2012 felt small communities like theirs had been "hung out to dry." I fumbled around with the question, but they ran with it.

KJC: Who do you think represents your concerns? I mean . . . do you . . . are there . . . does . . . do you feel like your state senator or state assembly person? Do you feel like anybody—

GLADYS: I think we are just hung out there to dry.

DOLORES: Great. I would agree with you. [*chuckles*]

KJC: That was the answer I feared, I mean—

DOLORES: There isn't anyone, I don't think, that really addresses the concerns of the smaller communities.

BEVERLY: No. I don't think so.

GLADYS: And being an agricultural dairy state, I understand that some of these farmers haven't got a lot more or maybe right in the same ballpark that they get for their milk that we got when we were farming twenty-three years ago and look at what else has gone up. The money it costs for the crops to go up . . . Nobody . . . We got the news. OK. "This big building burned in some area." It's all over the news. [But if] some farmer loses his barn, which is probably the same amount of money and the same catastrophe, it barely gets three seconds. It's not good.

Ignored by government and by the news media, these folks felt neglected by the powers that be. One way I noticed this was in the way they reacted to me. Several groups could not quite believe that I had made the effort to come “all the way from Madison” to talk with them. For example, in the town with the dice game in the central-west city, I spent time with a group that met up in the *early*, early morning at a gas station . . . :

KJC: Nice to meet you. Here’s a football schedule for you—would you like one? Football schedule? Good for three years. Convenient, yeah? You’re welcome. I would love to come back like January or February to talk to you guys again, could I?

["Sure!"]

MARK: I think we need more input out of Madison in your small areas. Even like your senators, and everything. I mean they’ve gotta get around to do things like this.

Even higher income people in places outside the Madison and Milwaukee metro areas expressed this kind of surprise. They saw themselves as less important than people in the metro areas in the eyes of politicians and other decision makers. For example, one group of professionals meeting for coffee every morning in a diner in a central Wisconsin city said they were surprised that I, a university employee from Madison, was taking the time to drive around the state to listen to people like them: “I think that we are impressed [that you come up here to visit with us]. Because most of us, particularly in a state like Wisconsin where politicians—none of the national ones come and see us—you know we only have ten electoral votes. I mean none of the politicians come to see us at all.” The Downtown Athletic Club perceived that the focus of politicians on cities rather than rural areas was a fact of politics nationwide:

KJC: Well, what’s your take on the presidential election?

JOHN: You don’t even want to know.

[Fred laughs]

KJC: Yes, I do! Sure I do. I don’t want to start any fights. I want to know what you think.

JOHN: I don’t know. How’s that?

KJC: Oh you, yes you do. Why don’t you . . .

JOHN: You had the state of Ohio, what was it? No. Pennsylvania. Where four precincts voted nineteen thousand some odd to nothing. For Obama. That just doesn’t make a lot of sense, does it?

FRED: I didn’t hear that story.

KJC: A little fishy. I didn’t either.

JOHN: There was like four or so precincts where Romney never got a vote. Not one. You would think that any precinct that there’d be one person contrary to the norm. And at least I would.

MATT: Yeah, makes you wonder there, don’t it.

JOHN: But uh no, I don’t know. The election? The president knew where to campaign. He campaigned in all the metropolitan areas. The cities and stuff. That’s where all the vote was. If you looked at, I go back to Ohio cause that was the swing state they all talked about all the time, and if you look at it on the map, I’m going to say there’s sixty-five counties and Romney—so characteristic throughout the whole nation won—the vast majority of territory, he did not win the cities. I mean that’s . . . somebody was attacking—

FRED: By square miles he’d have won.

KJC: Here in Wisconsin, too, right?

JOHN: Easily. What the . . . what did they say? All you have to do is win eleven cities and you can win the election?

KJC: Really?

JOHN: Someone was just saying that. The populist . . . the vote is that manner [set up in a way] that if you win eleven cities, you can win the election. I don’t know if that’s true but. . .

To me, much of what is getting talked about here is power, and that power comes in several layers. The most obvious example of this power is the ability of governments to force rural places to abide by laws they dislike. This is the classic definition of power—the ability of A to get B to do something B otherwise would not do (Dahl 1961). “Unfunded mandates” is one example. But there is another dimension of power getting talked about here, too: control over which concerns even get recognized and discussed (Bachrach and Baratz 1962). I heard people in rural areas say many times that all of the major decisions are made in the urban areas, by urban people, and dictated outward. They complained that authority flowed out from Madison and Milwaukee but never in reverse. They felt that they did not have the power to get people to listen to their concerns.

While the inability to get their concerns heard is a subtle instance of feeling powerless, it is nonetheless important. Power is partly about respect, recognition, and listening. People whose voices are never heard by decision makers have no power. When those in power listen to some group, they convey that they are worthy of attention and, implicitly, that they share their power.

Many of the people I spent time with in rural areas felt like their towns were drying up and blowing away because the spigot of resources had been turned off. In addition, though, there was also a sense that these more subtle forms of power had been denied them as well.

One member of a group of retired and working women meeting for breakfast in a rural, far northern resort community explained:

THERESA: As a former educator, I resented, highly, comments such as, “There is no education north of Highway 8 [a U.S. highway that runs East-West across the middle of the state]. These kids aren’t—” and we send them

such absolutely excellent and well-prepared students there that they—the attitude that the hick area of the state—was painful.

KJC: So who did you get that from? Recruiters?

THERESA: Professors.

KJC: Really? When they would visit?

THERESA: Yeah, or publish in newspaper articles or other, you know—and that was a little distressful because I think northern Wisconsin feels a little far away from Madison anyway. And we keep waving our hands and saying, “Yoo-hoo, there’s another half of a state up here! Up north is not Wausau [the main city in the central part of the state]!”

This is not just alienation, or a lack of trust, or low efficacy with respect to powerful institutions. These sentiments are tightly bound to a sense of place identity. Simply put, many folks I met in small places identified as rural people and equated membership in that category with being a person who is systematically ignored and left out of the exercise of power.

VALUES AND LIFESTYLES

When people talked about public affairs from a rural consciousness perspective they were telling me that city people have a lack of listening skills, exhibit a chronic lack of respect for the rural way of life, and regularly ignore rural communities. Many people talked about this as part and parcel of a fundamental aspect of the rural-versus-urban divide: city people just don’t seem to get it. They don’t understand rural life or pay attention to it.

Part of the reason people in rural areas felt misjudged by urbanites were the widely known stereotypes of rural folks. Many rural residents believed that city dwellers thought they were just “a bunch of rednecks,” for example. A third of groups ($N=18$) in places with populations under ten thousand assumed that public decision makers in the major metro areas held common negative stereotypes of rural residents, such as “hicks,” “country bumpkins,” “rednecks,” and uneducated folks (Creed and Ching 1997; Jarosz and Lawson 2002). One group that I interviewed even went so far as to call themselves the “Mediocre Redneck Coffee Klatch.”

They were defensive, but they were also proud. And they had their own stereotypes of city folk. Slightly more than a third of these groups ridiculed urbanites’ lack of common sense. Many of them made a point of emphasizing that in contrast to city folk, they understood how to really hunt and fish and knew what it was like to really interact with nature. Also, many people took enormous pride in using their hands rather than what they saw as what most city folks did for work: sitting behind a desk all day.

This combination of pride in one’s group and sense that their group is deprived relative to other groups is characteristic of group consciousness in general. So notice that although many rural residents resented cities, they did

not necessarily want to live in one. Conversations in eleven of the twenty-one groups located in places with populations of less than ten thousand included comments to the effect that, despite the hardships of rural life, they preferred their lifestyles to rootless, fast-paced city living. “Down in the cities, they don’t even know their neighbors most of ‘em!” one man exclaimed to me. People took pride in the face-to-face nature of their interactions, as opposed to the bureaucracy and technology they perceived to be typical of urban life. For example, one woman in a small town explained to me that, in her community, people do not do inspections when selling a house. “It’s seen as insulting,” she said. “If I give you my word that the house is in good shape, why would you need to inspect it?”

This perception of differing lifestyles for rural and urban residents fed the belief that city dwellers could not make decent decisions on behalf of rural communities. Such concerns were more focused on differences in ways of life and values than on differences in partisanship—that, say, city folks were Democrats and rural folks were Republican. In particular, many rural residents perceived a different pace of life in cities and were downright mad about attempts to appeal to tourists by urbanizing their own towns. For example, in [a] group of loggers in [a] northwestern village, during my first visit, I asked a general anything-else-I-should-know question, and here’s what the group offered up:

KJC: But is there something else I oughta know about—I don’t know—your lives in [this town] or what is going on up here? I know you can learn a whole lot in half an hour, but this is really helpful, actually.

[*Long pause*]

SAM: Well it’s a lot less rat race than Madison.

KJC: Yeah, really peaceful.

JOHNNY: Yeah it’s nice. I wouldn’t live anywhere else.

KJC: Yeah you want to stay here—I can see that.

SAM: Drives to work, his house within a mile you’re in the country—I mean not that [far] even.

KJC: Aw, it’s beautiful.

SAM: Yeah, it’s a lot less hectic. When you grow up this way. I guess if you grow up in the city, people say they can’t stand it here. But if you grow up here—

KJC: Well, I think even city people, when they come up here, it’s just like, “Wow it’s so relaxing!” or they’ll say things like—

SAM: Then they want to change everything. Have you been to Minocqua [a popular northern tourist town]?

KJC: Yeah.

SAM: Or Hayward [another popular northern tourist town]?

KJC: Not in a long time.

SAM: Hayward was like [this town] twenty years ago, and now it’s got Walmart.

KJC: Hayward has a Walmart?

SAM: McDonald's, Menards, Subway—you turn around, you make a little Madison. Just strip malls. Downtown turns into antique stores because everything is out at Walmart. Lost all your businesses. Like this was all stores [as he waves his arm at the boarded-up Main Street outside].

A few hours west of that group of loggers, I met up two times in the town hall with a handful of leaders from the local government and the public schools who would turn on the lights and the Mr. Coffee machine and huddle together there every morning. The men resented outsiders' desire to urbanize northern Wisconsin.

DEAN: What generally happens is that one or the other likes it here, either the husband likes it here or the wife, and the other just hates it because they want to go downtown every day and shop. But if they wanna go shopping they have to drive twenty miles. So eventually, we've got like two- or three-million-dollar homes built, and they were there like five years, and one or the other of 'em didn't like it, and they sold out and went back to Florida.

KJC: Wow, did somebody buy that home? I mean, who's gonna? . . .

JACK: Oh yeah.

KJC: Really.

JACK: They had, you know, snowmobiles, all kinds of equipment, fishing rods and boats and all that, but she hated it here. Well, just to be in that party system in the city, and you come up here in the wintertime, there's nothing. I think that more spread between the very, very wealthy who move up here, and, it seems like to me, what we might call the middle class is shrinking, and the ones on the bottom. I don't have any facts, but that's the way I look at it.

Although most of the commentary about the contrast in urban and rural lifestyles was not overtly political, sometimes people did bring in politics directly. The men who gathered around the Mr. Coffee shared this:

FRANK: Well, we're very conservative in the Northwoods and they're very, very, very, very, very, very left in those cities. Just think if Madison and Milwaukee and La Crosse did not vote in an election. What would've happened? I mean our votes mean nothing because of the population and the votes [the large number of votes coming from cities, as opposed to small towns]. That's how I look at it. Same reason [upper] Michigan years ago wanted to leave lower Michigan. Form their own state.

KJC: So you feel like the show is pretty much run by the people—

FRANK: Oh yes, oh yeah. Yeah. We don't have any say.

KJC: So how about with the DNR [state Department of Natural Resources]?

When you were working with the DNR?

FRANK [*sarcastically*]: Fine group of men. [*laughs*]

KJC: No, because the reason I ask is because connected with the state government did you feel like in your job you still didn't have much of a say—it was pretty much the folks in Madison telling you what you—

DEAN: You work long enough you have something political—we had decent working conditions—

AL: And that was the end of it. Now the governor appoints all the big shots and they don't know, before a guy had to work from the bottom all the way up and then become the head of the DNR. Now they just pick some guy off the street.

JACK: Oh yeah.

AL: A buddy of the governor and . . . That's the way I think about it. The DNR's changed.

Most of the people in this group were themselves elected officials or vocal commentators on public affairs. Their resentment toward the decisions people made in the cities had a clear partisan tone.

But when people talked about the inability of city dwellers to adequately represent rural concerns, partisanship was not front and center. Even for the group around the Mr. Coffee, they referenced "conservatism" not "Republicanism." There was a sense that urban residents lived differently. They were carving up the world into "us" and "them," but partisanship was not the key divider.

In addition, when they talked as if city people lived by different values, they were not emphasizing abortion, or gay marriage, or the things that are typically pointed to as the cultural issues that divide lower-income whites from the Democratic Party. Instead, the values they talked about were intertwined with economic concerns. When they talked about city folks being unable to understand rural life, those conversations were typically about how they had no understanding of the economic realities of rural life and how hard people had to work to make ends meet in small towns.

Here is one example of rural residents talking about how they struggled harder to get by than did people in cities. This exchange took place among a group of women meeting for lunch in the central-west town where the dice game takes place. They brought up the topic of health care and complained about politicians making choices out of step with ordinary people like themselves.

DOLORES: I have this feeling that—I don't know who mentioned this it might have been Bill Cosby—that if all of these senators and congressmen and all of these people took a cut in their wages, you know, and their benefits . . . and took the benefits that we have to take—

GLADYS: Yeah!

DOLORES: Live on the kind of salary that we have to live on, you know. They have no idea what small, rural America is like . . . small towns, you know! They couldn't begin to fathom what's it like to live on the incomes that we live on.

KJC: Do you feel that way about the state politicians too?

DOLORES: Up to a point. Yeah. You know, their thing is to win . . .

In a tiny town in the northwestern part of the state I met with a group of people that gathers in the basement of the local church every Tuesday morning: stay-at-home moms and some kids, retirees, and people taking a break from work. For a good chunk of time, the first time I met them, they complained about how disrespectful one of their state legislative representatives was and about how clueless state inspectors are. One example they gave me was the time an inspector checked the temperature of food in a salad bar in a restaurant a few towns over by sticking her thermometer in the ice.

When I asked them what the University of Wisconsin–Madison does not do well, they stated bluntly that people in Madison and Milwaukee have qualitatively different lifestyles than do people in the rural parts of the state.

KJC: What do you think the University of Wisconsin–Madison does not do well? When you think about [it] . . .

MARTHA: Represents our area. I mean we are like, we're strange to Madison. They want us to do everything for Madison's laws and the way they do things, but we totally live differently than the city people live. So they need to think more rural instead of all this city area.

DONNA: We can't afford to educate our children like they can in the cities. Simple as that. Don't have the advantages.

ETHEL: All the things they do, based on Madison and Milwaukee, never us.

MARTHA: Yeah, we don't have the advantages that they give their local people there, I think a lot of times. And it is probably because they don't understand how rural people live and what we deal with and our problems.

KJC: I think that's right. I think there is a whole lot of distance between—especially this corner of the state.

MARTHA: Oh we're, like, we're lost up here!

ROSEMARY: They don't even understand how we live in [our community]! [Laughter]

MARTHA: Yeah that's right! It's very true. They won't even come and help us with our roads until you demand it.

In that conversation, in response to my question about the main concerns in their community, they had talked about their representative in Madison as someone unlike themselves, and about the state workers that regulated their livelihoods as oblivious to the basics of their businesses. The sense of being “strange to Madison” and living “differently than the city people live” was about fundamental differences in lived experience. And much of that difference was tied to economics: “We don't have the advantages that they give their local people there,” Martha had said.



RESOURCES

When people in small towns claimed that they lived differently and had different values than city folks, they were often simultaneously claiming that they were people facing unique economic challenges. I want to ho[m]e in on their perceptions of economic injustice to show you the depth of these understandings. When people perceived that rural life was economically tough, this carried with it many complaints: about the injustice in the distribution of public dollars, unfair taxation, and more. Those complaints were intertwined with other aspects of rural consciousness, in particular, with their sense of being ignored and disrespected and of having fundamentally different values and lifestyles than city dwellers.

Here is a common narrative for how people wove these perceptions together: Rural life was a source of pride for many because it was different from urban living—it involved different lifestyles and values, including a special emphasis on hard work. That rural hard work ethic was a point of pride, but for many, it was a problem because in order to work hard, you needed a job, and rural communities were on the short end of the stick in terms of jobs. Why? Because rural communities had no power. Politicians and others with the ability to make the decisions to bring good-paying jobs to their communities paid no attention to the[se] places.

In the rural communities I visited, I often heard people stating, as though a matter of fact, that jobs, wealth, and taxpayer dollars are in “the M&Ms,” as people sometimes referred to Madison and Milwaukee. They complained that rural areas are being left on their own to fight a losing battle. Conversations in seventeen of the twenty-five groups outside the Madison and Milwaukee areas included statements conveying that their communities did not receive their fair share of resources and that metro residents did not understand this. Their comments conveyed that the rural-versus-urban distinction was *the* main way to characterize the distribution of taxation, wealth, and the cost of goods and services in the state. In short, many people in small towns perceived that their tax dollars are “sucked in” by Madison and spent on that city or Milwaukee, never to be seen again.

On this mapping, wealthy people live in the cities (cf. Bell 1992, 78). “Everybody in [the] northern [part of the state] makes money off of tourists . . . [the tourists] bring some of that fresh money up,” one man in the diner group in the north-central tourist town told me. On a different visit to the same group, another man said simply, “When you get down in the city, people are making more money.”

Many people equated the cities with wealth because they perceived that the cities are where the good jobs are. One man in the group meeting in the small town on the Wisconsin River explained to me during my first visit, “Our salaries are less than what they are in Madison, by far, our hourly wages. And I would think salaried jobs as well. People here don't make as much, but there

again, it's—that's why we don't have . . . that's why a lot of our young people have gone someplace else." About four years later, I heard a similar conversation in that group:

RANDY: I'd like to see, you know, I'd like to see a lot of new young families move into town . . . That's one thing you do see is too many older, retired persons in your communities—to be real active it makes a difference . . .

GLENN: A lack of good-paying jobs for the younger people to live on. You know it takes money to live or play or anything else and you get into a town like this and the people who are on the boards and stuff are people who usually own their homes and have a job and their interests are more in the parks and the fire departments and different things like that where it takes jobs for these young people to keep 'em around. And, you got jobs, you get young people, you get homes being built, and you get things being done.

RANDY: That's the problem with rural America.

GLENN: Right.

RANDY: You start here, go down along the river or whatever, you pick any of these communities, we're fortunate in [this town] . . . we're fortunate here that we got two or three good industries in town which we're very fortunate to have.

[. . .]

GLENN: In any of these towns. You go around Madison, thirty-, forty-mile radius, the majority of 'em are driving to Madison you know and it's, you know, they want to live in a small town but they gotta have a job, a decent paying job. With four-dollar gas, that's gonna make it tough.

Along with complaints about gas prices, I often heard concerns about utility bills in rural areas. For example, in the breakfast group of women in a rural tourist town:

SALLY: The cost of the water and sewer here is outrageous compared to what they pay in Madison. So here is big rich Madison, with all the good high-paying jobs, getting the cheapest water, and we have people up here who have three months of employment [because of the short tourist season], what are they paying? And I feel like there should be more sharing—less taxes going to Madison to help offset—

DOROTHY: I just moved from [a city in the central part of the state]. A quarter of water in [that city] is seventy bucks . . . seventy dollars every *three* months for [that] water. Up here, which we constantly have been paying, every second month, the bill—and sometimes we're not here—is seventy dollars every *second* month.

A bit later in the conversation, they continued on this theme.

SALLY: You've also got to look at Madison and the growth of Madison.

There's new sewers going in every single day, the result of the businesses. You go down there and you don't know where Madison starts and Mount Horeb—I mean it is just one big sewer. . . . Like Walmart, buy it in volume, get it cheaper. But I think we don't look at places here—I mean I was coming up here eighteen years ago with a business, and I was shocked at how little the people got for services here. You pay for your garbage collection here on top of paying high taxes. I mean Madison, I throw out sofas [and don't have to pay]. There should be more sharing with these communities that are really struggling with stuff like that.

SHIRLEY: But in Madison there are all these big businesses that are paying taxes that we don't have here.

SUE: Exactly, but it should be a shared thing. I mean, why can't we look at that? Or at least put a state office building up here, with all the communication.

[*Agreement all around: "That would help."/ "That's a thought."/ "Great idea."/ "Absolutely."*]

SALLY: We could. I've worked for the state of Wisconsin, in a lot of offices, and a lot of offices could be—

DOROTHY: Outsource it to northern Wisconsin!

LAURA [*to me*]: You could be here all the time!

[*Laughter*]

KJC: That would be delightful—I would love it.

In the rural consciousness perspective, not only were the cities wealthier but they were also advantaged in terms of gas prices, utility bills, and infrastructure like sewers. These perceptions of injustice burned so brightly because they carried perceptions of blame. It was not just that cities were advantaged, but also that decision makers in them were intentionally overlooking the smaller communities in the state.

A man in the northwest logging group lamented, "I mean, rightfully so, you know, population centers, that's where the majority of the stuff has eventually got to go. It just makes sense. But you can't ignore everything up here either, you know." Likewise, a group of men at a diner in a rural northern-central tourist town almost laughed at the notion that the Obama administration stimulus proposal would help their community. They assumed none of the funds would focus on rural areas. One man said, "But the trickle down won't get to here because we don't have any business. So the trickle down will stop at Green Bay, Wausau [cities south of where they live] . . ."

Taxation was a seriously raw issue for many people in small communities. In general, the perception was that taxation hurt rural areas. At least one person in ten of the twenty-five groups outside the Milwaukee and Madison metro areas assumed that people in those cities are taxed at much lower rates than rural residents are.

Property taxes in particular were treated like an invasive species killing off native life forms. And people were sure it had come from the cities. Many rural folks blamed urbanites for driving up property values in their communities by purchasing expensive vacation homes. Some claimed this had driven locals out of their own communities or, at least, away from their lifetime dreams of finally buying a house on a local lake. They described these rising property values, driven by urbanites, as a threat to their personal and community identities (cf. Bell 1992, 76). For example, on the first morning that I met with the group of women in the rural northwest tourist town, one member showed me a list she had written in a small notebook of sixty people who had been forced out of their homes by urbanites buying expensive vacation homes. "The old-time families have left or are leaving," she said. "The character of the town is changing, and it is just too bad."

In Door County, the "thumb" of Wisconsin, I heard a similar thing from a woman taking part in a conversation after a church service:

Having been raised and grown up here, it has gotten to the point that I think Door County is becoming very elitist. Thank God I have a home. I was lucky enough that my husband and I had worked for it and paid for it before he died. On my wages, I could not have bought a home by myself. The cost of all of the surrounding land has become so expensive because of all the people who don't live here more than six weeks out of the year, and build three-quarter-million-dollar homes, million-dollar homes, and basically visit, and so they've driven the property values so high that those people who have lived in a home their whole lives and were able to afford, can no longer afford because the tax rate has gone up so high. The wage scale is not that great in Door County. People say, "Well, you know, you make a good living." No. And they somehow get the impression that we go to the gas station and we pay less for our gas, and pay less for our food because we live here. Ah, wrong! We pay the same price [*laughter*], but we don't make the wages, and we're paying for what has been driven up, and it's—I see it as a real hardship. I'm fortunate, but I look at my children and my grandchildren and I wonder will they be able to live here and own a home? Maybe they'll be able to rent, but to live here and own a home and take pride in that? That's scary. Really is scary.

The sentiment that city people were oblivious to the economic hardships that rural residents face was simmering on the back burner in many of these conversations. People living in tourist communities acknowledged the income that tourism generated but resented the perception that people living "up north" led leisurely lives. A woman in a northwest rural town said to me, "Just remember that up here many people have two and three part-time jobs to survive." Across the state, one man explained to me that, yes, he lived in a

beautiful wilderness area, but when the weather got nice enough to be outside, he hardly had time to enjoy it. It was during those summer months that he and most of the people he knew had to work multiple jobs to get by throughout the rest of the year: "I live on a lake—lived there twenty-three years. I've fished it three times. Just not enough time. When we want to fish, we go to Canada or Minnesota to get away from it all."

Four years earlier, some people in his breakfast group expressed exasperation at how clueless city people were about the economic realities of tourist towns.

NELSON: Yeah—people in town here, they sell their home in Milwaukee or Madison or Illinois and they come up here and buy one of these small businesses. Christ!

PETE: Yeah—wake up!

NELSON: You won't make any money for twenty years, if you can stay in business for that long, pay your taxes and everything else.

KJC: Wow.

NELSON: It's a different world up here than it is in the southern part of the state.

PETE: Looks great in the summer time!

NELSON: Yeah looks great.

PETE: Nine months are winter, and three months are tough sledding.

In Door County, the "tough sledding" sounded like this:

PAM: What you make in six months has to stretch all year.

BECKY: And many of 'em are working two and three jobs during this period of time.

PAM: Exactly.

BECKY: Yeah, they're not doing just one job.

PAM: You don't really have a summer—it consists of working. When my kids were home, I worked two jobs, so you know—it goes by quickly.

SHELLY: People always say, "You are so lucky to live [here] in the summertime!" Well, any of us who live here, live here and work here and never enjoy it. First of all we're irritated [*half-jokingly*] because we can't get to our job because of these tourists driving so slow.

KJC: I'm sorry! [*Apologizing for being a slow-driving tourist.*]

SHELLY: And then when we get there we work, leave that and go to another job and come home and then we are following another tourist to come home [*laughter*], and so we really don't get to enjoy what everybody else does, although I am so appreciative that I can live here, I really can't imagine—I just thank God every day that I am able to live here in [this town] where I was born.

DON [*sarcastically*]: You don't want to go to Milwaukee and live there?

SHELLY: No and I'm willing to give up a lot to do that, and I think a lot of us have done that.

The way they described it, making a living in a tourist community was a challenge, characterized by constant hardship and uncertainty. And they believed that urbanites just did not understand this.

People resented the economic hardships they faced, the fact that city people and those who held the reins of power did not seem to recognize these hardships, and, also, the unfulfilled promise of tourism. They did not necessarily like city people coming in to their communities but were willing to put up with it in order to make a living. In some places, however, people talked about city people infiltrating their communities, yet not helping the local economy in any way. Local residents would complain that tourists passed right through without spending any money. One example was the “all they leave on the sandbars is shit” comment noted earlier. Randall, from the group of loggers in the northwest corner of the state, also expressed this objection: “A lot of people tell me, well, if it wasn’t for tourists, your taxes would be higher. Well, they don’t spend much money here. They bring their own gas, they bring their own food, they might stay in a motel, you know. We’re not really gaining anything from tourism.”

In these conversations, the distinctiveness of rural economies was obvious to people living in them. In one case, a woman gave this a label—“the rural class.” “If you look at the *rural class* [emphasis added] . . . we’ve never had jobs here, it’s not like this is part of the economy that there are no jobs, but I think one of our big concerns is the coming tourist season and the decrease in funding from the state for tourist-related activities, cause so many people here rely entirely on tourists coming so it’s just a real uneasy feeling about what’s gonna happen this year.”

Talk concerning rural economies ranged from this “uneasy feeling” to downright anger. Sometimes the resentment about the economic inequality between the major cities and small communities was so strong I wondered if I should end the conversation and get out. Other times it was downright comical. One group in west-central Wisconsin actually imagined a geographic line that represented this unfairness. . . .

This is the gang of men who played dice every morning before work. The first time I visited this group, when a local attorney led me through the curtain at the back of the diner to the group sitting at their L-shaped table, they stopped playing dice for a while and talked with me. At the end of our conversation, they asked me if I knew how to play Ship, Captain, and Crew. I said, proudly, “Why, yes I do.” My Wisconsinness came in handy here, as I had played this dice game many times with my family growing up. They asked me to “turn off that machine [my recorder] and we’ll shake for a buck” in their dollar round (before most of them left and went to work or their other tasks for the day), and I promptly lost. They asked me to “come back and shake dice” and “bring your quarters.” It was clear that I was welcome to come back, but I had better plan on playing dice when I did.

On my third visit, there was a horse auction going on in town, and the group members joked with me about buying a horse. This led to some color-

ful comments about Madison. When several of them asked me if I was going to check out the auction, I answered:

KJC: I think I will go up once, yeah, I went up—I looked through the fence yesterday evening.

HENRY: Why don’t you buy one of them horses? I got a trailer.

KJC: Not sure where I’d keep him. [They knew by this point that I lived right in Madison, a mile from the football stadium at the time, where there was room for them to park next time they come down for a game. But there is certainly no room to keep a horse.]

HENRY: Huh?

KJC: I’m not sure where I’d keep him!

HENRY: Keep him in Madison. That’s where they keep all the bullshit.

After everyone got a good laugh out of that one, Henry continued on:

HENRY: Well, basically all you gotta do is buy the front end of the horse, they got the back end in Madison!

The group laughed, and I almost snorted my coffee, but then I started to get uncomfortable—not because of the anti-Madison comments, but because I had been winning round after round in the dice game. Most of the members of the group thought this was funny, but at least one was visibly irritated. To try to soften the situation, I joked,

KJC: I come and ask for your thoughts and I take your money!

RICHARD: I’ll tell you what, that’s good though. Because we have so little of it.

KJC: And it all goes to Madison anyway [*joking along with them*].

HOWARD: We expect nothing less from Madison!

RICHARD: It won’t cost any postage to get it down there now!

This resentment was good-natured, but it was ubiquitous across the rural communities I visited. It didn’t seem temporary, either, and wasn’t just a product of the Great Recession. People talked about economic injustice as a fact of rural life.

ISN'T THIS REALLY JUST ABOUT RACE?

Many people in these small towns perceived that someone or something was responsible for the decline of their communities. Someone or something was siphoning off their money, they told me. They believed that wherever their tax dollars were going they sure were not going to their own towns.

Who or what was doing this? Who was getting their hard-earned money? “They” often had something to do with cities: decision makers, wealthy people, liberals, and the undeserving.

Cities represent a lot in American life. One thing they conjure up is race. In short, cities are often shorthand for people who are not white. When the dice game group in central Wisconsin referred to the line dividing rural Wisconsin from the metropolitan centers in the southern part of the state as the Mason-Dixon line, the racial implications of that term were probably not accidental.

The urban-versus-rural divide is undoubtedly in part about race. Cities have perhaps always “been the places where we have first and most fully confronted the task of living alongside people who do not necessarily belong to our own tribe” (Conn 2014, 4). There is a widening policy conflict between urban and rural areas, and it is no secret that it is driven in part by racial mobilization (Gimpel and Schuknecht 2003). Research on implicit racial priming tells us that the term “inner city” is racialized—that this term activates racial attitudes (Hurwitz and Peffley 2005). It is likely the term “urban” does so as well. This may be especially the case in Wisconsin, which is extremely racially segregated. Only 29 percent of the state’s African American population lives outside the cities of Milwaukee and Madison, and most of the state has little experience to date with Latino immigration. Also, the Milwaukee metro area is extremely segregated with respect to African Americans and Latinos. According to a Brookings Institute analysis of 2005–09 data from the Census Bureau’s American Community Survey, the Milwaukee metro area is one of the most racially segregated in the country (Frey 2010).

So yes, it is highly likely that when people refer to “those people in Milwaukee” they are often referring to racial minorities. But notice how complex this is. The urbanites that rural folks were referring to were not predominantly racial minorities. When white outstaters (i.e., those living outside the major metropolitan areas) complained of the laziness in the cities in these conversations, their comments were almost always directed at white people: government bureaucrats and faculty members at the flagship public university.

In that way, antiurban resentment is not simply resentment against people of color. At the same time, given the way arguments against government redistribution in the United States have historically been made by equating deservingness with whiteness, these conversations are about race even when race is not mentioned. Also, animosity toward public workers and wealthy folks in the city may be driven by conservative views on race. Since the cities, particularly Madison, are perceived as liberal and vote Democratic in elections, people who harbor racial resentment may indeed be equating city people with racial liberalism. Now, as in the past, racial animosity is directed toward groups of whites that help minorities, such as government employees and academics.

When rural folks did make openly racist comments, they did so about Native Americans, an overwhelmingly rural population in Wisconsin. There are eleven reservations in Wisconsin, located primarily in the northern third of the state. Hostility toward Native Americans did not arise often in these

conversations, but it is no secret that relations between Native Americans and whites in Wisconsin have been tense historically and in recent history. Violent protests erupted in response to a series of federal court decisions in the 1980s, beginning in 1983. Those decisions affirmed spearfishing treaty rights to the Chippewa tribe and imposed no limits on how many fish tribal members could harvest (Bobo and Tuan 2006, chap. 2). White residents protested at boat landings, held demonstrations and rallies, and called for the end to treaty rights as well as the reservation system. Much of this opposition was rooted in racism, as social science research has documented (Bobo and Tuan 2006).

In recent years, these tensions have become salient to the broader population again, as the Walker administration has passed legislation that is facilitating the start of an iron ore mine in northwestern Wisconsin. To some, the mine signifies hundreds of jobs for people in the area who are sorely lacking them, but to others it means extensive disturbance to the way of life and natural environment and health of Native Americans on the adjacent Bad River Reservation (Seely 2011).

It is very possible that the lack of references to urban racial minorities in the conversations I observed is a manifestation of the threat hypothesis, or the idea that racial prejudice is heightened when people of different racial backgrounds are in proximity to one another (Key 1949; Blalock 1967). Given the extreme racial segregation in Wisconsin, there is little interaction here between whites and people of color. Thus the immediate racial tensions in most rural areas are not between whites and African Americans and Latinos but, instead, with Native Americans and, in a few communities, with Hmong refugees, who were relocated to Wisconsin in the decades since the Vietnam War.

The point I want to make is this: race is a part of rural consciousness. However, I ask the reader to notice the complexity of these perspectives and not think of them as simply about race. If we boil rural consciousness down to race, we ignore the ways in which these perspectives comprise many things: identities with place, a sense of oneself as a person of a particular place in the class hierarchy, identities as people with particular values, and sometimes ideology. Resentment is operating because people perceive they are not getting their fair share. They are making sense of this injustice by resenting those whom they think are getting more than they deserve, and perceptions of who works hard and who is deserving are infected with racism (Winter 2006, 2008). But those notions of distributive justice are *intertwined* with race—neither separate from nor synonymous with a simple distinction of white versus other.

Finally, if we conclude that rural consciousness is just racism dressed up in social science jargon, it allows us to overlook the role of antigovernment attitudes and preferences for small government here. Tea Party messaging appeals to racism (Burghart and Zeskind 2010; Parker and Barreto 2013), but it also resonates with many of the perceptions of inequality and alienation from government observed in the conversations presented [here]. As I have

argued, attitudes about redistribution rest on a long history of racial discrimination in the United States. But that long history has enabled an accretion of meaning around attitudes of injustice.

This is how the politics of resentment operates—it works through seemingly simple divisions of us versus them, but it has power because in these divisions are a multitude of fundamental understandings: who has power, who has what values and which of those values are right, who gets what, and perceptions of the basic fairness of all of this. It is opposition to other people, and the overlap of urban and racially “other” is a powerful combination.

This is part of the reason racism is so persistent. Because it is intertwined with other fundamental attitudes, it can be invoked and expressed in seemingly socially acceptable ways (Mendelberg 2001). In the conversations I observed, when people expressed racist sentiments, they did so while weaving them with values and allegiances of which they were sufficiently certain and proud that they were willing to express them in front of me, a relative stranger. Take for example these comments to me, by a man in the group of loggers in northwest Wisconsin . . . :

RON: Yeah. You know. Well like him that just left, that was here before to get coffee?

KJC: Yeah.

RON: He’s an American Indian. [One sentence deleted for confidentiality.]

KJC: Oh really?

RON: He’s a good guy.

KJC: Yeah.

RON: Works hard. Yeah.

KJC: Well sure.

RON: But he won’t live on the reservation where they get all the free housing and stuff, he’s self-supporting, you know?

KJC: Yeah.

RON: And, there, there’s too many programs down there for a bunch of people, you know to have it for them to want to go to work. You know? They got the casino down there shoving our money through ‘em, they got the federal government shoving our money through ‘em, and they wonder where they got drunken alcohol problems, they got nothing to do all day besides sitting around and do what they want to do. And they keep giving ‘em money to do it, well how do you expect to get anything out of anybody? There’s an old saying: A hungry dog hunts harder. Hey, you keep feeding a dog or a cat, they’re not gonna hunt, they’re not gonna look for food, they’re gonna lay around and get fat.

If I said these comments in a classroom, I would expect to get accused of racism. But for Ron, this was about hard work and deservingness. To call this just plain racism misses the complexity of the sentiments involved here.

CONCLUSION

“Rural consciousness” is the term I am using to describe a strong sense of identity as a rural person combined with a strong sense that rural areas are the victims of injustice: the sense that rural areas do not get their fair share of power, respect, or resources and that rural folks prefer lifestyles that differ fundamentally from those of city people. . . .

When I argue that rural consciousness structures the way people understand politics, I am suggesting that something other than partisanship is driving their political preferences. Support for the Republican Party is not what causes people to have these complex, intertwined understandings of economic injustice, place identity, class identity, race, and values. And the complexities of this understanding do not inevitably lead to support for the Republican Party. You may have noticed that some of these rural groups contain a good number of Democrats. In fact, the northwestern and southwestern corners of Wisconsin, although predominantly rural, lean Democratic. Booth Fowler, one of the wisest scholars of politics in Wisconsin, reasons that this is due in part to high levels of poverty in those areas, the influence of the city of Superior and of Great Lake shipping unions in the northwest corner, and the effect of commuters or out-migrants from Madison in the southwest (Fowler 2008). Whatever the reason, it is clear that the correlation between where people live and how they vote are not set in stone. They are the product of people actively trying to make sense of their lives.

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9.5

JAMES CAMPBELL

From Polarized: Making Sense of a Divided America

One way to measure the degree to which Americans have become more polarized is to use surveys to discover the proportion who consider themselves moderate in ideology. Campbell shows that many more Americans currently say that they are ideologically very liberal or very conservative than was the case in previous decades, with a shrinking proportion of moderates. He carefully shows that these measures from surveys reflect actual changes in American political attitudes with real consequences for politics.

Are Americans sharply divided in their politics or are they calmly gathered around a pragmatic political center? This is a tough question because the answer most probably lies somewhere in between. Americans are neither cantankerously polarized to the hilt nor blissfully of one mind. But the fact that Americans are not all at the outer edges of ideology or neatly clustered at the center does not mean that we can blithely split the difference and walk away thinking that the polarization questions are answered. We should be able to extract a more meaningful reading of polarization from the evidence.

IDEOLOGICAL DIFFERENCES

There is a long history of self-reported measures of political ideologies. Since at least the mid-1930s, surveys have asked respondents to declare their general ideological perspectives on politics as liberal or conservative. Data drawn from these questions played important roles in public opinion research in the late 1960s, but it was not until the early 1970s that surveys provided consistent question wordings offering response-options across the spectrum from liberal to moderate to conservative.

Where better to begin an investigation of the polarization of the public than with what citizens themselves say about their own ideological orientations? After all, self-declarations are the basis for measuring the other major

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