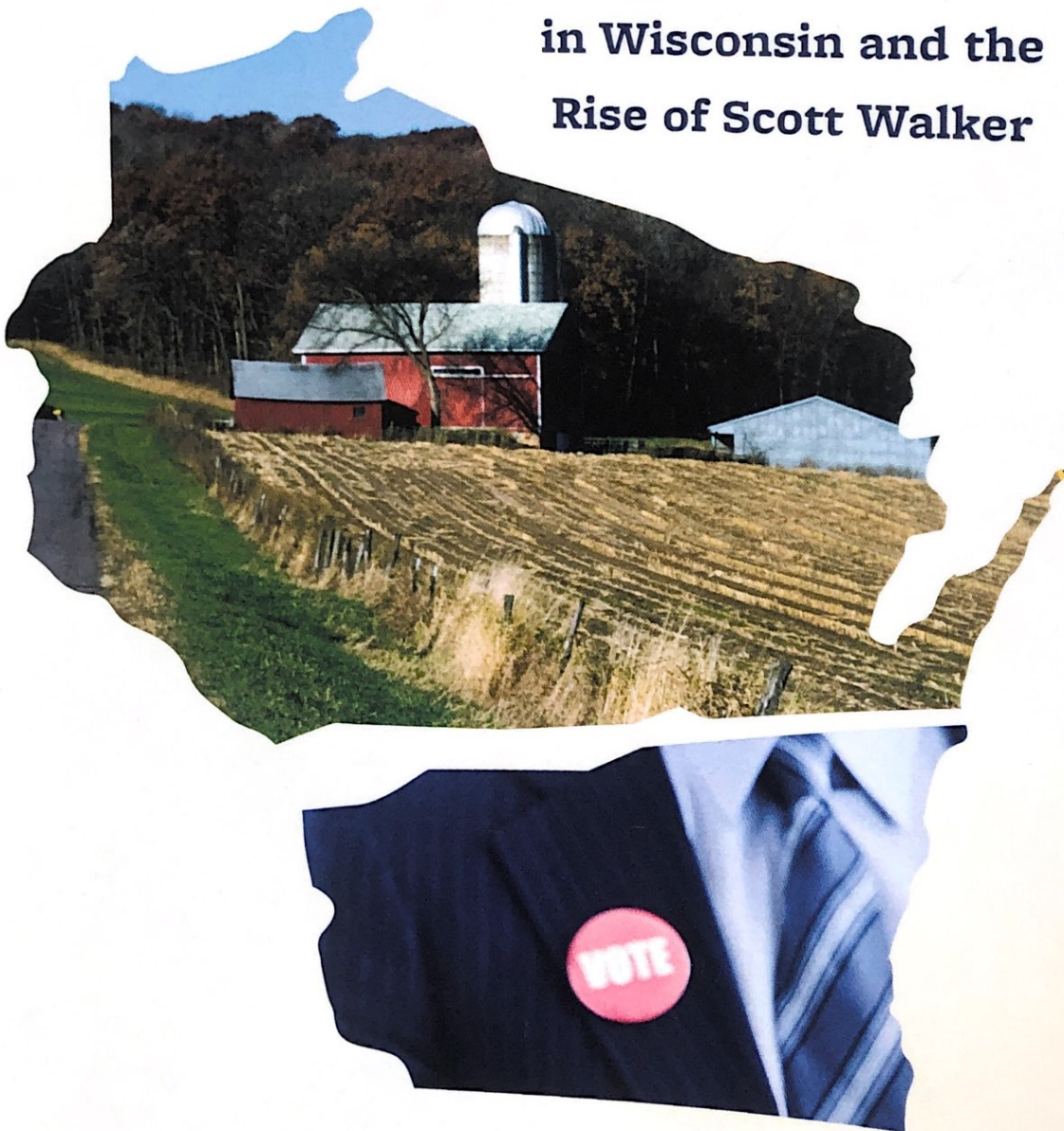


KATHERINE J. CRAMER

THE POLITICS OF RESENTMENT

**Rural Consciousness
in Wisconsin and the
Rise of Scott Walker**



sharp twists and turns, and I could not have made it through without my friends and without my family. From the bottom of my heart, thank you. I am grateful to be the daughter of two devoted, loving, and generous parents. Thank you to my mom and dad, Pat and Kip Cramer; to my brother and sister-in-law and their kids, Scott, Joan, Ben, and Matt Cramer; and to my whole extended family for your support and understanding. Thank you to my former husband, Bailey, for your constant kindness.

Finally, I dedicate this book to Rosemary, my daughter, who had no choice but to come along on much of the fieldwork necessary for this book. Your intense sense of justice inspires me.

CHAPTER ONE

Making Sense of Politics through Resentment

I have a story I would like to share with you. It is a story that my friend Tom recently shared with me. We both live in Madison, Wisconsin, which is the state capital and home to the state's flagship public university, the University of Wisconsin–Madison. Tom tells me that not too long ago he was filling up his car at a gas station here in town. He drives a Prius, and has two bumper stickers on his car that say, “OBAMA 2012” and “RECALL WALKER.”

Walker, for anyone who may not know, is our current governor, Scott Walker. He is a Republican and was first elected in November 2010. He took office on January 3, 2011, and soon after, on February 11, 2011, introduced a budget repair bill (Act 10) that called for an end to collective bargaining rights, except with respect to wages, for all public employees except police and fire employees. It also required all public employees to increase their payroll contributions for health and pension benefits (to the tune of a 10 percent cut to many of their paychecks).¹ Over the following weekend, union leaders organized protests at the Capitol. By Tuesday, February 15, over ten thousand protestors gathered on the Capitol Square, and thousands more packed the inside. Two days later, fourteen Democrats in the state senate fled to Illinois, in an effort to block the bill. The protests continued for weeks, peaking on Saturday, March 12, when approximately a hundred thousand protestors packed the Capitol Square. Earlier that week, the legislature passed the collective bargaining provisions by removing some parts dealing with fiscal matters, which allowed them to reach quorum in the senate despite the fourteen missing Democrats. By mid-March, efforts to recall sixteen

state senators (of both parties) and the governor were underway. In the summer of 2012, recall elections for nine state senators were held.² On June 5, 2012, Walker himself survived a recall vote in a campaign against the same Democrat he had competed against in 2010, Tom Barrett, the mayor of Milwaukee—becoming the first American governor ever to survive a recall. Then in November 2014, he was reelected, with 52 percent of the vote.

The partisan divisiveness in Wisconsin reflects broader political trends in the United States. The country as a whole has seen increasing partisan polarization since the mid-1970s (Layman, Carsey, and Horowitz 2006; McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2008; Barber and McCarty 2013). Democrats and Republicans in both the U.S. House and Senate are increasingly further apart on many issues. Also, state legislatures have become more and more polarized. Wisconsin stands out in this respect—its state legislators are further apart than most—but the trend is universal (Shor 2014). Our political leaders are increasingly taking stands that are ideologically distinctive and far apart (McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2008; Barber and McCarty 2013). And members of the public are increasingly polarized as well (Layman et al. 2006; Jacobson 2010; Abramowitz 2013; Haidt and Hetherington 2012).

Some argue that the public is not actually polarized, that people are just better sorted ideologically into partisan camps than in the past (Hetherington 2009; Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope 2010). But others observe that there is more at stake here than ideology. Divides between identifiers with the two parties in terms of religious preferences, attitudes toward race, and racial demographics themselves are deeper than ever (Abramowitz 2013, 2014). The divides are not just about politics but about who we are as people.

These divides are also reflective of the central debate in American politics today: What is the proper role of government in society and who should pay for it (Stonecash 2014)? There are those who believe government ought to be expanded in order to deal with the challenges we face, and there are those who feel that government itself is a major obstacle that should be shrunk. The emergence of the Tea Party is one manifestation of this fundamental divide.

So back to my story. It is in this contentious context that Tom is pumping gas into his clearly liberal/Democratic car. A cool vintage convertible pulls in to the station. Tom starts chatting up the driver when he

gets out of his car. The man looks at Tom, looks at Tom's car, and says, "I don't talk to people like you."

This is a little shocking. Unfortunately, it is not unusual in Wisconsin anymore. It has gotten downright nasty around here. People, in casual conversation, are treating each other as enemies. And this is in a place in which people are notoriously nice. Seriously nice. But times change.

I am a life-long Wisconsinite, and proudly so. I am also a political scientist. So I know from my daily work that besides partisan divisiveness, another key feature of the times we live in is economic inequality (Piketty and Saez 2003). Yes, families at all parts of the income distribution have experienced growth in income since World War II, even when adjusting for inflation. But the growth among the wealthiest folks has skyrocketed, while it seems to have stagnated since the 1970s among the 40 percent lowest in income (Bartels 2008, 7–8).

When you consider how much the very top income earners make compared to the bulk of the population, economic inequality in the United States looks even worse. According to 2005 tax returns, the average income for the top 1 percent was \$1,111,560. For the bottom 90 percent, it was just \$29,143 (Winters and Page 2009, 735).³ Of course, since those figures were calculated, the Great Recession hit us all. And this meant a hit to household wealth—the savings, investments, and ownership of things like homes that people can tap into during rough times. Here, too, we see inequality: Those in the ninety-fifth percentile of wealth lost a great deal of wealth in the Great Recession but then recovered quickly. However, those in the bottom twenty-fifth percentile have lost a great deal—approximately 85 percent of their net worth—and not regained it.⁴

This economic imbalance has apparently produced a widening gap in political access between the rich and everyone else. The policies our elected officials put into law reflect the preferences of the affluent, but not so much the opinions of other folks. For example, when you compare the votes of U.S. senators to the preferences their constituents express in public opinion polls, the preferences of the lowest third by income are hardly reflected at all in the senators' votes. The preferences of the middle third are reflected somewhat, but just by the Democratic Party. It is only the opinions of the wealthiest that correspond in any substantial way with senators' votes (Bartels 2008).⁵

I offer another piece of evidence that national politicians seem to listen only to the affluent from political scientist Martin Gilens, who com-

pared the opinions of the nation as a whole with policy outcomes. He used responses to 1,935 questions concerning a variety of policy areas from surveys conducted between 1981 and 2002 (Gilens 2005, 2012). When wealthy and low-income people had similar preferences, their opinions corresponded with policy outcomes. But when their preferences diverged, policies did not reflect the wishes of the low- or middle-income people. They reflected the wishes of the wealthy.

Similar results have been found at the state level. State-level economic policy more closely corresponds to the desires of the rich and hardly matches the desires of the poor (Rigby and Wright 2011). On specific policies, including the death penalty, abortion, gun control, level of education spending, gambling, and scope of AFDC eligibility, state policy again is unresponsive to the ideological leanings of the lowest-income residents (Flavin 2012). If our legislators are listening to anyone (Jacobs and Shapiro 2000), it looks like they are listening mainly to the people with a great deal of money.

There are some who disagree with this interpretation. Ura and Ellis (2008) and Soroka and Wlezien (2008) argue that the evidence of unequal representation is not so strong, since on many policies, preferences do not vary greatly by income level and tend to move similarly over time. But even if that take on public opinion is correct, we are left with another puzzle: as income inequality has risen in the United States, low-income voters' preference for redistribution of income has moved in a conservative fashion. Their preference for redistribution has moved in the same direction as that of high-income voters, even though presumably low-income voters would benefit, directly in their pocketbooks, from more redistributive policy (Kelly and Enns 2010).

This puzzling trend is not just among low-income voters, at least internationally. Among affluent member countries of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, when the distance in income between low- and middle-income voters is small compared to the distance between the rich and the middle-income, there is greater support among middle-income voters for redistribution (Lupu and Pontusson 2011). But that does not hold in the United States. There seems to be less support for redistribution here than in other countries with similar levels of economic inequality (Kenworthy and Pontusson 2005).

Why? Why is it that most voters continue to elect officials who apparently do not represent the vast majority of us? Or if one does not believe that interpretation, why is it that many low-income voters who might

benefit from more government redistribution continue to vote against it? Why, in times of increasing economic inequality, have the preferences of the lowest-income voters moved in a conservative, rather than liberal, direction? And why is it that, here in the United States, we have less support for redistribution among middle-income voters than in comparable countries?

This book provides at least part of the answer to these questions. Back in May of 2007, I started inviting myself into conversations in over two dozen communities chosen throughout Wisconsin.⁷ My aim was to listen. I wanted to hear how people made sense of politics and their place in it. I kept going back to those groups of people for over five years, through November 2012.

Their conversations enabled me to examine what it looks like when people who might benefit from more government instead prefer far less of it. Listening closely to people revealed two things to me: a significant rural-versus-urban divide and the powerful role of resentment. This book shows that what can look like disagreements about basic political principles can be rooted in something even more fundamental: ideas about who gets what, who has power, what people are like, and who is to blame. What might seem to be a central debate about the appropriate role of government might at base be something else: resentment toward our fellow citizens.

This book shows people making sense of politics in a way that places resentment toward other citizens at the center. It illuminates this politics of resentment by looking closely at the manner in which many rural residents exhibit an intense resentment against their urban counterparts. I explain how people make sense of politics when the boundaries they draw between "us" and "them" coincide with real, geographic boundaries. I show that, although this form of thinking about politics is often criticized as ignorance, these understandings are complex, many layered, and grounded in fundamental identities.

I learned, as a city girl, that many rural residents have a perspective I am going to call "rural consciousness." To folks who grew up in rural areas, a fancy social science name like that probably seems unnecessary. But it is my shorthand for referring to this: an identity as a rural person that includes much more than an attachment to place. It includes a sense that decision makers routinely ignore rural places and fail to give rural communities their fair share of resources, as well as a sense that rural folks are fundamentally different from urbanites in terms of lifestyles,

values, and work ethic. Rural consciousness signals an identification with rural people and rural places and denotes a multifaceted resentment against cities.

When I heard people using this lens to interpret their world, I heard them claiming that government and public employees are the product of anti-rural forces and should obviously be scaled back as much as possible. Viewing politics through the perspective of rural consciousness makes wanting less government a commonsense desire.

We political scientists often claim that whether a person feels closer to the Democratic or Republican Party is the most important predisposition for predicting what people think about politics, including how much government and redistribution people want. But in this book, I show how partisanship can be part of a broader understanding of who one is in the world and a less meaningful identity than we often assume.

Instead of partisan identities, many of the people I spent time with in rural areas used identities rooted in place and class, this perspective I am calling rural consciousness, to structure the causal stories they told to each other—and to me—about the state of the economy before, during, and after the Great Recession.⁸ It informed their frequently negative perceptions of public employees. Even though there were public employees in their towns, and sometimes even in their groups, many rural folks did not view public employees as truly rural. They did not see them as hard working and deserving as rural folks in general, for example. This perspective provided an environment ripe for the Tea Party, Scott Walker's success, and support for small government generally.

I call this book *The Politics of Resentment* because there are other ways to make sense of politics than by relying primarily on ideas about which of one's fellow citizens are getting more than their fair share and who among them is undeserving. I draw attention to a kind of politics in which people do not focus their blame on elite decision makers as they try to comprehend an economic recession. Instead, they give their attention to fellow residents who they think are eating their share of the pie. These interpretations are encouraged, perhaps fomented, by political leaders who exploit these divisions for political gain.

This is a different argument than is commonly made about U.S. public opinion and its manipulation by political elites. Contrary to the arguments of political observer Thomas Frank (2004), the interpretations that I am describing are not devoid of economic considerations. The conversations I observed suggest that politicians are not distracting people

from economic considerations by convincing them to focus on social and cultural issues. People *are* taking economics into account. But these considerations are not raw objective facts. Instead, they are perceptions of who is getting what and who deserves it, and these notions are affected by perceptions of cultural and lifestyle differences. That is, in a politics of resentment, people intertwine economic considerations with social and cultural considerations in the interpretations of the world they make with one another.

The possibility I am raising here is that we may be missing something if we think of votes in terms of issue stances, as political scientists normally do. Perhaps issues are secondary to identities. Perhaps when people vote for a candidate their overarching calculation is not how closely does this person's stances match my own, but instead, is this person like me? Does this person understand people like me? The answers to those questions include a consideration of issue stances, but issue stances are not necessarily the main ingredient.

This is a study of public opinion, but it is atypical in that my goal is not to tell you *what* people think, whether Wisconsinites or any other general population. My goal is not to predict voters' candidate choices or policy preferences. Instead, my goal is to better understand *how* people think about politics. Some public opinion scholars have argued that opinions about redistribution are not just a function of economic considerations but are, instead, the products of people embedded in particular social locations and social environments (Brooks and Manza 2007). In this book, I do the listening required to study how people combine their sense of themselves in the world with their perceptions of economic conditions to arrive at policy preferences. My goal is to uncover the understandings that make a politics of resentment possible. I want to know what it looks like when people use social categories to understand the political world, and how they connect resentment toward particular groups to the broader stance of wanting less, not more, government redistribution.

Let me also say that this is not a study of how *well* people interpret the political world. American citizens already get a great deal of criticism from public opinion scholars and political pundits for being inept (as Lupia [2006] has noted). The pages that follow do contain a good bit of dismay about the way people make sense of politics, but my point is not to echo that argument. The purpose of the book is not to blame the average citizen. Instead, its purpose is to illuminate how we blame each other.

Why the Focus on “Us” versus “Them” and Social Identities?

The politics of resentment is fueled by political strategy but it is made possible by basic human cognition. When people try to make sense of politics, what do they rely on? Psychologists tell us that when people try to understand the world in general, not just the political world, they categorize (Chi, Feltovich, and Glaser 1981; Medin and Cooley 1998). A particularly powerful set of categories in the realm of politics are social identities, more casually called notions of “us” and “them” (Tajfel 1981; Turner et al. 1987). My definition of social identities is simply this: Identities with social groups. These may be small or large—from friendship groups to society-wide categories like “women”—but they serve as reference points by which people compare themselves to others. These identities help us figure out which people are on our side. They help us figure out how we ought to behave and what stances we should take. They even influence what we pay attention to. Because of all that, they affect what and who influences us (e.g., Tajfel et al. 1971; Brewer and Miller 1984; Sears and Kinder 1985; Tajfel and Turner 1986).

These social identities are important politically. They play a central role in political attitudes and behaviors (Campbell et al. 1960, chaps. 12, 13; Conover 1984, 1988; Huddy 2003). Identifying with the broad category Republican or Democrat alone captures enough of individuals’ sense of themselves that those identities predict a whole host of political behaviors, particularly voting (Green et al. 2002).

Not all social categories are relevant to politics, but it does not take much for a social category to have an impact on the formation of preferences regarding the distribution of resources—an issue at the heart of politics. When people are simply told to identify with an arbitrary social group, such as Klee or Kandinsky fans, they become more likely to allocate more resources to members of that in-group as opposed to people in the out-group (i.e., the “minimal group result” [Tajfel et al. 1971]). Identifying with a group does not necessarily entail vilifying members of out-groups (Brewer 1999). However, in the realm of public affairs, the distribution of resources is often portrayed as a zero-sum game. There is only so much money to go around. If I allocate it to my group, yours will not get it. Therefore, how people conceptualize the outlines of us and them likely influences what types of policies they are willing to support.

When people feel unsure and insecure about the amount of money

available to go around, the situation is ripe for a politics of resentment. People are especially likely to rely on their group identities in situations of uncertainty (Grieve and Hogg 1999; Mullin and Hogg 1999). When people perceive that they are not getting their fair share and that others are but do not deserve to, the emotion of resentment is a likely result (Feather and Sherman 2002; Feather and Nairn 2005). The combination of a reliance on social identities and the emotion of resentment can create a situation in which people regularly view politics in terms of opposition to other social groups.

Resentment is both public and stubborn. It is more socially acceptable to express than envy (Feather and Sherman 2002), making it a potential tool for political arguments. And it is stubborn because even when members of better-off groups are suddenly on the short end of the stick as well—as when public workers must suddenly devote more of their paychecks to benefit contributions—those who resent them are not likely to feel sympathetic toward them (Feather and Nairn 2005). Also, victories over people perceived as underserving tend to produce schadenfreude, or a feeling of pleasure over their failure (Feather and Sherman 2002).

A politics of resentment arises from the way social identities, the emotion of resentment, and economic insecurity interact. In a politics of resentment, resentment toward fellow citizens is front and center. People understand their circumstances as the fault of guilty and less deserving social groups, not as the product of broad social, economic, and political forces.

Some people are more prone to interpret the world in terms of us and them than others (Kinder and Kam 2009). My intent here is not to figure out who uses us/them divisions more than others—I am not claiming that rural residents do this more than urban residents. Instead, my goal is to show what it looks like in practice when people interpret politics by focusing on whom they are against and whom they resent.

My Window Is Wisconsin

My window to the way the politics of resentment works is Wisconsin. This is a state in which the debate over the appropriate role of government has played out prominently and over a sustained period. It has been central to the conservative response to the disarray of the Republican Party after the George W. Bush presidency and Barack Obama’s 2008

presidential victory. Wisconsin was a predominantly Republican state until the 1950s, but Democratic presidential candidates have repeatedly carried the state since 1988. Since 2000, however, it has been a partisan battleground, or swing state.

You can see the push-and-pull of partisan fights here in multiple ways. Wisconsin scored highest on the number of “Bush-Obama counties”; no other state had as many counties that went for George W. Bush in the 2004 presidential election and then for Barack Obama in 2008 (Achenbach 2012). Wisconsin went from having a Democratically controlled state legislature with a Democratic governor and two Democratic senators in 2009–10 to having a narrowly Republican-controlled state legislature, Republican governor, and a split U.S. senate delegation in 2012. The state senate has been narrowly balanced, and has alternated between the parties, for decades.⁹ The 2010 elections saw a sharp shift toward the Republican Party. Those elections involved a defeat of three-term Democratic U.S. senate incumbent Russ Feingold to Tea Party-backed Republican Ron Johnson, and Walker’s ascent to governor (a position previously held by Democrat Jim Doyle, only the second Democrat to ever win reelection to the Wisconsin governorship). But the state continues to be closely divided. Although Walker won his gubernatorial recall election in June 2012, exit polls showed that approximately 9 percent of the electorate had voted for Walker and intended to vote for Obama that coming November (Gilbert 2012b). In the 2012 presidential election, Obama won Wisconsin, and in a race for an open U.S. senate seat, Democrat Tammy Baldwin defeated Republican Tommy Thompson, one of the most popular politicians to ever serve in the state (a former Republican governor and secretary of Health and Human Services under George W. Bush). In the same election, however, Wisconsin elected a majority Republican state assembly and senate.

These recent elections show that Wisconsin does not lean clearly toward one party or the other. The state’s political leaders have real and visible debates about the appropriate reach of government and the merits of market- versus government-based approaches. This makes Wisconsin a fascinating place to study the politics of resentment because it is a laboratory for some of the most fundamental political issues of our time.

To be honest, I did not initially choose to study Wisconsin for these reasons. I was not looking for a laboratory for arguments about the right size of government or even a way to examine the Tea Party. I set out, in

May of 2007, to learn more about the way social-class identities matter for the way people make sense of politics. I chose Wisconsin because average household income and local economies vary widely across the state, and I knew the people here were likely to hold a variety of perceptions with respect to social class. I also wanted to better understand attitudes among state residents toward my alma mater and the university I work for, the University of Wisconsin–Madison. I was also the faculty investigator of a state-wide public opinion poll and wanted to use conversations with people across the state to help set the agenda for our surveys instead of relying solely on conversations with politicians in Madison, the state capitol.

I had a lot of reasons for studying Wisconsin. But the three most important ones were these: I grew up here, I love this state, and I care deeply about it.

I did not foresee the rise of the Tea Party. I did not foresee the Great Recession, Barack Obama, or Scott Walker. But as this intense political context took shape, I was already in the field, listening and gathering data on what residents in the state were thinking. I had sampled my research sites in an attempt to take myself to a wide range of places in the state. My hope was to listen to people of varying socioeconomic backgrounds, across different types of communities. This meant that I spent a lot of time in smaller communities, and more time outside metro areas than ever before in my life.¹⁰

Listening to conversations in a broad assortment of places alerted me to a rift that surprised me. As I listened closer and longer, I learned that it is a rift through which our economic tensions and our ambivalence about the proper role of government gets played out. This rift is, on its most basic level, a rural-versus-urban divide.

Rural Consciousness

As a female social scientist driving my Volkswagen Jetta out from Madison, the state capitol and the second largest city in the state, I heard a lot of criticism of cities from people in small-town Wisconsin. I heard that urbanites ignore people in rural areas, take in all of their hard-earned money, and fundamentally disrespect and misunderstand the rural way of life.

What I heard while inviting myself into conversations around Wis-

consin taught me that the rural-versus-urban divide is an important—if quite overlooked—divide in American politics today. We tend to talk about red versus blue when we look at electoral maps, but perhaps a more important divide is urban versus rural (Meckler and Chinni 2014). We have known for a long time that this divide matters, but not in the way I am suggesting.

History shows us that the rural-versus-urban divide has long been a factor in American politics. But what I am describing in this book is not just the correlation between place and votes. Instead, I am arguing that place matters because it functions as a lens through which people interpret politics, and I am showing *how* it matters. When previous studies have examined how or why location matters, they have not, in fact, examined how place-based consciousness matters for the way people make sense of politics. In this book, I show how consciousness as a rural resident itself can make the stands that people take in these conflicts seem appropriate and natural.

I am calling this lens rural consciousness to describe a perspective that is at its core an identity rooted in place and class. But it is infused with a sense of distributive injustice—a sense that rural folks don't get their fair share.

I heard this perspective in just about every rural community in which I spent time.¹¹ In general, it had three elements: (1) a belief that rural areas are ignored by decision makers, including policy makers, (2) a perception that rural areas do not get their fair share of resources, and (3) a sense that rural folks have fundamentally distinct values and lifestyles, which are misunderstood and disrespected by city folks.

I label this perspective rural consciousness in order to build on a line of research in political science regarding “group consciousness.” That work focuses on social identities that are infused with a sense of distributive injustice. Such scholarship argues that a group consciousness is a social identity that has particular importance politically. People with a group consciousness prefer their in-group, are dissatisfied with that group's status, believe that members of the group are not getting their fair share, and perceive that this state of affairs is the product of systematic decisions, not just chance or individual-level behavior (Miller et al. 1987). When such attitudes are attached to a social group identity, that identity tends to matter for politics. It affects political preferences and whether people become politically engaged.

The Importance of Place in Contemporary American Politics

In this book, I focus on the urban-versus-rural divide and the perspective of rural consciousness as a window into understanding the politics of resentment.¹² I regard this divide as one of many through which the politics of resentment can operate. However, this particular axis of resentment is hugely consequential for American politics today. Yes, the population of rural residents in the United States is quite small—about 15 percent of the total population. However, contemporary Republican Party power depends on rural residents. According to a recent *Wall Street Journal* analysis, “Over the past 15 years the percentage of rural Americans represented by Republicans in the House has grown sharply, while urban Americans have shifted slightly to House Democrats. . . . As Democrats have come to dominate U.S. cities, it is Republican strength in rural areas that allows the party to hold control of the House and remain competitive in presidential elections” (Meckler and Chinni 2014).

Take Wisconsin, for example. Milwaukee's suburbs lean increasingly Republican, and yet Madison leans increasingly Democratic. There is a lot of attention to the culture war between these two urban areas and, also, to the tensions between the overwhelmingly Republican and white Milwaukee suburbs versus the Democratic and racially diverse city of Milwaukee.¹³

But the rural-versus-urban divide matters. Almost half of the population in Wisconsin lives outside the fourteen counties that make up the greater Milwaukee and Madison metropolitan areas (48 percent according to the 2010 Census).¹⁴ And these nonmetro areas are a political battleground. Of these fifty-eight nonmetro counties, only six voted for the Democratic gubernatorial candidate in 2010. But just two years earlier, only eight of them went for Republican John McCain in the 2008 presidential race. And in 2012, the counties outside the major metro areas basically split: twenty-seven of them went for Obama, and thirty-one went for Republican challenger Mitt Romney. There is an independent streak in the rural areas, and it has mattered in recent elections.¹⁵

Also, at the same time that the United States is becoming increasingly urban, and increasingly racially and ethnically heterogeneous, there are places that are experiencing something different. Wisconsin is one of them. The changes in Wisconsin represent a change common to

the Midwest, but one that is often overlooked by journalists living on the coasts. Here in "flyover" land, the population in Wisconsin is indeed becoming more racially and ethnically diverse. But the largest overall growth in Wisconsin is in the Milwaukee suburbs, which tend to be predominantly white and predominantly Republican.¹⁶

You can look at demographic change and conclude that urban areas represent the future, and rural areas the past. You could say that conservatism is woven into the fabric of rural life. Maybe. But the alliance of Republican and rural is not inevitable. Nor is the correlation between small towns and support for less government. My interest is in the interpretations of the world that make these correlations happen.

What I argue in this book is that paying attention to identities rooted in place is key to understanding these interpretations. We should pay attention to place because rural areas are political battlegrounds, our system of representation is based on geography, and conflicts between rural and urban areas over who should get what are intensifying (Gimpel and Schuknecht 2003, esp. 385). But we should also pay attention to place because it is central to the way many people understand the political world. Americans' perceptions of who gets what and our notions of fairness about these distinctions are often linked to place (Hochschild 1981). These perceptions of place and justice also correlate with perceptions of who has power and how it is exercised (Hayward 2000). Our identification with particular communities is also associated with our willingness to pay taxes (Wong 2010, chap. 3).

The links we make between place and justice, fairness and inequality are powerful because they involve race and social class. By social class, I mean our perceived social standing relative to each other, which is rooted in economic characteristics such as income, occupation, and education. It is inescapable that there are haves and have-nots in the United States in terms of objective wealth, and on that basis I argue class matters in American politics. Place is intertwined with the objective indicators of class (Burrows and Gane 2006),¹⁷ defined by a long pedigree of scholarship as income, wealth, occupation, and relationship to authority in the workplace.¹⁸

When it comes to figuring out how the politics of resentment works, people's perceptions of their social class make a difference—and that is also intertwined with place. Objective measures of class do not necessarily predict how people will perceive their own social class (Walsh, Jennings, and Stoker 2004). A person we type as "upper class" accord-

ing to income may instead think of herself as "middle class." Social-class identities are a function of income, occupation, and education, but they also incorporate a sense of what people value and the lifestyles they prefer (Jackman and Jackman 1983).

Class is not something that people just have—it is something that they *do*. They give meaning to their social-class status through the food they eat, the clothes they wear, the sports they play, and so on (Bourdieu [1979] 1984, chap. 3; see also Lareau 2008). People give meaning to their identities through their everyday life and interactions with others, and those meanings in turn structure how they make sense of the world.¹⁹

The connection between social-class identity and geographic place may be particularly important for politics. Because identities are perceptions, not necessarily consistent with objective circumstances, other people, including politicians, can influence and manipulate them. And because dividing lines may be most easily exploited when they have physical markers, identities rooted in geographic spaces are ripe for the politics of resentment. Geographic boundaries allow us to actually draw lines between types of people, particularly between the haves and the have-nots.

I am focusing on place as a dimension of the politics of resentment because it is intertwined with another social category that is highly relevant to redistributive policy in the United States: race. Race has been central to debates over what role the government should play in redistribution since at least the Civil War. In their book, *Fighting Poverty in the US and Europe*, Alesina and Glaeser (2004) explain that, until the Civil War, the federal government did not have the capacity to redistribute wealth. After the war, three things came together: a stagnant economy among farmers, enormous increases in wealth for some people (this was what we call the Gilded Age, after all), and a government with increased power, not only real but demonstrably so—it had just successfully freed the slaves.

At that point in time, the rural-versus-urban divide, race, and redistribution collided. Rural economies were particularly hard hit and various rural-based movements arose, in which people argued for redistribution. Their focus was on increasing inflation so that farmers could pay their debts. But in essence they were asking for the federal government to take from the very rich and redistribute to the rural poor.

These movements became what we now call populism. As populists tried to make their arguments, they tried to appeal to African Amer-

icans—an overwhelmingly poor population at the time. And pretty quickly, enemies of populism invoked racism to combat these calls for redistribution.

President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's New Deal legislation to combat the Great Depression changed the debate about redistribution, and the United States practiced significant redistribution until the 1960s. The Republican Party found itself out of power—until a change that began with Barry Goldwater's successful candidacy for his party's nomination in 1964 provided a blueprint that the party built on in later years. He gained support in that race by appealing to a coalition of McCarthys (anticommunists), anti-New Dealers, and Southerners committed to segregation. That coalition has underpinned Republican success ever since. As Alesina and Glaeser (2004) argue, whether or not Republican politicians were intentionally using race, when they ran on an anti-New Deal platform, they were appealing to those opposed to integration.

Arguments against redistribution still benefit from the unfortunate fact that racist sentiments persist. As Alesina and Glaeser show, across the globe opponents of the welfare state have succeeded by tapping into the cultural heterogeneity, whether racial, religious, or otherwise. In the United States, it is in the interests of the Republican Party for attention to class to be diverted to attention to race.

In fact, race is quite likely the reason that public opinion in the United States has not shifted in a redistributive direction as much as it has in other countries, despite rising economic inequality. In most affluent member countries of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, governments have responded to rising inequality with greater redistribution—but not in the United States (Kenworthy and Pontusson 2005). Some say that the relative weakness of labor unions and socialist movements (Korpi 1983) and the low voting rates among low-income voters (Kenworthy and Pontusson 2005) in the United States have resulted in less pressure for redistribution than in other countries.

Another part of the story, though, is the composition of the poor in the United States. As I noted at the start of this book, support for redistribution among middle-income voters in the United States is much lower than it is in other countries of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development with comparable levels of affluence and structures of inequality (Lupu and Pontusson 2011). Scholars argue this is because a greater proportion of the poor in the United States are racial

minorities (Alesina and Glaeser 2004). They argue that racial difference reduces the connection that middle-income voters feel toward the poor. Without a psychological connection to the poor, middle-income voters are less likely to support redistributing resources toward them (Lupu and Pontusson 2011; see also Lane 2001).

The history of the intertwined nature of race, place, and class underscores that the alliance of rural voters with a party pressing for less government has roots in human action—it has not popped out of thin air. In fact, in the populist era, the relationship was reversed: farmers were allied with populists calling for more redistribution. Looking closely at the way rural residents understand politics today helps uncover the many layers of the publics' interpretations of who is on their side and where they place the role of government in these battles.

Listening closely to rural voters also helps reveal how the meaning of “populism” has changed in the contemporary United States. Political actors often claim to be populist as a shorthand for conveying that they are especially close to the people and are railing against politics as usual. Present-day U.S. candidates who call themselves “populist” are not necessarily so.²⁰ Because we live in a time when distrust in government is the norm, there is often a political benefit in running against government and in making the claim that government is out of step with the concerns of the public.

But the white-collar composition of our national, state, and local governments calls into question the extent to which those seeking office are on the side of “the people” in a populist division of people versus the powerful elite (Carnes 2013). Also, how often are so-called populists these days operating outside the party structure? For example, are Tea Party candidates really separate from the Republican Party and the organizations that support it? That does not appear to be the case, as Republican Party elites and the Fox News network have been key players in Tea Party activism (Williamson, Skocpol, and Coggin 2011).

When populist appeals are made, do we really have genuine “discontent stem[ing] from the disparity between those who hold no power versus those who do” (Barr 2009, 31)? For example, in the rural consciousness I observed, many people living in rural places thought that their communities were not receiving their fair share of resources. And yet, empirically the evidence on this is unclear, as I explain in greater detail in chapter 3. Also, on many issues their stances were similar to the policy priorities of the party in power: Act 10, gun control, and reducing taxes,

for example. In this way, many appeals that are labeled populist rarely cut against the grain of society or against the grain of elite values.²¹ The claim we will encounter that public employees are lazy and undeserving is not exactly against the interests of the established elite, for example.

The approach I take in this book enables us to better understand the operation of what contemporary political pundits call populism. I show what some of these us-versus-them divides look like from the public's point of view. I also show why people find these categories appealing and useful, even if focusing on such categories ultimately benefits not themselves but, instead, the powerful elite.

Public Opinion among Ordinary People

My attention in this book is focused on "ordinary" people who find themselves in a caustic political environment and who, unfortunately, through their own sense making, contribute to that environment. By ordinary people, I mean people who are not themselves political elites—not elected officials, staffers for elected officials, public employees involved in the policy process, or journalists and others who live and breathe politics. (As much as I would like to think of myself as an ordinary person, this leaves out political scientists, too).²²

Because I listen intensively to particular people in particular places in this study, you can say this is a bottom-up study of public opinion. But I am not assuming that the opinions I hear in these communities exist in a vacuum, independent of mass media or political leaders. I am also not assuming that ordinary people simply parrot the views of Fox News, Barack Obama, or anyone else. The reality I will try to convey to you is of a much more complex process of sense making and understanding.

Here are my assumptions about the way public opinion operates. First, we can predict the aggregate shape of public opinion quite accurately from the content of mainstream news media (Zaller 1992). Second, differences within the population can be accurately predicted by politically important predispositions like partisanship, attitudes toward war (Zaller 1992), and attitudes toward racial groups (Kinder and Sanders 1996). People pay attention to and hear things that resonate with their preexisting beliefs. Third, when we judge whether the ordinary citizen is capable of making "good" judgments with respect to politics accord-

ing to how much they "know" (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996) and to what extent they base these judgments on an overarching ideology (Converse 1964), they do not in general perform very well. Fourth, when you listen to the way people make sense of politics, they have justifications for what they think, and these justifications make sense to them and are steeped in their personal sense of who they are in the world (Cramer Walsh 2004). Fifth, the identities people use to make sense of politics are constantly evolving and change salience in response to the context (Turner et al. 1994; Green, Palmquist, and Schickler 2002).

Sixth, public opinion is not just what polls measure. Before we had survey research, people did not define public opinion as poll results. Instead, scholars thought of it as the product of groups of people competing with one another (Blumer 1948) and the back and forth between citizens and journalists (Bryce 1913). When the technology of mass sample surveys was emerging, it seemed crazy to some people to think of public opinion as the mechanical aggregation of the expressions of isolated individuals. Even today, for many decisions, especially at lower levels of government, it is not practical to capture public opinion through polling. Politicians with small constituencies or limited budgets figure out what their constituents think and feel—public opinion—based on things other than polls (Fenno 1978). They talk to people. They do "polling by walking around" (Cramer Walsh 2009). I am trying to revive this definition of public opinion as more than just what polls measure. It is also the understandings that emerge from communication among people.

In this view of public opinion, bottom-up and top-down processes are occurring at the same time and influence one another. Elites mobilize public opinion. That does not mean that they create public opinion from scratch. Instead, they tap into preexisting sentiments and values they find it advantageous to activate. Market research and campaign consultants try to figure out what messages will work—what will resonate and what will successfully ignite opinions that are lying dormant (Key 1961). In addition, political strategy does contribute to the opinions and sentiments that are out there. The seeds of resentment are sown over long periods of time. In other words, political elites reap the benefits of the divisiveness they help create.

In the conversations of this book, we see how the weeds grow as people sow them in the minds of each other. We also see how certain contexts create a bountiful harvest as politicians fertilize certain resentments

for particular political purposes. My focus here is on processes among ordinary people, but my aim is to explain how they fit into an overall political ecology.

Why Study Group Conversation?

You might have gathered that this is not your typical public opinion study, meaning a study conducted via scientific opinion surveys. This book is based on data gathered by inviting myself into the conversations of ordinary people. I find mass-sample public opinion surveys enormously helpful for capturing what a large population of people think at a given point in time. But for the task of figuring out *why* people think what they do I have found no better substitute than listening to them in depth—sitting down with them in groups in the places they normally hang out and hearing how they piece the world together for themselves. This is sometimes called an “ethnographic approach” (Schatz 2009). It is ethnographic in the sense of observing life in a place in order to understand the meaning people construct of their own lives and the world around them.

I said at the outset that **my main motivation was not to get at how well people make sense of politics, but to get at how they do so.** I am trying to discern what people have rather than what they lack, in terms of the tools they have for making sense of politics. I take this approach because, as I said above, I tend to think of public opinion as the understandings that people create together. That is, if a person was to talk about an issue one way in her morning coffee klatch and yet another way in response to a telephone interviewer later in the day, which one is her real opinion? Both are real and both have importance.

My hope is to better explain how the perspectives people use to interpret the world lead them to see certain stances as natural and right for someone like themselves (Soss 2006, 316). This is in line with an approach to social science called “interpretivism” (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012). This kind of work generally shares the goal of trying to provide a coherent account of interpretations or understandings in order to explain why people express the opinions they do. My assumption is that providing such an account is necessary for a true explanation.

Even before I noticed that place identities were a prominent way in which people in the rural communities I sampled were making sense of

politics. I wanted to take into account the way the socioeconomic context of their communities mattered in their conversations. An ethnographic approach enabled me to do this. I also wanted to spend time with people having conversations in their own environments because doing so allows me to see the work of social identity. Social identity is hard to measure with surveys. Our best attempts involve asking people how close they feel to certain social groups, but when we do so we have to anticipate what groups matter to people. I find that we learn a lot when we allow people to tell us what their identity reference points are (Walsh 2004). In addition, when you watch people interacting with people they normally spend time with, you can hear and see them using these reference points in a way that does not necessarily occur in a one-on-one interview with a researcher.

Another thing I should point out about this study is that it is not about causation. I am not trying to predict how *X* causes *Y*. For example, my question is not whether living in a rural place causes rural consciousness, or whether politicians activate rural consciousness. Instead, this study is a “constitutive” analysis. That is, it is an examination of what this thing, rural consciousness, consists of, how it works, and how it is part of a broader politics of resentment (Taylor 1971; McCann 1996; Wendt 1998). The point is not to argue that we see consciousness in rural areas but not in other places, or to estimate how often it appears among rural residents, or to describe what a population of people thinks. Instead, my purpose here is to examine what this particular rural consciousness is and what it does: how it helps to organize and integrate thoughts about the distribution of resources, decision-making authority, and values into a coherent narrative that people use to make sense of the world. In addition, the goal is to illuminate how this perspective fits in with a broader politics in which tapping into resentment is an effective political strategy. This is not a study of Wisconsin; it is a study of political understanding that is conducted in Wisconsin (Geertz 1973, 22).

To clarify what this study needs to show in order to contribute to our understanding of politics, and what exactly it does contribute, allow me to contrast it with positivist approaches. By a positivist approach, I mean one that tests data to demonstrate causality and discover scientific laws that explain human behavior and society. One of the things that I do in this book is to examine how people weave together place and class identities and their orientations to government and how they use the resulting perspectives to think about politics. A positivist study of this topic

might measure identities and orientations to government, and then include them as elements in a statistical analysis that is attempting to figure out which things predict policy or candidate preferences.

Such an approach is problematic for my purposes. The positivist model set-up assumes that values on one explanatory (or "independent") variable move independently of the other variables. Or, if claiming an interaction between two explanatory variables, it assumes that people with particular combinations of these characteristics exhibit a significantly different level of the variable we are trying to explain (the "dependent" variable). However, the object of my study, or my dependent variable, to put it in positivist terms, is not a position on an attitude scale but, instead, the perspectives that people use to arrive at that position. My object is to understand neither the independent effects of identities and attitudes (such as trust) on a given political opinion nor how people having different combinations of characteristics and attitudes compare to others in terms of their issue positions. Rather, my goal is to distinguish how people themselves combine attitudes and identities—how they create or constitute perceptions of themselves and use these to make sense of politics.

What does this study need to demonstrate, if not that *X* causes *Y*? I have to show, convincingly, that a particular perspective is influential for the way some people think about politics.²³ The burden is on me to show that rural consciousness structures how the people I spent time with think about politics—that is, that their use of rural consciousness screens out certain considerations and makes others obvious and commonplace. I have to show that the work of this perspective contributes to a broader context in which politics is understood as a matter of resentment toward other members of the public.

Plan of the Book

My plan for the remainder of this book is to first explain the approach that I took in doing this research, what rural consciousness is, and then how it functions to structure political understanding and contributes to a politics of resentment. After I specify what rural consciousness is and what it does, I will develop in detail how this lens structures interpretations of politics.

In short, here is what I will do in each chapter. In the next chapter,

I explain my methods in full and introduce the reader to the groups who allowed me to join in on their gatherings. It is conventional to put this information in an appendix at the back of the book. I am asking you to read it as part of the story because knowing how I went about collecting these data is important for understanding what I learned from them. Also, since most people—scholars and ordinary citizens alike—are used to thinking about public opinion as the results of public opinion polls, I need to provide some extra clarification concerning how to evaluate the kind of data I present in this book.

In chapter 3, I lay out the nature of rural consciousness, the geography of Wisconsin, and its historical relationship to politics in the state. With the use of survey and conversational data, I argue that there are three major components of the rural consciousness perspective: a perception that rural areas do not receive their fair share of decision-making power, that they are distinct from urban (and suburban) areas in their culture and lifestyle (and that these differences are not respected), and that rural areas do not receive their fair share of public resources. I examine the importance of understandings about who works hard in the population and the manner in which rural consciousness has provided an extra grounding for even this basic part of U.S. culture. I also carefully consider racism in these conversations and ask the reader to take a nuanced understanding of its role in the resentment we hear.

In chapter 4, I analyze whether there is empirical support for the idea that rural areas are the victims of distributive injustice. I argue that even though per capita allocations do not consistently support this view, the nature of the challenges facing rural areas in the United States means that there is a reasonable basis for these perceptions. Finally, the chapter presents results of an investigation into evidence of rural consciousness in local news coverage in Wisconsin. I use our null results from that analysis to argue that rural consciousness is one aspect of public opinion that is likely communicated primarily through interpersonal interaction, again suggesting the importance of public opinion methods that place listening front and center.

In chapter 5, I move from explaining what rural consciousness is into what it does—how it works for helping people make sense of politics. I look closely at conversations about education, particularly higher education, to analyze how rural consciousness has structured conversations about public institutions and public employees. As I contrast conversations among groups of people meeting in rural areas with groups meet-

ing in urban and suburban places. I show how rural consciousness provides extra grounding for interpretations that center on resentment.

In chapter 6, I show how rural consciousness provides fertile ground for arguments in favor of less redistribution and smaller government. I examine the way people connect resentment toward government in general and toward public employees in particular with the conclusion that government ought to be cut back. I argue that, in a politics of resentment, attitudes toward social groups do the work of ideology. In this kind of politics, we see people arguing in favor of small government based on resentment toward other citizens, not libertarian principles. I show how rural consciousness provides an extra footing for these understandings. Ambivalence in the public about the proper size of government means these interpretations are not inevitable, but the narratives that resentment offers make them seem that way.

In chapter 7, I show how the lens of rural consciousness has structured understandings of the Great Recession. Barack Obama, and the ruckus around Scott Walker in Wisconsin. I dissect conversations about public employees to examine how rural consciousness served to reinforce the politics of resentment before, during, and after the Great Recession. I also examine conversations about Barack Obama, Scott Walker, and the legislation by Walker that effectively ended collective bargaining for public employees and required them to contribute much larger amounts from their paychecks toward their health insurance and pensions. Finally, I analyze Walker's public comments to suggest how politicians tap into resentment to win elections and further their policy goals.

These analyses help develop the argument that the politics of resentment is about more than making sense of politics with the tools of social identity. It is about using perspectives that make resentment toward social groups inevitable and reasonable. In this style of interpretation, people blame other residents rather than broader structural forces.

In the conclusion of the book, I reflect back on the nature of rural consciousness, how people use it to structure their understanding of politics, and how it is part of a broader politics of resentment. I underscore that perspectives that are often denigrated as ignorant seem quite complex in these conversations. I consider what the results tell us about the importance of place identity in public opinion, as well as the importance of place in practical understandings of social class. I use the results from the various analyses throughout the book to argue that understanding contemporary public opinion requires considering both bottom-up and

top-down forces. I describe some of the insights this interpretivist study offers for positivist approaches. Finally, I conclude that this study gives us some serious warning signals about the tendency of modern democracy toward resentment. When arguments about how we ought to allocate resources to each other are made on the backs of our resentment toward each other, what does the future hold?

wealthy people, and people with a different work ethic. The fact that the social divide of rural versus urban is so rich with meaning is perhaps the reason that it is an appealing perspective for politicians to tap into. Activating one component of this perspective can mobilize resentment against other aspects of it. For example, notice the things that "Madison" invoked for many people: state government, which ignores people like them; public employees, who are living high off the hog at their expense; liberal academics who are arrogant, overpaid, and challenging their way of life; city people, whose lifestyles and values just breed the mess we are in; and more.

These divisions, indicative of the politics of resentment, are not simple. They have roots in many things: place, power, and distributive justice. It is kind of ironic. Often when people try to explain why members of the white working class vote for Republicans, they explain it as a product of ignorance or, perhaps, a lack of sophistication. But there is another way to read these conversations. These understandings, whether or not one agrees with them, have roots and reasons behind them.

Support for Small Government

When I was traveling around Wisconsin, inviting myself into conversations in gas stations, diners, and other local hangouts, many times I got into conversations about health care reform with people who said they could not afford health insurance. They wished they could afford health care and dental care, too, for that matter. They talked about how people in general in their community could not afford health insurance. As the years went on, Barack Obama became president, and went about pursuing substantial health care reform.

But people in those groups, even the folks missing teeth, rarely supported government-sponsored health care reform. Why?

A common way to answer this question is to say that people are simply ignorant; they vote against their interests. But I would like to suggest the possibility that the issue is not about what facts they know. Instead, the issue has to do with the perspectives through which they encounter facts and conceive of possible solutions.

When we stop to notice the way rural consciousness undergirds resentment toward public employees, support for small-government policies and the conservatism of candidates in rural areas is not so surprising. In this chapter, I am going to make the bold claim that support for small government is more about identity than principle.

Why is this a bold claim? We can look back on "Obamacare" or the "Affordable Care Act" and note that which side people took is related to partisanship. And we can say that whether people side with Republicans or Democrats in general is related to their attitudes about the appropriate role of government (e.g., Green, Palomquist, and Schickler 2002; Goren 2005; Carsey and Layman 2006). But those correlations do not help us understand why someone without teeth would not support

government-funded dental care. Is it really the case that such a person is thinking to himself, "In principle I believe the less government the better; therefore, I am going to vote for the Republican Party and against single-payer health care, even though I need health care myself"? I don't think so.

Instead, what I heard over and over again is some version of the following: "I wish I could afford better health care, but I can hardly make ends meet as it is. And the harder I work, the more my taxes go up. I don't want my taxes to go up anymore. I can't afford it. And wherever it is those tax dollars are going, they sure aren't going to people like me, in communities like mine. Because look at this place! This community is dying! It seems to me that I'm paying for health care for people who aren't working half as hard as I am, and even though I am working myself to death, I can't afford to pay for my own health care."

A fundamental aspect of rural consciousness is the perception that "people in my rural community are not getting their fair share of resources—in particular, we are not getting our share of taxpayer dollars." We can imagine that people holding that belief would want *more* government resources, as they sometimes did when talking about wanting more state aid for the tourism industry or for their local schools. But that is not the conclusion I heard people reaching. Instead, I much more commonly heard them concluding something like "the government must be mishandling my hard-earned dollars, because my taxes keep going up and clearly they are not coming back to benefit people like me. So why would I want an expansion of government?"

These are summaries of what I heard—but let me give you examples of actual conversations. In the group of women meeting once a week in the northwest tourist town, I heard this in January 2008 (Group 2):

ELAINE: A lot of people here have less money than other parts of the state so how can they buy their insurance?

KJC: Yeah, OK [*quietly, overlapping other people talking*] . . . important to remember.

KATIE: A lot of times people up here have health insurance but they have a huge deductible 'cause that's the kind of health insurance they can afford, so you can still get stuck with a big, big bill.

In the northwest logging town, several hours south, earlier that morning (Group 6, January 2008):

SUPPORT FOR SMALL GOVERNMENT

JMW: Well you tell me. Somebody that's working in these industries around here that are making eight, nine dollars an hour. With a family of two, how are you going to afford eight hundred dollars a month for health insurance?

KJC: You can't.

JMW: On eight dollars an hour?

KJC [*quietly*]: You can't.

JMW [*really mad now*]: Eight, ten dollars an hour? At fifteen, fifteen dollars an hour how can you afford it?

Several hours west of there, among the group of people meeting at the diner counter in the north-central tourist town, I heard this in June 2007 (Group 9):

KJC: How about health care? Is that a big issue?

NELSON: Health care has always been an issue because the average person up here can't afford health care.

KJC: Do you think most people up here just kind of take a risk, don't buy it?

NELSON: Well they get . . . they don't go to the doctor when they should, checkups, no. I've always been lucky.

KJC: So what do you think should be done about health care? There is a lot of talk these days about universal health care and such . . .

NELSON: Well, see what's happening right now is that we're getting more and more hospitals opening up, making enough money where they are building 'em. They are crying about not making any money, but they sure as heck are—should see the doctor's houses out here. They are beautiful!

[*Agreement all around: "Yeah."*]

A half a year later, in January 2008, I asked that same group what they thought should be done about health care, and Nelson was skeptical that a government mandate for people to buy insurance would work in their type of town (Group 9, January 2008): "Well, when you get down in the city, people are making more money, so you can afford to do it, but when you're in northern Wisconsin making ten dollars an hour, and you try to stretch that over for a family, you're not gonna get health care. As a matter of fact, you're lucky if you can pay your bills. You're going to be running an old car and hopefully that will get you back toward working, but you're not going to be able to pay for health care."

If people perceived that they could not afford health care themselves,

then why didn't they support government-subsidized health care? In many conversations, people perceived that even government-subsidized care would still cost them a great deal. In the dice game, in west-central Wisconsin, during my first visit in May 2007, I asked this (Group 11b):

KJC: Do you think a lot of people who are retired in this community decide not to do health care at all? Just decide to take the risk?

HENRY: Some of 'em can't afford to do health care.

RICHARD: Not a matter of choosing—it's a matter of what you have to do. You pay some insurance company, or do you buy groceries? Whatever.

ERNIE: Well if they would let us buy the insurance out of the state, that would be a hell of a lot cheaper—but they say well you can't buy insurance out of the state. Gotta be in state. That's stupid.

RICHARD: You look at the average income in the southern part of the state, look at the average income here and you could tell me who is more prepared to buy their health insurance?

MARK: We're about the second poorest county in the state.

ERNIE: Yeah.

MARK: After Menominee, Dave, is that right?

DAVE: Uh, I think so. One of the poorest counties right now.

MARK: So we're what? Number 2? And the state-run health program is—I'd like to say well that's going to take care of this, but that ain't gonna work. There ain't a damn thing the state ever does that's cheap.

The sense of identity as people from a place that was disadvantaged economically coexisted with the perception that wherever their hard-earned money was going, it was not coming to them. It seemed instead to be going, in part, to bloated government programs and overpaid and underworked public employees. That resentment toward government and toward public employees fueled support for small government. In this chapter, my intent is to show, in greater detail, what this looked like.¹

The sentiments above about health care seem to include a bit of parrotting of conservative media or Republican arguments. (Take, for example, the complaint about prohibitions against buying health insurance across state lines. That was a plank in Mitt Romney's platform when running against Obama in 2012.) But again, understanding these sentiments should entail more than looking just at the facts mentioned. While the facts that people pick up and repeat are a product of what they consider valid and credible ways to view the world, it is important to dig

support for small government

the sections that follow. I will examine more closely the way deeper. In the sections to understand the appropriate size of government. the people I listened to understood the appropriate size of government.

Ambivalence about the Size of Government

Often, when scholars have reflected on why Americans have not supported universal health care, they have noted the strong tendency to avoid such large-scale government intervention in this aspect of their lives (e.g., Popkin 2007). But in order to understand what underlies support for small-government policies and candidates, it is important to acknowledge that the American public is far more ambivalent about the size of government than many contemporary political arguments allege (Sears and Citrin 1982; Cook and Barrett 1992; Quadagno and Street 2005; Martin 2008).

There have been significant expansions of government in U.S. history, particularly around the time of the Industrial Revolution and the New Deal, and the three decades following World War II (Cook and Barrett 1992; Martin 2008). Public education, Social Security, and Medicare are three notable examples (Quadagno and Street 2005).

When the economic downturn of the 1970s occurred, criticism about government social programs intensified (Cook and Barrett 1992, 5). The economic crises of the 1970s were a stark contrast to the prosperity of the two preceding decades, and people felt it. Government programs felt costlier as public revenues increased primarily from inflation rather than actual expansion of the economy (Sears and Citrin 1982, 225).

One result was protest against property tax hikes at the local and state levels, as Sears and Citrin argue in *Tax Revolt* (1982). In 1978, voters in California passed Proposition 13 (Prop 13) via referendum on a two-to-one margin. That proposition changed the state's constitution such that property taxes dropped and instantly were limited in how much they could escalate in the future.

Prop 13 is an example of an issue or event that some tout as a clear showing of widespread support for small government, but it is understood by others as something else. The passage of Prop 13 was spun by national political elites as support for downsizing government. But Martin (2008) argues that Prop 13 was not a show of support for limited government more generally. Instead, he argues, Prop 13 was a reaction to a specific, noticeable change in policy. It won the public's support because the prop-

erty tax had been modernized in the 1960s and members of the public were steaming about the relatively sudden hike in their taxes.

Sears and Citrin write that the conservative wing of the campaign for Prop 13 "portrayed itself as a movement of 'the people' against a 'patriotic government'" (1982, 15). When Prop 13 passed, officials of many leanings interpreted it "as a symbol of public hostility to government in general, rather than the property tax in particular" (Martin 2008, 15). Even Jimmy Carter said publicly in 1978, "I do believe that Proposition 13 is an accurate expression of, first of all, the distrust of government" (quoted in Martin 2008, 126).

Notice, though, that Carter said "distrust of government." But distrust of government or antigovernment sentiment is not the same as a preference for limited or smaller government. By antigovernment sentiment, I mean criticism of the government, lack of trust in government, or perceptions of corruption or incompetence in government. By support for limited government, I mean a belief in the adage the less government, the better. A person can be highly critical of the people currently in government or current government procedures while at the same time believing in principle that society ought to invest heavily in government, even beyond defense (e.g., public education, public assistance, or health care). At the same time, a person might believe strongly in limited government (e.g., most government programs ought to be privatized), while believing that current policy makers are doing a competent job. Walker supporters in Wisconsin are one example.

Even though antigovernment sentiment is not the same as support for limited government, the conservatives of the Reagan revolution succeeded in melding the two. Conservatives used the hostility to government they claimed Prop 13 revealed to justify cutting taxes in general (Martin 2008, 15). In the midst of the shifting party coalitions in the postwar era, the parties were looking for ways to distinguish themselves. Republicans found such a strategy in antitax and anti-big-government stances (127). Martin (2008) argues that Prop 13 changed American politics because it changed how much attention the parties paid to taxes.

It was in that context that Reagan became president. One of the main targets of his efforts to scale back government was the welfare state. But some argue that, despite these attempts, there were actually few cutbacks to the welfare state in the 1980s because the public, and their congressional representatives, actually expressed widespread support for social welfare programs (Cook and Barrett 1992). Cook and Barrett's

support of public opinion data show that public opinion in favor of social welfare did not drop in the 1970s and early 1980s, despite conservative arguments to the contrary (25).²

The health care debate during the first part of the Clinton administrative arguments to the contrary (25).² The health care debate during the first part of the Clinton administration is another example in which a political outcome that was interpreted as evidence of a widespread preference for less government may have been something else entirely. Theda Skocpol argued in *Boomerang* (1997) that the failure of the Clinton health reform did not result from the public bluntly rejecting an expansion of the government. Instead, she argues, the public may have been reacting to the nature of that specific policy. Clinton proposed increasing regulations, rather than increasing taxes, to achieve reform. Skocpol argues that the public does not take kindly to regulation without observable payouts, such as the payouts people receive from social security. In that way, political elites who mobilized against the bill, motivated by a desire to make large Republican gains in the 1994 midterm elections, were able to take advantage of that vulnerability and defeat it.

These battles over the expansion of government suggest that U.S. public opinion has rarely if ever been overwhelmingly in favor of limited government. Although a strong distrust of government is a familiar theme in American history as it is commonly told, that is just one strain of our political culture that politicians at times successfully mobilize (Quadagno and Street 2005; esp. 67) and parlay into support for cutting government back, including reducing redistributive efforts.

We can see from figure 6.1 how support for small government has wavered even in the past several decades. This figure plots responses from a nationally representative sample of eligible voters collected by the American National Election Studies conducted at the University of Michigan. Since 1990, the American National Election Studies has asked three questions that tap into attitudes about limited government.³ Several things are notable here. First, support for limited government has not been the same over time, from a relative high in 1996, then a low in 2008, then a rebound in 2012 to the highest point since the questions were included. Second, the responses seem to correspond to the partisanship of the president at the time. The chart indicates that, since 1990, support for small government tends to rise after a Democrat becomes president. The rebound in small-government views after the 2008 election of Barack Obama suggests that his election provided fertile ground for the Tea Party movement to nurture support for limited government.

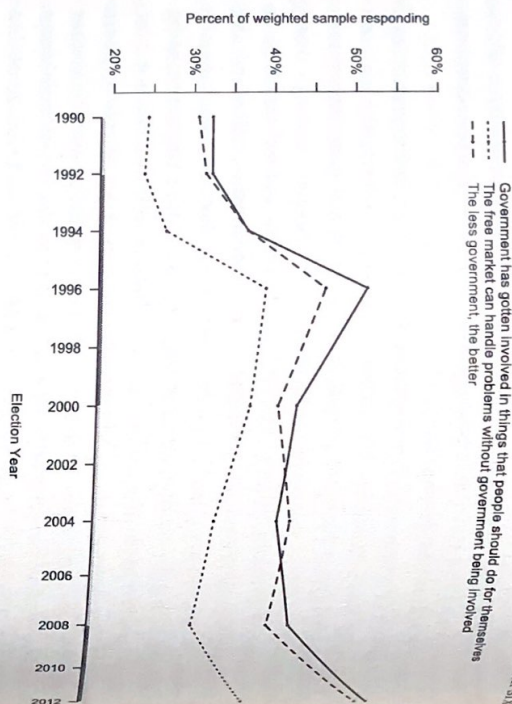


FIGURE 6.1. Small government views over time. Source: American National Election Studies, "Time Series Cumulative Data File [dataset]." Stanford University and the University of Michigan (producers and distributors), 2010, http://www.electionstudies.org/studies/anes_tseries_cdf/anes_tseries_cdf.htm. Darkened portions of the x axis correspond to time periods with a Democratic president.

Indeed, people tend to be less trusting of the government when their party is not in control of the White House (Haidt and Hetherington 2012). Trust in government has declined significantly among Republicans since Obama has been president. Republican ideology has developed into arguments in favor of less redistributive policy. So here we are, in a time in which one party is advocating for smaller government and supporters of that party in the public are also the least likely to trust government right now. The time is ripe for Republican leaders to say, "Look, government stinks. So let's cut it back."

What Support for Small Government Sounds Like

We may be in a historical moment when politicians have successfully melded distrust in government with support for cutting back. But again, it is not inevitable that people will respond to disenchantment with government and their own quality of life with a call to scale back govern-

ment. Distrust and disenchantment with government is not the same as support for limited government.

Let me demonstrate this using the words of the people who invited me into their conversations. Some people were highly critical of government, but they did not necessarily want to cut it back. One case in point was a group of middle-class African Americans in Milwaukee (Group 23a). In the first ten seconds of talking with them, one man argued that the city needed to spend more on policing in his neighborhood and explained to me thus: "We live in a war zone, OK? I'm gonna be honest with you. We are at the mercy of urban terrorists, you know, in some cases, and it seems like that message is not getting through like it should. People don't really have an idea of what really is going on in Milwaukee. They brush over it, politicians brush over it, there are times—to receive votes—and once they get into office, it's like that's going on the back burner, and it's never going to be anything done about it." This man wanted more government, even though he felt ignored by it. I encountered other instances of people complaining about government yet favoring *more* services, rather than less. For example, many people complained about the lack of regulation of the health care system and wanted to see government play a stronger role in it, especially before the debate over the Affordable Care Act (or "Obamacare") heated up and people adopted partisan stances (Groups 18a, 18b, 22b, 17, 21b).

I also encountered clear support for limited government. The members of a group of retirees in the Milwaukee suburban area that met every morning at a diner for breakfast and coffee (Group 18c) provide the clearest example of this. They introduced themselves to me as "conservatives" and time and again asserted that government programs should be scaled back. They believed in people pulling themselves up by the bootstraps and lamented the inability of many people to do so. There were a few exceptions to their general belief in the less government the better: defense spending, and "programs like the WPA [Works Progress Administration] and the CCC [Civilian Conservation Corps] that rewarded hard work."

Those attitudes are attitudes in favor of limited government. And notice how even this seemingly principled group does not hold principles that are immune to the political context. They supported WPA and the CCC because those programs presumably rewarded hard work, but they were not supportive of such government programs in the context of the Great Recession.

When I talk about "antigovernment attitudes," I am including complaints that government only cares about wealthy people and big business, not ordinary people, or that people in government are not to be trusted because they ignore and avoid important issues.

I am dwelling on this distinction between support for small government and distrust in government to emphasize that political attitudes are not inevitable. Despite the evidence that there is a biological basis for some political leanings and beliefs (e.g., Hibbing and Smith 2007; Haidt and McDermott 2011), people still have to do the work of interpreting the political world around them. People have to make a connection between disenchantment with government and wanting less of it.

Political scientists look around for the basis for political beliefs—political ideology, value systems, and partisan guidance. What is it that guides these choices? Why do people think what they do? The way rural consciousness structures understanding teaches us that a big part of the answer is identity, including questions such as: What kind of a person am I? What is appropriate for someone like me to think and do? Where am I and where are people like me in relation to others in terms of power, resources, and respect?

The conversations I observed suggest that rural consciousness is one of the identities that makes support for limited government the logical choice. Resentment toward cities often served as the glue between antigovernment and small-government attitudes.⁴

This worked in three main ways. First, when people talked about specific issues and whether government spending was a solution or an obstacle, people in these rural places would often contrast their community's wealth against that of Madison and Milwaukee. They said that, sure, their community needed government services, but people in their type of town simply could not afford to pay higher taxes in order to afford these services. "There ain't shit here" one logger in northwest Wisconsin told me (Group 6). When I sat with his group in April 2008, we got around to talking about sewer pipes. It sounded to me like the men in the group knew their town needed new sewer pipes, but they thought people in town simply did not earn enough money to be able to afford them.

SAM: If only we had more money to fix our sewers. Twenty percent of the water is unaccounted for. We got no money to fix them, you know?
KJC: Wow.

SUPPORT FOR SMALL GOVERNMENT

support for small government

RANDALL: Well all these were put in back in the forties.

KJC: In the forties . . .

SAM: They just can't even patch them anymore.

RANDALL: So you just put in close to three million dollars in sewer pipes three years ago. They did an income survey, a private income survey, away from the town . . . saw the results of the engineering permit. The average income in the town I live in is eleven thousand dollars.

KJC: Eleven?

RANDALL: And the sewer bills are fifty-three dollars a month.

KJC: A month?

RANDALL: A majority of people—

TOM: Wow, now my sixty-five and a quarter ain't too bad at all.

RANDALL: And a majority of the people, it was over half if I remember, are elderly, single people on a fixed income.

KJC: Awful.

RANDALL: We were promised 90 percent grant money. We got under seventy.

So the federal government won't work with us at all . . .

KJC: Oh my, yeah. What are you gonna do in a case like that? I mean, you need a sewer, right? I mean—

SAM: Yeah, you gotta have something done . . .

RANDALL: I'll say. In order to fix anything, you can't keep raising the rates on it, you know, those people can't afford it.

The second way that rural consciousness fueled limited-government stances was by providing a set of arguments against government regulation. Many people openly resented having decision makers in the cities impose regulations on rural life that they felt displayed an obvious lack of understanding of what life in their community was like. In the previous chapter, I mentioned some of these complaints with respect to the state's Department of Natural Resources, or DNR—or in some of these circles, "Damn Near Russia." The DNR came up in many conversations as a government entity that imposed what were perceived as ridiculous regulations.

People in rural areas mentioned the DNR more than any other government agency. It was a prominent force in their lives. Many of them made a living working with natural resources, and many people spent a good bit of their leisure time outdoors hunting and fishing. When I first met the loggers in northwest Wisconsin, I asked them, "So what do you do, when you have leisure time, if you do, what do you like to do around [this town?]" (Group 6, June 2007).

SAM [*laughs*]: They go to taverns . . .

KJC: Hang out and visit?

CHARLIE: Go to work!

SAM: Sure yeah, go back to work.

JOHNNY: Hunt and fish. That's what lots of people do.

KJC: That's great, that's great.

JIM: Four-wheel it.

Later in our conversation, they brought up the cost of hunting and fishing licenses.

CHARLIE: No, they keep raising the prices of everything, hunting license, fishing license, and your wardens and stuff—you're on this side of the river then the trout has gotta be twelve inches long, and you go down here, a hundred yards underneath the bridge, and it's gotta be fourteen inches long, and then you get picked up and the warden don't even know what kind of fish they are.

KJC: Oh gosh!

CHARLIE: You know, it's—I haven't bought a fishing license in—

KJC: Do they keep close track of you, keep track of what you fish?

CHARLIE: I used to love to fish but I quit buying a license.

JIM: Yeah, I quit buying a license

CHARLIE: I won't even fish anymore because they don't know what they're doing, and I'm not going to go out there and get caught. As far as I'm concerned, the DNR thinks they are God. You know? We drop a half quart of oil out there or break a little hose or whatever and you gotta spend six months out there cleaning it up. It's good, but their good can go overboard. I can't walk out into a federal forest and go behind a tree and take a leak.

KJC: You can't?

CHARLIE: No! It's that bad. Really.

KJC [*laughing*]: Good grief! Do DNR folks live around here?

JIM: Oh yeah—

CHARLIE: We run into 'em all the time.

KJC: Be friendly with your neighbors, you know.

FRED: Well some of the guys—like in the forestry department, [of] course you got your forestry department, then you got your law enforcement then all your environmental stuff you got—

SAM: So guys turn them in, then they gotta go investigate.

Is deer hunting a big thing up here?

KJC: Is deer hunting a big thing up here?

CHARLIE: Oh yeah.

KJC: I'm sure. And do they overregulate?

JOHNNY: What's that?

KJC: Deer hunting?

JOHNNY: Yeah, getting out of control.

SAM: If you ask five guys you'll have five different answers.

KJC: That's all right.

CHARLIE: It's just like the bear season, you know? You apply for a bear tag, you apply for a bear tag, takes you seven years to get a bear tag. But there you apply for a bear up here.

SAM: Yeah, got way too many.

CHARLIE: Every year you pay in to get that tag, and bear problems all over the place.

JIM: My mother lives down by Glidden, and they are ripping her bird feeder down every night, they are taking the humming bird feeders down, and you call the DNR and: "We ain't got time. We ain't got time to come up and check and see," you know. So what you do is you shoot the sucker. Got to. Got to protect your own property.

I heard criticism of the DNR as an agency getting in their way, even though its employees, according to the locals, knew less about the environment than they did, in many small towns. On the other side of the state, in Door County, I heard this (Group 5, June 2007):

DORIS: Talking about the environment up here, we've gotta do something about this algae that's running around [in the Great Lakes]. [*People in the group groan in agreement.*] Now you can get a fifty-dollar permit from the DNR to clean up your beach, but supposedly the people next to you don't do anything. And it comes back, I don't know how many times are you supposed to do this, and how are you going to get down [to the beach from the cliff above], like where I live, to get something down there to scrape it all up, and then what are they going to do with it?

PAM: And why do you have to pay?

DORIS: Yeah? Supposedly giving you a break because it was supposed to be five hundred dollars.

KJC: So—

BECKY: Why are they going to charge you to clean?

[Several people]: Have to have a permit.

KJC: Yeah—so for the \$50 you just get a permit, it's not like the tools, or supplies you need?

DORIS: No, just to clean it up

SHELLY: And get rid of it.

PASTOR CORRIE: Yeah, that doesn't make any sense at all!

KJC: That doesn't make any sense.

PAM: Right now—

DON: The DNR is very difficult to understand.

Many DNR employees live in rural areas, and are even from rural areas. But people in small-town Wisconsin would often talk about the DNR as one of these arms of government that is driven by decision makers in Madison. The perspective was that even if a given DNR employee was him- or herself a rural person, the regulations they had to enforce were made by people who were oblivious to rural life. In this way, resentment toward cities and toward the way urbanites ignored and disrespected rural folks fed opposition to government regulation.

A third way in which rural consciousness provided grounding for limited-government stances was by providing a story about where their tax dollars go. The basic narrative was that taxes are high and they must be going somewhere besides rural communities because rural communities are dying.

In that view, even if a person was willing, in theory, to give up some of their own income to support something like education, in practice they resented the idea because they believed that those dollars would go to the big cities, not to their town. Their disgust with the cost of public education was not aimed at spending on education in general. Instead, it was a resentment that public education spending systematically disadvantaged rural areas.

Take, for example, the conversations about education that took place in a rural group that leaned liberal but contained vocal conservatives as well. In a far northwest tourist and artistic community, a group of older and retired women met every Tuesday morning for coffee in the back of a restaurant, on the edge of town beyond the tourist-prone places (Group 2). Some of the women were big Obama supporters. Their leftiness was clearly signaled when one woman belowed, "Rush Limbaugh should be hung." Another member stated outright that she moved to Wisconsin because of its reputation for great public education. She knew

that quality education required higher taxes, and she was more than willing to pay them.

You know, on the other hand, though, this maybe seems strange. I've always felt that if I'm living in Wisconsin I'm going to be paying taxes. I've already accepted that. And I don't want to live in Florida, and I don't want to live where education is poor. If my paying taxes supports kids, that's what I need to do. We feel that—I mean my husband and I both feel that way. So even though taxes are creeping up and they do and they do and they do, I think—if I want services, I'm going to pay taxes, they have to go to schools.

However, some of the women in this group were not as liberal. Many of them complained about high local property taxes. Their view was that urbanites bought or built expensive vacation homes, pushed up property taxes, made it hard for the locals to keep their homes, and changed the character of their town. Even the more vocally liberal members of the group nodded in agreement with these sentiments. Like many of the other rural groups, these women were willing to pay for public services but perceived that the money they put into the public pot would not come back to their small town. They lamented the way income tax took money out of their community, but were not at all positive about the way property taxes kept it there.

As noted in chapter 3, one woman, Carol, kept a notebook of all of the names of locals who had to leave town because of what they saw as skyrocketing property taxes driven by the price of urbanites' summer homes. When others expressed surprise at the length of the list she had accumulated in just nine years (sixty names), she said in June 2007:

CAROL: This is a phenomenal thing. My notebook with all the pages of people that have left or are thinking about leaving. The majority for tax reasons.

LAURA: And did they move, like, to . . . nearby areas? But just out of [this town]?

CAROL: Out of [this town].

LAURA: But still in the same county.

CAROL: Mostly.

ROSE: And one of the things, too, almost everybody has got a view of the lake. Almost everybody. And you pay for having a view, and that just doesn't seem right.

LAURA: Conversely, because of the high cost of living, people, especially fam-

ities, aren't moving in because there is not a job to support them to be able to live here. So the school enrollment doesn't increase and we still have to pay the burden of the school as part of the taxes.

SUE: And I think with shared revenues in the state of Wisconsin it is always going to be that way. The money is collected here, it is sent to Madison, and it is dispersed to Milwaukee and Madison primarily, and so our return on what we spend is very little, you know? And we struggle with our school system here for the same reasons.

This was a general pattern for ambivalent rural groups. They were not necessarily opposed to government spending in principle but, instead, perceived that the government spending that did take place was unfair to people like them—rural folks. Again, these perceptions were not always accurate. The school-funding formula in Wisconsin is designed to ensure that every district has a minimum level of spending per pupil. Districts that have lower wealth in property values obtain proportionately more in state aid.⁵ But it is the perceptions that matter for how people interpreted small government.

Some of the people in these groups were clearly not opposed to government involvement in their lives. For example, although the group at the diner in the northern tourist town (Group 9) passionately resented regulations on hunting and fishing, they also supported stricter drunk driving laws. The opposition to "big government" was more commonly rooted in a perception that government was not functioning on behalf of people like themselves than in a belief that government in general should do less (Williamson, Skocpol, and Coggin 2011, 34).

Some of the ambivalence may also be related to the way the people I listened to tended to meld different levels of government—local, county, state, national—together when they talked about the government. Complaints about one level seemed to flow right into complaints about another. An issue with DNR regulation (a state agency) was often cause to complain about "the government" in general.

The conversations in the Downtown Athletic Club, the group that had been meeting in the old service station in the small town in central Wisconsin, can help illustrate the way groups were willing to pay for public services if they could be convinced that their tax dollars would actually come back to the people of their rural community. After I showed up one morning to find the station shut down, I wrote a letter to the owner, and we eventually got in touch. They had moved to a new location, and

I joined up with them one November morning in 2012. It was a small crowd because of deer hunting season (Group 1, June 2012). There were just two men there that morning when I arrived: the former service station owner, and the owner of the business that had become the new location for their morning meet-ups. For a few minutes, the wife of the latter business owner joined us, as did another man after about an hour. None of the retired public school teachers were there that morning.

During my earlier visits, the members of the Downtown Athletic Club expressed a lot of pride in their local schools and worried about their town blowing away if the state decided to consolidate the school district with the schools from a nearby town. Even without the retired school teachers in attendance, these small business owners said they were willing to pay tax dollars for the public schools, but they were not willing to pay higher taxes to support benefits for school teachers.

FRED: Exactly, that's why Obama won cause he got the black vote, he got the Hispanic vote, and he got the women vote. He preyed upon the people who want to sit back and do nothing and keep receiving the handouts.

And—

SHARON: That's what irritates me.

FRED: Nobody is ever going to get in there and win an election if they go in and tell the truth. Nobody will ever win any election if you go in and say we have to raise this tax 2 percent for this reason. We have to do this. We have to cut this for this reason. You'll never get in. It's like I told Lou and all them guys at the schools with these referendums. I says, If you can tell me the school needs a million-dollar referendum to buy computers for the junior high, new labs for the senior high, and a science class or whatever, I'd be more than happy to pay extra taxes and do my share. If it's truly for what the kids need. Now but that referendum just means the school can use it for whatever they want. And if they need this million dollars to pay the teachers' health insurance when we're paying thirteen hundred dollars a month with a twenty-five-hundred-dollar deductible.

SHARON: Yeah, no, forty-five hundred dollars for the family deductible.

FRED: I'm sorry, now you're starting to hit, where I won't 'cause it's not for the kids anymore. It's not about kids.

SHARON: No dental, no vision.

MATT: You know, but—

SHARON: And that's, I told Fred, I said I would just as soon pay my kids a tuition to go to school. And I realize there are people out there that can't do

that. But I really feel like there's too much free shit in the world that people are abusing. Way too much.

KJC: That's frustrating. When times are tight.

Fred's wife, Sharon, who had joined us for a little while, says goodbye and leaves, and I continue.

KJC: Yeah, that's so hard when you're busting your butt to make ends meet and it feels like, you know, the government isn't paying any attention to people like you.

MATT: No, it's like we've always said, small business, we're not a small business—him and I aren't. I don't know what the hell we are.

FRED: We're just . . . We gotta carry umbrellas so the ants . . . we've got to carry umbrellas so the ants don't pee on us.

[KJC laughs]

MATT: Yeah, small business is fifty employees. That's not us.

KJC: Micro? Micro-business.

MATT: Micro-business I guess you'd call it. There is no category for us. They just kind of skim over the top of us.

People in other small towns were similarly willing to devote their tax dollars to education, but reluctant to give it away to people who seemingly ignored or were unconcerned about them and their town (including the local public school teachers, who were often treated as outsiders). When I went back to the dice game in west-central Wisconsin on recall election day (Group 11b, June 2012), I sat down at the table, apologetic for winning so much money during a previous visit. Amid shouting about the score on the previous roll, Dale said to me:

DALE: You should get your money out.

KJC: You know the one time I did that, I won and won and won and never lived it down. I won't play again and take all your money. Partly because I come up here and hear that Madison sucks away all your money,⁵⁰ so that wouldn't be very appropriate for me to just sit here and take all your quarters.

DALE: That was a lesson to remember. Madison sucks it all away.

KJC: I know. [laughs]

RICHARD: Well they do suck a lot of property tax⁵¹ away north of the Mason-

Dixon line⁵² for school aid. I wonder what—look at what they get per student down there for school aid versus north of Highway 21.

ERNIE: They shouldn't get any.

DALE: You're getting to the problem now if they would bring us their school district money back, we wouldn't have to raise taxes.

RICHARD: We're supposed to pay the teachers at the union scale and keep up all this stuff the same that they pay down there and we're expected to do it with less dollars than they do it south of [Highway] 21.

DALE: We keep our schools up and they let theirs fall apart and we pay them more.

RICHARD: The problem is with Milwaukee, of course. For years, the policy was the worst we're doing down here, let's just throw some more money at it. You think afterwards you would say, "It ain't working. There has to be fundamentally something else wrong."

DALE: We have to tax them enough to get it.

RICHARD: Who you gonna get them from though? Who you going to tax from?

DALE: The [same type of] people that they're taxing.

RICHARD: Why do you think they come up here and identify—and come up with a new term, "recreational land." You know what all that is about. It's about collecting more property taxes here to go south of the Mason-Dixon line. That's all it is. That's the only reason to do something.

DALE: We can halfway agree on something.

ERNIE: What's that?

RICHARD: The politics down there . . . they saw all this wooded land and of course that's God's country and why are all these people able to own that and they're paying nothing for property tax on it, you know. Well there's a reason property taxes are different up here than down there.

Hours south, well south of Highway 21, but nevertheless in a very rural area, I heard similar complaints. In the hamlet on the Wisconsin River, the people in the gas station resented the manner in which Madison sucked their tax dollars away for what they saw as unnecessary problems, but they also resented that the state government mandated that their local schools provide city-like programs (Group 8, January 2008).

DAN: It's like, have you ever seen a politician ever cut out a program? No, because the more programs you have the more politicians and government

employees it takes to run them. So they want as many programs as possible, whether they're any good or not.

[KJC laughs]

RANDY: So are you, you go right there. [You're doing the same thing] Right there. You know the legislature used to be part time in Wisconsin.

KJC: I know. Very different isn't it?

DAN: It's no different than all the programs that are mandated in the schools. They're never gonna back off in those programs because it takes that many more state employees to administer them. So they want as many programs as possible. And the health care is no different. The more programs they have, the more government-controlled programs, the more government employees it takes to run them. So they never talk themselves out of a job.

LARRY: I remember when the schools were paid for by our local taxes. The state of Wisconsin said, Well, you know, your small schools here, you're not giving the number of different classes that these kids could take. We want the kids in [this town] to receive the same classes as the kids in Madison. So the state of Wisconsin took it over. And we still are not getting the same classes that they do in Madison and they're not paying to run our schools.

DAN: But we're helping pay for the Milwaukee programs.

LARRY: That's right. Our schools are going into debt every year.

That kind of a conversation suggested to me that opposition to government spending was rooted in part in a perception that school policies were unfair to small towns. Part of the opposition here is due to a belief in government waste. But part of it stems from rural consciousness. Why support education spending when you believe that the money collected will not be used to benefit your own district? In these conversations, no one considers the possibility that any of these policies—school and policy, recreational land designations—were created with rural interests in mind. Instead, the lens is of unfairness to rural places and rural people.

Political Principle? Or Identity and Resentment?

When people in rural areas claimed that government did not represent their interests, they were often rooting these claims in their identities as rural people. When they tried to make sense of the proper role of government, the concept of deservingness mattered just as it did in more

urban areas. However, their understanding of who is deserving was often rooted in contrasts between themselves as rural people and nonrural people who did not face the same challenges and did not share the same work ethic or values.

Hard work was a key consideration for the consistently conservative groups but also, arguably, for the vast majority of the groups, including the groups who were ambivalent about small government. This is important. It suggests that support for limited government is not driven mainly by a belief in small government as a principle itself but, instead, by attitudes about a particular program's recipients (Schneider and Ingram 1993; Nelson and Kinder 1996).

It is important to pause a moment and consider once again the work of race here. When people were complaining that their hard-earned dollars were being taxed away and unfairly spent on the cities, wasn't that just racism? As I argued in chapter 3, I would like to suggest that the answer is not a simple yes. There is ample evidence to suggest that racism underlies much of the opposition to government spending, particularly on welfare (Kinder and Sanders 1996; Gilens 1999), although some scholars argue that such opposition is based on the principle of individualism, not rooted in racist beliefs (see the outlines of the debate in Huddy and Feldman 2009). Particularly since the Progressive Era (the late 1800s through the 1920s), cities in the United States have represented the expansion of government and cultural diversity (Conn 2014). That is, what we think of when we think of city is often about both of these things, together. We know that drawing attention to race, subtly or overtly (Huber and Lapinski 2006, 2008), influences support for policy. When race is salient, racial stereotypes play a role in whether people support a given candidate or policy choice (see also White 2007). Race can be made salient in a variety of ways, including images of people of color (Valentino 1999; Mendelberg 2001; Valentino, Hutchings and White 2002), the race of the president proposing the policy (Tesler 2012), the demographics of a policy context (Soss, Fording, and Schram 2011), or the use of words like "inner city" (Hurwitz and Peffley 2005) or "welfare" that have become near-synonymous with people of color (Gilens 1999).

Because support for policy is often driven by notions of deservingness and hard work (Soss and Schram 2007), and perceptions of who works hard are tinged by racism (Winter 2006, 2008; DeSante 2013), racism is unfortunately an inescapable part of public opinion in the contemporary United States.

However, I am reluctant to explain the work of rural consciousness simply the work of racism because in contemporary parlance "racism" is often understood as blatant discrimination against people of color. That is not what is going on here. As I mentioned before, I observed little overt racism in rural Wisconsin.⁸ But I heard ample amounts of it in urban and suburban areas.⁹ I searched my field notes for a conversation in a rural community in which at least one person made a comment that directly linked urban residents with being lazy welfare recipients, for example. I found exactly zero such exchanges in rural communities, but several in urban and suburban locations.

When the rural residents I observed complained about urban people sucking tax dollars away, they were talking about their perception that urban residents paid fewer tax dollars than rural residents and received more government services such as better schools and better roads and infrastructure (e.g., Group 8). When I heard rural residents talk about "those people on welfare," they were talking about their white neighbors, not people of color in the cities (e.g., Group 8). Also, when they talked about lazy urbanites, they were talking about government employees or wealthier people who did not have to work as hard as themselves. The lazy and undeserving were also often young people (see Skocpol and Williamson 2012, chap. 4; e.g., Group 3). In this way, the perception that government programs benefited urbanites and not rural residents was not racism as it is commonly understood.

But racism today is not simple. Race is not something that we can slip on off from place and class in the contemporary United States. Patterns of discrimination over centuries mean that race colors our impressions of what kind of people are where and our willingness to share resources with them.

Unfortunately, particularly in a time of economic recession, the seeds of racism in U.S. political culture make it possible for public officials to use racism to mobilize support for small government. If one wishes to mobilize opposition to a government program, a powerful way of doing so is to suggest that the recipients of that program are predominantly people of color, precisely because support for policy hinges so strongly on notions of deservingness, which are rooted in notions of who in the population works hard. The persistence of racial stereotypes that contain beliefs that some racial groups are lazier than others makes it likely that those arguments activate racial resentment among many people and, therefore, even stronger opposition to government spending, as we

support for small government (e.g., have seen in the mobilization of support for Tea Party candidates (e.g., Bughart and Zeskind 2010; Parker and Barreto 2013).¹⁰

In the contemporary era, many people in the population feel that the government is not responsive to their concerns, as we have already seen. If people perceived that it is the affluent whose preferences are most closely reflected in policy decisions, then reducing the size of government is not necessarily what they would prefer. Instead, their response might be to favor increases in taxation of the rich and big business or, perhaps, reforms to campaign-spending laws. But if the focus is placed on the "undeserving" poor instead, the logical solution is to eliminate or reduce programs that provide a safety net for the undeserving, thereby shrinking government spending. To be blunt: conservative politicians encourage people to focus on the undeserving as a way to achieve their goal of limiting government without harming the interests of the wealthy. In the following chapter, I look in closely at conversations that directly involved race, as I analyze reactions to Barack Obama.

Conclusion

It may not take much for you to agree with me that the people I observed are not reasoning about politics on the basis of political principle. We do not expect people to reason on the basis of coherent ideologies, and we often denigrate the average American voter as ignorant and incompetent in the realm of politics. But what is support for small government, if not a function of principle? To suggest that people are being hoodwinked does not mesh with what I have just presented to you. People have reasons for not wanting more government programs, even if an outside observer might conclude that stance is not consistent with their interests.

Why might the rural folks introduced here vote for a candidate whose policies support the idea of less government? Is it likely because they support an array of that candidate's specific policies? Are they voting on the basis of issues?

I suggest that whom people support in the election booth has to do with something rather different than issue voting—namely, identity. I heard people making sense of health care, education, and property taxes as a function of the kinds of people they believed themselves to be. Their sense of themselves as a part of a local community with a particular kind

of challenging economy and relationship to government meant that they wanted less interaction with government, not more.

In the following chapter, I show how those perceptions and an identity-driven assessment of government programs played a role in the way they interpreted the Great Recession, Barack Obama, and Scott Walker.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Reactions to the Ruckus

When I started this project, I did not know the Great Recession was coming, that Barack Obama would soon be elected leader of the free world, or that Scott Walker would soon become my governor and propose Act 10. And I certainly did not foresee how interesting Wisconsin politics were about to become. I tried to take advantage of the fact that I was already in the field as these events happened. Because I had by that time established relationships with people taking part in regular coffee klatches across the state, I was able to ask for their permission to listen to how they were making sense of all this ruckus.

Noticing the Great Recession

The remarkable thing to me about the way people in small towns made sense of the Great Recession was just how unremarkable the recession seemed to many of them. For people who viewed the world through the lens of being victims of economic injustice because of where they live, the recession was just not that big of a deal. The recession *did* affect their towns. But they treated the effects as unremarkable. They said economic struggle was nothing new where they lived.

Because my fieldwork started before the Great Recession began and lasted well past its technical end, I was able to get some sense of when people noticed it. When I first visited twenty-three of the thirty-nine groups in this study in May and June of 2007, the financial crisis had not yet occurred. At that time, the Dow Jones was still rising (it hit its pre-recession peak on October 9, 2007). By most official accounts, the recession did not begin until August 2007, when problems with subprime

CHAPTER EIGHT

We Teach These Things to Each Other

When Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker won his recall election in June 2012, the city of Madison went into shock. The protests that had lit up the capitol square for week after week were a visible, tangible sign of the animosity toward Walker and his budget repair bill, Act 10. Many people in the Madison area had been directly affected. Among residents of Dane county, where Madison is located, 22 percent were employed by some level of government at the time and, therefore, had been part of unions that lost collective bargaining rights and were also now contributing substantially more of their paychecks to their pensions and health care insurance. “RECALL WALKER” bumper stickers and yard signs were everywhere in Madison.

People expected to stay up late until the results were final. They expected a close race. But instead, it was over by 10 p.m. Many people living in Madison could not quite believe the outcome (see Knisely 2013). “Who were the 53.1 percent who voted for him?” many asked. “What were they thinking?”

Although many in Madison found it hard to believe that Walker would survive the recall effort, things looked different in rural parts of the state. I have never seen so many political yard signs, and the vast majority said “STAND WITH WALKER.” The election was bitterly fought in the Madison and Milwaukee metro regions, but it was won in large part in rural areas. One keen observer called it the “rural landslide” (Gilbert 2012a).

The shock that people in Madison expressed when Walker won reminded me just how unfamiliar the perspectives of people in outstate

Wisconsin are to those living in Madison and perhaps in Milwaukee as well. When I gave talks in Madison about the anti-public employee sentiment I had observed in my fieldwork all the way back to 2007, people were surprised. They still are.¹ Walker’s win in 2014 again shocked people in Madison.²

My hope is that this book helps to lessen that surprise and increase understanding of public opinion in our contemporary context. When we start to ask why people vote against their interests, we need to acknowledge that interests are subjective. In a simplistic view, this means that interests are not necessarily what we as observers would predict based on objective facts, such as a person’s income. But in a more useful view, this means that interests are interpretations that people arrive at through thinking about the world as particular types of people—people with identities. The simplistic view paints voters as ignorant. The latter view acknowledges their humanity.

The particular puzzle I focus on in this book is why people prefer less government when they might seemingly benefit from more of it. This study shows how people can arrive at the interpretation that less government is better on the basis of perspectives with class- and place-based sentiments at their core.

I used observations of conversations among thirty-nine groups in twenty-seven different Wisconsin communities to illuminate the way people arrive at preferences for less government by making sense of politics through perspectives rooted in social identities and perceptions of distributive justice. I visited these groups repeatedly across a contentious five-year period in a state that exemplified national debates over the role of government.

I did not expect to hear it, but many of the people I listened to in rural areas exhibited a multifaceted resentment toward urban areas. That resentment was part of a perspective I call rural consciousness. It is a perspective rooted in place and class identities that convey a strong sense of distributive injustice. Many of the people I listened to in rural areas identified strongly as rural people and took it as a given that rural areas do not get their fair share of political attention or decision-making power or public resources and have a fundamentally different set of values and lifestyles, which are neither understood nor respected by city dwellers.

One can view as misinformation or ignorance the perception among rural folks that they are the victims of distributive injustice, but the con-

clusion that people vote the way they do because they are stupid is itself pretty shallow. It overlooks that much of political understanding is not about facts; it is about how we see those facts (Bartels 2008, chap. 5; Nyhan and Reifler 2010). Support for less government among lower-income people is often derided as the opinions of people who have been duped. But the stands taken in favor of small government delineated in this book are rooted in views of the world that carry a great deal of meaning for the people that hold them. Listening in on these conversations, it is hard to conclude that the people I studied believe what they do because they have been hoodwinked. Their views are rooted in identities and values, as well as in economic perceptions; and these things are all intertwined. Economic interests *do* matter here. But they are a function of the complex meaning that people give to their lives.

Studying the act of making sense of politics in Wisconsin proved fruitful as Wisconsin became a focal point for debates about the role of government. Political commentators treated the 2012 gubernatorial recall election as a proxy test for the national debate between two visions of government: government as an essential safety net and guarantor of a healthy society versus government as an obstacle and bloated resource suck.

Wisconsin is a microcosm of the nation in another respect. What happened there is symptomatic of the role of divisiveness in contemporary politics, both in the public mind and in the manner in which politicians are actively using this divisiveness for political gain.

The contentiousness of our times is not exclusive to the urban versus rural divide. It occurs in the context of broader political polarization, in which our national and state-level political leaders are increasingly far apart on a range of issues (Layman et al. 2006; McCarty et al. 2008; Shor 2014). Members of the public have also sorted themselves into partisan camps (Florina et al. 2010), which are distinctly different in fundamental cultural ways (Dionne 2006; Abramowitz 2014).

This study and events in Wisconsin in the past few years suggest these divides are not just political disagreements, but are actually intensely personal for many people. When Walker proposed Act 10, public employees felt personally attacked. And they were, at times.³ Walker opponents were not innocent of this incivility either.⁴ The personal nature of politics did not just involve tearing down each other's yard signs (Knisely 2013, 72–74) or name-calling. In a surprising number of cases, the basic act of talking to one another seemed to become impossible. A week af-

ter the recall vote, 31 percent of Wisconsinites reported that they had stopped talking with someone about politics due to the attempted recall of Scott Walker.⁵ The story I told of Tom the Prius driver at the beginning of this book is a related case in point.

A politics of resentment stems from and reinforces political differences that have become personal. In a politics of resentment, we treat differences in our political points of view as fundamental differences in who we are as human beings.

I have focused on rural consciousness as one perspective through which the politics of resentment can operate. The work of rural consciousness that I have revealed in this study is evidence that support for small government can come from something more visceral, though certainly not less serious, than political principles: our sense of who is on the side of good and who is on the bad.

There are other dimensions along which a politics of resentment can operate. On a national scale, the United States has experienced a great many divisions—Northerners versus Southerners and people in favor of equal rights for women versus those in favor of traditional roles for women, just to name a few. Other forms of resentment could feed a politics of resentment if they they tap into salient identities that coincide with perceptions of injustice that encompass both economic and cultural considerations—namely, a perception that people on opposite sides of the battle lines have unequal shares of power and resources and that they live different lifestyles according to different values. These battle lines do not need to coincide with geography, but they likely do, given the way Americans have segregated themselves socioeconomically.

Beyond garnering the insight that people use social identities to think about politics, this book also shows how social group divides can operate as the central narrative by which people understand the political landscape and by which they structure their ideas about which candidates to support. In this politics of resentment, when we tell ourselves and others about the reasons behind how events have unfolded, the stories hinge on blaming our fellow citizens. What I am calling the politics of resentment is a political culture in which political divides are rooted in our basic understandings of ourselves, infuse our everyday relationships, and are used for electoral advantage by our political leaders.

A review of what the work of rural consciousness teaches us about the politics of resentment may be helpful at this point. In chapter 3, I explored, using conversational data, the ways in which rural consciousness

is a perspective rooted in identity—specifically, the belief that rural folks are the victims of distributive injustice in terms of resources, power, and also cultural respect.

Chapter 4 provided empirical support for these perceptions. However, evidence that rural people are the victims of distributive injustice is not straightforward. Nevertheless, there are a variety of solid reasons that people living in rural areas would perceive that their type of community is under attack. I also argued that these perceptions are likely the result of social interaction, not simply the parroting of facts, and that matters for how people use them to interpret politics.

In chapter 5, I detailed how rural consciousness structures attitudes toward public employees and public institutions, especially with respect to the University of Wisconsin–Madison. I found that people in rural Wisconsin felt distant from the university and believed that people in their community were at a disadvantage in terms of accessing it. They believed that university sorts looked down on their type of wisdom—a commonsense wisdom—and generally viewed public employees as lacking such wisdom. They also regarded those affiliated with the university as people who were driven by urban policies and urban priorities that were antithetical to the hard-work ethic and values among rural people like themselves. They saw public employees enjoying high salaries and great benefits, while not really working hard like rural folks. They resented public employees because they viewed them as undeserving recipients of rural folks' hard-earned taxpayers' dollars.

I clarified how the rural consciousness perspective and the views of public employees it fostered were connected to support for small government in chapter 6. After a review of the history of public opinion toward property taxes and social welfare, I argued that what elites have constructed as support for limited government in general is often support for (or opposition to) something more specific. This is in line with decades of research suggesting that individuals' opinions are more often formed on the basis of attitudes toward social groups rather than on the basis of ideology (following Converse [1964]). We see in the conversations I presented here the ways championing small government policies is not support for the principle of small government but, rather, support for or opposition to a particular social group.

For example, my observations documented some rural residents opposing higher taxes in order to fund education. They were often proud of and concerned about their local public schools and weren't opposed to

paying more taxes if that money would improve education. But they perceived their tax dollars going instead to urban and suburban schools or to undeserving public school teachers. It was not more money for education that they opposed; instead, they resented the perceived recipients and that fueled their desire for limiting this aspect of government.

Part of my argument in that chapter is that lack of trust in government is not the same as wanting less of it. I focused on conversations about health care and education to emphasize three ways that rural consciousness among people in small towns brought together their distaste for government with support for small government policies and candidates. Rural consciousness fed the argument that people in small towns simply cannot afford higher taxes. It fed an attitude that government regulations are out of touch with rural life, causing rural inhabitants to want less regulation. Rural consciousness also structured talk about government programs such that people said they were willing to pay higher taxes in principle but were resistant to do so in practice because they believed those tax dollars would not return to the people of their community.

These arguments were rooted in rural identity and perceptions of the rural economy and rural life and values. In other words, although I was able to identify resentment toward public employees in conversations among urban and suburban groups, too, the resentment among rural people was special in the way it wove together place and class identities, making preferences for less government logical.

The economic woes people communicated to me through the lens of rural consciousness were interlaced with their sense of who they are, who is a part of their community, what their values are, who works hard in society, who is deserving of reward and public support, and how power is distributed in the world. This complex set of ideas is the product of many years of political debate at the national level as well as generations of community members teaching these ideas to each other. This entwined set of beliefs was not something that any one politician instilled in people overnight—or even over a few months.

In chapter 7, I examined how people used rural consciousness to make sense of politics by focusing on their conversations about the Great Recession, Barack Obama, and Scott Walker. People in small towns treated the Great Recession as unremarkable since they perceived their rural economy as having been bad off prior to then. Assigning blame to certain fellow citizens—public employees—became the centerpiece of the

stories people told to explain the economic downturn. People in small towns were uncomfortable talking about Obama and race—much the case with people throughout Wisconsin—but they were initially supportive of him. However, they eventually came to talk about Obama as just as aloof to rural concerns as other politicians. Scott Walker made a big splash. Many people in the rural places believed that here, finally, was someone on the side of small town Wisconsinites. And a look at Walker's rhetoric shows he overtly attempted to foster that image.

Scott Walker's public comments are suggestive of how our leaders mobilize resentment for electoral and legislative gain. Mobilizing resentment toward public employees, for example, is not simply the act of persuading ignorant, unsophisticated voters that the real enemy is public school teachers. Tapping into these resentments works because members of the public have complex interpretations that are ripe for tapping into, as the analyses in this book collectively demonstrate.

Lessons from Listening

Researchers do not usually study American public opinion by inviting themselves into conversations in gas stations. Those used to reading positivist research will wonder about the generalizability of the results of this study. And as discussed in chapter 2, I agree that it would have been optimal if there were enough of me that I could have spent time in enough groups, in enough places, at enough times that I would have had a truly representative sample of Wisconsinites, or even of people in the United States. I would be able to describe urban-rural divides generally.

But my purpose was to better understand how people in particular places ascribed meaning to their political world. This study should be judged, therefore, not on the basis of whether the results are sufficiently generalizable to a broader population but, rather, whether I have provided results that are "sufficiently contextualized so that the interpretations are embedded in, rather than abstracted from, the settings of the actors studied" (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012, 47).

Though my intent was not to generalize to all people in the United States or even all Wisconsinites, the fact that the vast majority of the people I observed were middle-aged or older raises a question of whether the perspectives encountered here reflect a generational divide rather

than simply a rural-urban divide. Would my findings have differed if I had spent time with additional younger people?

I spent much time in these pages dissecting resentment toward public employees. It is possible that older folks in particular are more resentful toward public employees—especially public school teachers. Their kids are no longer in school but older people nevertheless have to pay rising tax bills, and they are especially sensitive to those increases because they are often living on fixed incomes. High school students in the conversations I observed in 4-H groups did exhibit less resentment in general than did older folks. Mass sample survey studies show that younger people are actually no less willing to pay for older folks' social welfare benefits like social security than are older people (Campbell 2009). However, there is evidence of an increasing generational divide in terms of attitudes toward government spending in general, especially between older white Americans and younger nonwhite folks. This is sometimes called the gray-brown divide: older white voters are more likely to prefer smaller government than are younger people of color (Brownstein 2010; Skocpol and Williamson 2012, 204; see also Leonhardt 2012).⁶

The in-depth view I provide of older citizens' understandings helps explain why the gray-brown divide has power. It may manifest itself as a divide over the role of government, but it is likely rooted in social identities and resentments against particular types of people. Even if younger generations are less resentful, getting rid of the politics of resentment will require political leaders who do not foment divides but, instead, try to bridge them.

Questions about the way younger people interpret politics and fit into the politics of resentment are among those this book leaves unanswered. Many of my claims about the manner in which politicians actively tap into these resentments are as yet untested. It would be useful for future research to examine the relationships between everyday conversations and the rhetoric of political actors and news media outlets to better understand how the connections we see in the public and those among political elites reinforce one another. Experiments would undoubtedly aid our understanding of causal effects. Some additional historical perspective of the arguments that have been used over time to cultivate support for small government is also necessary, as is an understanding of the nature of arguments political actors are using in the contemporary period. One of the benefits, however, of approaching the study of public opinion

ion in the manner I have used here is that it illuminates our understanding of public opinion in ways other methods cannot. It can help improve our poll-based positivist analyses in numerous ways. First, this study suggests that although measures of preferences for limited government are useful predictors of political opinions, there is much to learn about what predicts those preferences.⁷ On what basis do people believe “the less government, the better”? We might interpret such a question as an indicator of libertarianism. But the conversations in this book suggest it may instead reflect primarily resentment. The distinction matters. If we conceptualize limited government measures as tapping an ideological principle, that seems to ignore the decades of research reinforcing Converse’s insight (1964) that the vast majority of people do not reason on an ideological basis (Kuklinski and Peyton 2007). If, instead, it is an indicator of resentment toward public employees, or something else entirely, we could more accurately model opinion by asking directly about such sentiments, delving into the complexities of attitudes toward different levels of government and how those change depending on who is in office.

Second, this study suggests that consideration of external efficacy ought to take into account not just whether people believe government is responsive to “people like me” but also whether it is responsive to “people in my community.” We see in these analyses people thinking about government through the lens of their geographic community. Which geography people have in mind when they think about “my community” matters for their perceptions of racial context and resentment toward racial groups (Wong et al. 2012). Given that, it seems our understanding of individuals’ orientations to government would be improved with attention to perceptions of geography.

The approach I use in this study suggests not only new avenues for positivist research or refinements of existing measures but also answers to some of the puzzles raised in positivist studies. Returning, for example, to the question of why white working-class people tend to vote for Republican candidates, hard data show that this is a common misperception. The majority of lower-income whites actually side with Democrats—and pretty consistently so ever since income inequality has started to rise (Bartels 2008, 73). Yes, higher-income states do lean Democratic, while lower-income states tend to vote Republican these days. However, the relationship between higher income and Democratic votes does not hold on the individual level.

But what about those red and blue electoral maps that pop up during elections showing rural areas within states—which tend to be lower income—as red (Republican)? Yes, rural America increasingly leans Republican (Gimpel and Karnes 2006, 467). But again, behavior at the aggregate level is not consistent with individual-level behavior. Within states, lower-income people still side with the Democrats (Gelman et al. 2008).

A mystery, though, is why lower-income areas within blue or Democratic-leaning states are more likely to vote Republican than higher-income areas (Gelman et al. 2008, e.g.). This study offers one possible explanation. Let’s assume that some version of rural consciousness exists outside of Wisconsin. It may be, then, that rural places in blue-leaning states are places in which many people hold a perspective that is conducive to small-government arguments. In that respect, people in rural, low-income areas in blue states might be more likely to vote Republican, even though the relationship between low-income and Democratic votes holds nationwide.

Which party people vote for is obviously important. But this study provides a significant caution for our continued reliance on partisanship as the most important predisposition in the study of political opinion. There is no denying that partisanship performs well as a predictor of votes and policy preferences. But what is that actually telling us? If the main divide that people see in the political world is not Democrats versus Republicans but, instead, us versus the government, or people with my work ethic versus people without it, shouldn’t we spend more time measuring identities that are more meaningful to people than partisanship?

One possibility suggested by this study is place identity. For at least some people, place matters more than just as a proxy for which partisans are where. It is a part of at least some voters’ fundamental sense of self. One can imagine many other perspectives rooted in the intertwined identities of place and class that matter for politics. Neighborhood- or municipality-based identities in urban politics and region-based identities in national politics are some examples. Our tendency to use national-level survey data leads us to overlook the manner in which respondents’ perceptions about their immediate geographic context matter for their political preferences. Voters’ sense of *where* resources are going may often be intertwined with partisanship, or as important for understanding the shape of public opinion as partisanship.

This study also highlights the importance of place with respect to class. The way many people in these conversations imbued geography

with economic and distributive meaning suggests that whether we are interested in class identity or the social construction of identity in the Bourdieuan sense, attention to place can be useful. For many people in this study, geographic place of residence was a central consideration in their subjective sense of their place in society. Alongside indicators like income, occupation, and education, whether one is rural or urban was part of the way they constituted their own position with respect to wealth, resources, and authority.

The manner in which people intertwined place and class in these conversations reminds us that social class is a social science concept. It is not an everyday, readily familiar concept. The people in this study did not refer to themselves as white working class, or working class, or even any "class" unless I encouraged them to do so. But they did talk about themselves in more specific but nonetheless meaningful categories (e.g., rural folks) that convey a perception of relative wealth and power.⁸ In other words, even though people do not readily use the terminology of "class," this does not mean that people do not think about how they compare to others in terms of power and resources. Whether we call this act of comparison "status," "class," "social location," or something else does not really matter. What matters is that we recognize that these comparisons to other people in terms of haves and have-nots are very much a part of our politics.

These insights with respect to social class are an additional indication that poll-based analyses of opinion ought to be accompanied not just by focus groups or in-depth interviews but also by listening methods that expose us to the conversations and contexts of everyday life. People use people they know and the physical surroundings they are familiar with to make sense of politics. When we study them independent of these things, we treat them like particles, not people. If we wish to know the social bases of politics, we would do well to open the study of opinion to a wider range of methods and methodological approaches that enable us to see these social tools at work.

My focus in this book has been on public opinion among ordinary people, not so much on the strategies that politicians use to influence these opinions. But the lessons of this book nonetheless speak to a conception of public opinion in which top-down as well as bottom-up forces matter. Some critics of Governor Walker have reflected on the events in Wisconsin and argued that it was the budget legislation he proposed that created a divide in Wisconsin between public workers and the rest of the

public (Lueders 2011). However, the discussions in this study show that the seeds of this public-versus-private-worker divide predated the 2011 legislation, and even the 2010 election that brought Walker to power.

Undoubtedly, these battle lines are adopted to a degree from mass media.⁹ Walker may not have created these divisions, but his policies exposed them and made them readily available for people to grasp onto as legitimate categorizations and targets of blame. The current animosity toward public unions is arguably part of a decades-long battle against unions among conservative and Republican elites (Zernike 2011). But again, it is the bottom-up process of people teaching in-group/out-group categorizations to each other, including the many layers and associations that those distinctions contain, that clarifies, reinforces, and keeps alive these divisions that politicians can then exploit. In chapter 4, I presented evidence from an analysis that showed animosity toward urban areas was not present in daily newspapers serving areas outside Madison and Milwaukee. If this and other aspects of rural consciousness are not prominent in daily news outlets in the communities where people are expressing anti-urban opinions, then how else are such positions communicated? Interpersonal interaction is likely an important part of the process.

As people tried to make sense of the economic crisis they experienced with various scapegoats. However, Walker's budget bills (like the budget bills offered by Republican governors in numerous other states in 2011, such as Ohio, Indiana, New Jersey, and Florida) put two particular targets of blame front and center: public employees and the unions through which they organize. And as my findings in this study indicate, public opinion and the political process are driven neither by elites nor from the bottom up. Rather, politics occurs at the confluence of these forces. In order to fully understand the origins of mass opinion at a given point in time, we need to acknowledge processes taking place among members of the mass public as well as the messages coming from political elites.

Implications for Democracy

I do not know if the politics of resentment is increasing in the United States. Democracy, for good reason, has contention built into it. The United States' form of government was designed on the assumption that people do not automatically agree about the best way forward. We are

supposed to have competitive elections. We are supposed to have debate in and outside of government. The system, in theory, privileges the voice of disagreement, rather than its suppression.

But contentiousness is not necessarily resentment. My fear is that democracy will always tend toward a politics of resentment, in which savvy politicians figure out ways to amass coalitions by tapping into our deepest and most salient social divides: race, class, culture, place. This does not exactly make for a pleasant public life. When we get to a point where we do not actually have a public life, when we turn away from politics because it brings resentment rather than hope to the surface, democracy ceases to exist.

The trick, then, would seem to be finding some way to prevent resentment from dominating the perspectives through which people make sense of politics. The question is, what is that fix? What is the change that needs to take place to ensure that democratic debate is fueled by something other than resentment? Is it institutional? Is it the act of encouraging the public to get along despite our leaders' proddings to the contrary? Is it a move toward greater economic equality?

As we ask ourselves these questions, we should also question the quality of representation that takes place in a politics of resentment. In this study, we see politicians tapping into divides and nourishing resentment and then claiming that electoral support is evidence that the public has a principled stance on the role of government. The conversations I observed suggest that what gets sold as support for small government is often something quite different.

Even support for the Tea Party is perhaps not best understood as support for small government. Support for the Tea Party may be a manifestation of simmering resentment toward social groups in the majority culture, though its most devout adherents may themselves be ideological extremists (Barreto et al. 2011). Moreover, the charge of Tea Partiers to "take back our country" seems an enticing call to a seemingly broad swath of people who believe their lives are buffeted by forces beyond their control that they can't even observe. Is this support for limited government? Or support for a kind of government that listens to "people like me"? Tea Partiers' pro-small-government arguments are often not based in libertarian principles but are instead rooted in a sense of injustice (Williamson et al. 2011; Skocpol and Williamson 2012).

Nevertheless, we can expect that political elites who are small-government proponents will continue to claim a mandate for limited gov-

ernment policies. That certainly has been the case in Wisconsin, as small-government proponents have taken center stage. Governor Walker has survived a recall and a closely fought reelection campaign and was for a while in mid-2015 a serious contender for the Republican presidential nomination. Congressman Paul Ryan, an Ayn Rand devotee, was a vice-presidential nominee. Since the November 2012 elections, both houses of the state government have been controlled by the Republican Party. As long as public workers continue to be portrayed as less hard-working and as undeserving of the pay and benefits they receive, there is leeway for an antigovernment stance to serve as a viable campaign strategy.

One might say that even if Tea Party politicians are tapping into negative attitudes toward particular social groups in order to win, they should be applauded for giving people a sense that finally someone in government is listening to people like them. Many of the people I spent time with who expressed support for Act 10 and Walker conveyed a sense of gratitude that finally someone in power was recognizing the burdens they faced. To them, someone was finally acknowledging the injustice of their hard-earned money being shunted toward the undeserving.

But what about the people in rural areas that complained about being ignored? Was Scott Walker representing them? One simple way of addressing this is to examine how he has spent his time in office (Hall 1996). Has he spent time in rural areas in the state? According to the Wisconsin Center for Investigative Journalism (a center housed at the UW-Madison and supported in part by funds from liberal groups), the answer is no. Their analysis of Walker's official calendar from his first thirteen months in office shows just sixteen public appearances in the northern third of the state (the most rural portion of the state), as compared to 778 appearances in the southern two-thirds of the state.¹⁰ If Walker had made visits in proportion to the distribution of population, he would have made four times as many visits to northern Wisconsin. Unfortunately, even if many rural Wisconsinites perceive that Scott Walker understands the concerns of people like them, it does not appear that he is going out of his way to listen to them, at least not in person in the first year he was in office.

Moreover, we still have the broader problem of lack of representation with which I began this book. We live in a time of increasing economic inequality, and yet voters continue to elect politicians whose policies respond very disproportionately to the preferences of affluent people. In that respect, the issue is not why is the white working class getting it wrong, but why is nearly every voter getting it wrong?

I have resisted the terminology of “getting it wrong” throughout this book to try as much as possible to listen openly to the views of people and set aside my own predispositions. I could provide an argument that says each person has the right to define his or her interests and that no academic should be so arrogant to judge what people “ought” to think.

It is not the case that people have been hoodwinked into voting for Republicans by being distracted from economics by social and cultural issues (as Frank 2004 argues). In the conversations that I observed, economics are very much a part of the conversation. Bartels’ analysis of surveys data also shows that economics are of as much importance, if not more importance, than social and cultural issues in recent presidential votes (2008, 86). But consideration of economic issues is not devoid of social and cultural issues, either. I observed people making sense of economics by pitting themselves against their fellow citizens along social and cultural lines.

So the problem, for me, is this. We are in a time of increasing economic inequality and of stark policy bias in favor of the affluent, and yet the politics of resentment draws our attention to our animosity toward each other rather than the ways in which the political system is not working for anyone but the very few.

In more partisan terms, why do people vote for the Republican Party when it is that party that is especially likely to represent the policy preferences of the affluent and ignore those of everyone else? The conversations in this study suggest that it is not because a wide swath of people identify as affluent or believe that they will be affluent someday. Instead, the conversations suggest that the Republican Party has been very successful at tapping into existing resentments toward particular targets. In the frameworks they provide, the demons are not affluent people but, rather, the government, the people that work for it, and urban areas that are home to liberals and people of color. The manner in which these understandings hinge on notions of hard work and deservingness means that social and cultural issues are important considerations, as are economic concerns. The “them”—the “haves”—is defined not by affluence but by culture. In these narratives, people are telling each other that there are people that do not value what we value, do not work as hard as we do, and are actively sucking away the livelihoods we have worked so hard to create. While some people point to the government as a source of assistance, others—such as those just described—do not believe claims that government programs will help. They have been hurting

economically for generations, and in their eyes government programs do two things: they help the undeserving, and they require an increase in taxes. Even though they perceive that their towns are about to dry up and blow away, they want government to just leave them alone.

The 2012 presidential election demonstrated a limit to the ability of the Republican Party to capitalize on such arguments. Mitt Romney’s personal wealth and plutocratic lifestyle proved to be a liability for the Republican Party. Bartels (2013a) has demonstrated that Romney turned voters off because he appeared to care more about those with wealth than those without. In that light, it seems the Republicans’ ability to paint the haves as social groups other than the wealthy is limited.

In other words, it is not inevitable that rural residents will remain attracted to the Republican Party. The Romney candidacy demonstrates this, and so does the lack of enthusiasm that I observed for either party. If the conversations I observed are at all representative of conversations among white working people elsewhere in the country, this is a demographic that displays considerable ambivalence about, not solid allegiance to, the Democratic and Republican Parties. When these folks expressed support for small government, it was typically rooted neither in political principles nor in identification as Republicans but in a perception that services were not benefiting people who deserve them: hard-working Americans, like themselves.

What the rural voters I observed wanted in their politicians are people who understand and respect the way rural folks live and their daily concerns and desires. It is not obvious to me that Republican candidates are innately better suited to provide this understanding and respect.¹¹

What Is to Be Done?

One straightforward response to the concerns I have raised in this book might be for policy makers to reassess what is going on in rural places and reconsider the policy responses they have made to date. As I documented in chapter 4, rural communities in Wisconsin are receiving significant amounts of resources—and not necessarily less than their fair share, as many of them believe. However, the depth of the resentment toward cities and policy makers suggests three possible alterations to public policy targeted toward rural areas.

First, it is possible that the resources rural communities are receiving

are not effectively addressing the needs of rural communities. Perhaps state, federal, and even county legislation is too often applied to all types of places equally. Maybe more programs should be tailored specifically for rural needs and crafted with recognition that not all rural areas are the same. When such programs are developed, they have to be approved by legislative bodies that include representatives from urban, suburban, and rural areas. We need geographic cooperation as well as bipartisanship. Within state legislatures, something as simple as an exchange program, in which representatives from urban districts spend time in rural districts and vice versa, could help improve empathy for the needs of people outside one's own type of district.¹²

The second thing rural resentment toward the cities suggests about public policy is that some of the resources rural communities are receiving are invisible to the people who live there. Many of the government benefits that a wide variety of people receive are part of the "submerged state"—government programs that are as expensive as welfare but less often acknowledged (Metler 2011). How many of us, when asked, admit that we have "ever used a government social program, or not?" Most—56.5 percent—say we have not. But 60 percent of those who say they haven't used any government social programs do admit that they have received a tax deduction for paying a mortgage, for example (Metler 2011, 37–38). A similar kind of invisibility likely applies to the benefits that rural residents receive.¹³

The third thing this book suggests about public policy is that the manner in which policy is created and delivered is important for whether people perceive it as meeting their needs or being in their interests. If the people I spent time with had perceived that policy makers had listened to the concerns of rural residents before creating government programs, would they have felt differently about those programs? If they had perceived that UW–Madison researchers were going out of their way to ask locals for their insights on the projects they were pursuing in their small towns, would they have felt more supportive of that work? A team of archaeologists who have invited community members to be a part of the research process in Trempealeau, Wisconsin, for example, suggests the answer is likely yes.¹⁴ I recognize that this is easier said than done. The Department of Natural Resources has gone to great lengths to listen to community members, live alongside them, and deliver policy in ways that meet people where they are in the course of their daily lives

(such as delivering information at boat landings), yet still bears the brunt of a great deal of criticism in small-town Wisconsin.

At root, my hope in writing this book is that more and more people redirect the energy they use to engage with public issues away from criticizing their fellow citizens and toward improving the policy process to ensure that it is responsive to the needs of all people. That is asking a lot. In an atmosphere of resentment, it is tough to take the high road and operate on a belief that all people are, at root, good and deserving of respect. Our current politics give little incentive for elected officials to pursue such behavior. It is time that those of us with the power to vote demand it of them.