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Putting Inequality in Its Place: Rural Consciousness and the Power of Perspective

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Why do people vote against their interests? Previous explanations miss something fundamental because they do not consider the work of group consciousness. Based on participant observation of conversations from May 2007 to May 2011 among 37 regularly occurring groups in 27 communities sampled across Wisconsin, this study shows that in some places, people have a class- and place-based identity that is intertwined with a perception of deprivation. The rural consciousness revealed here shows people attributing rural deprivation to the decision making of (urban) political elites, who disregard and disrespect rural residents and rural lifestyles. Thus these rural residents favor limited government, even though such a stance might seem contradictory to their economic self-interests. The results encourage us to consider the role of group consciousness-based perspectives rather than pitting interests against values as explanations for preferences. Also, the study suggests that public opinion research more seriously include listening to the public.

Scholars of political behavior puzzle over why people vote against their interests (Citrin and Green 1990). A prominent recent manifestation of this is the debate between Thomas Frank and Larry Bartels. In *What's the Matter with Kansas?* Frank (2004) argued that the success of the Republican Party since the late 1960s is due to its ability to distract white working class voters from economic issues and issues of distributive justice by drawing their attention to social issues and culture wars. Bartels (2008, chap. 3), on the other hand, has argued that Republicans have not distracted voters; voters *do* care about economic issues. The main issue instead, he argues, is that voters do not understand distributive issues correctly; they are willing to vote for tax cuts that will only benefit the very rich (2008, chap. 6).

This article presents an alternative possibility previously missed in these debates: Some people make sense of politics through a social identity infused with notions of distributive justice. This perspective-based notion of political understanding alerts us to the possibility that economic interests are not subordinated to values (contrary to Frank) but are instead intertwined with them. It also suggests that notions of inequality are not fundamentally misunderstood but are instead understood correctly according to the perspectives through which people interpret the world (contrary to Bartels).

This idea, that some people may process political information through a perspective constituted from social identity and notions of distributive justice, invokes attention to the concept of group consciousness. The classic conception of group consciousness is as an identification with a social group (not just membership in it), combined with a politicization of that identity in the form of perceived relative deprivation of that group. Central to this concept is the idea that deprivation is the fault of the political system, not individual behavior (Miller et al. 1981; Verba and Nie 1972). People with group consciousness make sense of the world through that politicized identity. It frames out alternative understandings and fosters negative perceptions of outgroups (Conover 1984; 1988).

The group consciousness literature has focused on *scholars'* conceptions of groups. That is, it has examined whether people exhibit consciousness of prominent social science categorizations such as race, gender, or materially deprived groups. However, when we adopt a bottom-up approach and listen to what people themselves identify as important categorizations, other forms of consciousness become apparent (Geertz 1974).

The following study reveals the importance of a group consciousness that has been overlooked using our typical top-down procedures: rural consciousness. By "rural consciousness" I mean a concept with the following characteristics:[1]

1. It is a set of ideas about what type of geographic place one is from, and where that place stands in relation to others in terms of power and resource allocation.
2. It contains ideas about what people are like in rural places—that is, their values and lifestyles—with a

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[1] This description borrows from the approach used by Lane (1962, 14–15).

particular emphasis on the importance of hard work in rural areas.
3. It operates as a lens through which people think about themselves, other people, and public affairs, among other things.
4. As a form of group consciousness, it contains a social identification with rural residents, as well as a perception of distributive injustice toward this group.
5. This sense of injustice is a perception of deprivation relative to other groups—in this case, residents of metropolitan (i.e., urban and suburban) areas.
6. This injustice is perceived as the fault of political elites located in urban areas.
7. Rural consciousness encompasses orientations toward government. In particular, it encompasses political trust because it contains judgments about the past performance of the government and an expectation that future actions will not be in line with rural interests (e.g., Hetherington 2005).
8. Rural consciousness also encompasses the concept of political alienation, which includes lack of support for the system as well as a sense of political isolation from others. That is, it contains a "rejection of political norms and goals that are widely held and shared by other members of a society" (Finifter 1970, 391). The rural consciousness uncovered here includes a perception that the rules of the game do not apply equally to people from all places. Alienation is also a part of rural consciousness insofar as the former concept encompasses political efficacy (Finifter 1970, 390). Specifically, rural consciousness involves low external efficacy, or a belief that government is unresponsive to the concerns of rural residents (Craig 1979).

This article contributes to our understanding of the connection between interests and preferences the insight that in some places, people have a class- and place-based identity that is intertwined with a perception of deprivation. In the rural consciousness examined here, people view rural deprivation as the fault of (urban) political elites. Thus they favor limited government, even though such a stance might seem contradictory to their economic self-interest. The results encourage us to move beyond pitting interests against values as explanations for preferences and suggest that we instead consider the role of group-consciousness-based perspectives.

The purpose of this study is to think about political understanding not in terms of what people lack—knowledge or sophistication or mass belief systems (e.g., Converse 1964)—but what they have. This article examines what people have with respect to political understanding by using an ethnographic approach. It investigates how people make sense of the political world in the course of everyday life while interacting with members of their social networks. I studied public affairs conversations among people embedded in 37 groups across 27 widely-varying communities, over 4 years, in the state of Wisconsin.

This approach flows from a conceptualization of public opinion as the understandings that people create together. That is, even if the individual group members were to talk about the very same issues differently in mass sample survey interviews, which would be a more true manifestation of their opinions? Both have importance. Before the emergence of survey research, scholars conceptualized public opinion as the product of groups of people competing with one another (Blumer 1948) and the understandings that are created as citizens and journalists share their impressions with others (Bryce 1913), not the aggregation of the expressions of isolated individuals. For many decisions, especially at lower levels of government, political actors use other sources of information besides polls to determine what constituents think or feel, including face-to-face group conversations (Fenno 1978; Walsh 2009). This study assumes that what gets said in groups is an important manifestation of opinion.

My purpose in investigating what people say in the groups they normally inhabit in a particular set of communities within one state is to better explain how the perspectives people use to interpret the world lead them to see certain stances as natural and right for people like themselves (Soss 2006, 316). It is motivated by the interpretivist goal of providing a "coherent account of [individuals'] understandings as a prerequisite for adequate explanation" (Soss 2006, 319; see also Adcock 2003). In other words, to explain why people express the opinions that they do, we need to examine and describe how they perceive the world. In this article I explain the contours of the rural consciousness I observed and then specify its particularity by contrasting it with conversations among urban and suburban groups. That is, this is a constitutive analysis (an examination of what this thing, rural consciousness, consists of and how it works) versus a causal analysis (e.g., an examination of whether living in a rural place predicts rural consciousness—McCann 1996; Taylor 1971; Wendt 1998). The point is not to argue that we see consciousness in rural areas but not in other places, nor to estimate how often it appears among rural residents, nor to describe what a population of people thinks. Instead, the purpose here is to examine what this particular rural consciousness is and what it does: how it helps to organize and integrate considerations of the distribution of resources, decision-making authority, and values into a coherent narrative that people use to make sense of the world. This is not a study of Wisconsin; it is a study of political understanding and group consciousness that is conducted in Wisconsin (Geertz 1973, 22).

To clarify the stakes, contributions, and implications of this study, allow me to contrast it with positivist approaches. I examine here how people weave together place and class identities and their orientations to government and how they use the resulting perspectives to talk about politics. A positivist study of this topic might measure identities and orientations to government, and then include them as independent variables in a multivariate analysis in which the dependent variable is a policy or candidate preference. Such an approach is problematic in this case in the following ways. The positivist model specification assumes that values on one

independent variable move independent of the other. Or if using an interaction term, it assumes that people with particular combinations of these variables exhibit a significantly different level of the dependent variable. However, the object of study, or my dependent variable in positivist terms, is not the position on an attitude scale. It is instead the perspectives that people use to arrive at that position. My object is not to understand the independent effects of identities and attitudes such as trust, or how people with different combinations of these compare to others, but to understand how people themselves combine them—how they constitute perceptions of themselves and use these to make sense of politics.

What is at stake in this analysis, then? If the goal is not to establish that a particular variable or combination of variables predicts a particular political attitude, then what is it that I have to establish? I have to show, convincingly, that a particular perspective is influential for the way some people think about politics. The burden is on me to show that rural consciousness structures how the people under investigation think about politics, that is, that it screens out certain considerations and makes others obvious and mundane.

When I claim that a perspective is influential on the way people think about politics, is that not a claim about causation? If this is not a positivist approach, then why am I talking about explaining? If by explaining we mean establishing causation in the traditional positivist sense, then I am overstepping my bounds. But if by explaining we mean identifying and clarifying the resources and reasoning processes people use to make sense of politics, then explanation is in the domain of a constitutive approach such as this one, too.

This study suggests a revision of the way we study the gap between interests and votes, as well as an expansion of the methods we use to study public opinion. There is a need in our scholarship for listening to the people we study and attempting to discover the categories that they use to understand politics. This investigation was conducted in the hope that positivist and constitutive approaches can inform one another. I return to this claim in the conclusion and outline the way this study complements positivist analyses by generating hypotheses, suggesting new measures, illuminating existing puzzles, and confirming previous findings.

To further specify what this article contributes, notice how this is not an analysis of whether opinions correlate with place of residence. We already know from history (e.g., electoral maps from 1896 and 1948) that rural vs. urban distinctions matter for public opinion. However, when research has examined *how* or *why* location matters, it has not in fact examined how consciousness as a person from a certain type of place matters for political understanding. Instead, there are four main ways in which place has been studied with respect to political behavior. First, previous work has looked for composition effects, or the way that other social categories affect behavior (Agnew 1987, ix; Freudenburg 1991; Keith and Pile 1993, 2). For example, scholars have paid attention to the relationship between place, level of political and cultural diversity, and political behavior and attitudes (Gainsborough 2001; Oliver 2001; Putnam 2007). Second, scholars have expected that different demographic compositions across geographic areas would result in differences in social structure and culture (Knoke and Henry 1977; Wirth 1938) and thus in socialization (Agnew 1987; Lipset 1981, 263–67). For example, Campbell et al. (1960) argued that farming occupations exposed people to less political information and mobilization than was the case with industrial labor jobs in urban areas, resulting in rural/urban differences (425–30). Third, scholars have conceptualized rural/urban differences as labels for underlying class conflict (Black and Black 1987; Key 1949). Finally, another argument has been that the rural/urban divide is a conflict that arises from competition over material resources (Bowen, Haynes, and Rosentraub 2006).

This article makes a different contribution. It shows how place consciousness itself serves as a perspective through which people interpret politics. The analyses that follow examine how this framework structures perceptions of the distribution of power, resources, and values. In doing so, this study argues that the significance for politics of being a rural resident is not just that people in rural areas have a different demographic profile, or that the different experiences in rural areas result in different attitudes. It also goes beyond the argument that rural/urban divides are manifestations of class conflict or conflict over material resources. Instead, it shows how consciousness of being a rural resident itself can make preferences for limited government obvious, appropriate, and expected even among low income people.

UNDERSTANDING AS CATEGORIZATION AND SOCIAL IDENTIFICATION

To understand why rural consciousness is likely important for political understanding, it is necessary to recognize the psychology behind understanding in general, and also the importance of place in this process. Psychology tells us that when people make sense of the world, they categorize (Chi, Feltovich, and Glaser 1981; Medin and Cooley 1998). In politics, a particularly powerful act of categorization is the parsing of people into "us" and "them" (Tajfel 1981; Turner et al. 1987). Identities as members of social groups, whether friendship groups or societywide categories, serve as reference points for social comparison and boundaries of allegiance, help guide notions of appropriate behavior and attitudes, and influence what messages people pay attention to and incorporate into prior beliefs (e.g., Brewer and Miller 1984; Sears and Kinder 1985; Tajfel et al. 1971; Tajfel and Turner 1986). Social group identities play a central role in the manner in which individuals interpret the political world, influencing political attitudes and behaviors (Campbell et al. 1960, chaps. 12 and 13; Conover 1984; 1988; Huddy 2003). The group consciousness literature has taught us that when social identities are imbued with notions of distributive justice, they are particularly important for political behavior (Miller et al. 1981).

We should expect that group consciousness rooted in place plays an important role in understanding because place is a tool for understanding that people commonly use to make sense of many aspects of life (Boroditsky 2000; Creed and Ching 1997; Soja and Hooper 1993). We interpret ourselves and others with reference to particular places (Moore 1998). One of the first questions we use to make sense of new acquaintances is, "Where are you from?" Although social science often assumes that distinctions between places are fading and becoming less relevant to social life (Knoke and Henry 1977), modern life has not erased the importance of place (Agnew 1987). It may have instead increased the need for people to draw boundaries, more crisply define their geographic communities (Bell 1992; Cohen 1985), and perform elements of their identity rooted in physical places, such as speech patterns (Purnell et al. 2005).

We should expect that place matters for political understanding in the form of group consciousness for many reasons. Representation, and thus many resources, is allocated by geography in the United States. Therefore, individuals' perceptions of distributive justice are likely related to place, especially among those who perceive that their communities are relatively deprived. We should expect *rural* consciousness because group identities tend to be more salient among members of minority groups, and rural residents compose just 17% of the U.S. population[2] (Creed and Ching 1997, 4; Wong and Cho 2005). Even though there is contention over how "rural" is defined, studies of rural communities suggest that the term carries a great deal of meaning for people who identify with it (Bell 1992; Mellow 2005). Also, the conflicts between rural and urban areas within states are intensifying (Gimpel and Schuknecht 2003, especially 385), suggesting more sensitivity to distributive inequalities across these areas.

In Wisconsin, rural/urban divides have been a part of the state's politics for at least a century. It may have been contrasts between rural and urban that brought both Joe McCarthy and Bob LaFollette to power in this state. Granted, part of the mystery of how such seemingly different figures could arise within the same state is solved by noting that both started out as Republicans and Wisconsin was a Republican one-party state for much of the first half of the twentieth century (Epstein 1958). However, both men tapped into rural skepticism of distant institutions of authority to win their campaigns. La Follette's Progressivism took hold in a nonmetropolitan Midwestern state, in which rural skepticism of party organizations outweighed allegiance to urban political machines (Epstein 1958). Likewise, some argue that it was the small town and rural skepticism of globalization and distant institutions with no attachment to the local community (i.e., urban) that McCarthy successfully exploited to win a U.S. Senate seat.[3] Even the breakthrough of the modern Democratic Party—the election of Democrat William Proxmire to the Senate in a special election after McCarthy's death—is commonly understood as the result of a successful appeal to "rural discontent" (Fowler 2008, 173). Part of the tension may have been magnified by the fact that state legislative seats have been apportioned by population since 1954, giving urban Democrats proportionately more representation in Wisconsin than in states in which seats were allocated according to geography until *Baker v. Carr* was decided in favor of representation according to population in 1962 (Ansolabehere and Snyder 2008; Epstein 1958, 27).

Since the mid-twentieth century, Wisconsin has largely reflected the national map of blue cities and red rural areas. The Democratic Party's success in the metropolitan and larger cities is likely due to stronger union organizing in those places (Fowler 2008, 184). Also, the rural areas may retain an anti-Democratic Party stance that is a holdover from World War I and World War II. A large portion of Wisconsin residents claim German heritage (43% in 2000; Fowler 2008, 205). German voters were strongly isolationist during World War I and World War II, and therefore likely to vote against the Democrats, especially in rural areas, where unions had little influence (Fowler 2008). As we shall see, the connection between most rural areas in Wisconsin and Republican leanings is not just a vestige of the past.

Wisconsin is a fruitful place for examining what rural consciousness is and how it structures understanding of politics, because rural areas in the state are more volatile than the correlation between rural and Republican suggests. Both the northwestern and southwestern corners lean Democratic, although they are predominantly rural. This is due in part to high levels of poverty in those areas, the influence of the city of Superior in the northwestern corner, and commuters or outmigrants from Madison in the southwest (Fowler 2008). Also, many Wisconsinites identify as independents, and the state's political institutions have long reflected its "confidence in the independent and more or less self-informed citizen" (Epstein 1958, 310). For example, the state has open primaries, which allow voters to remain independent until receiving a ballot, nonpartisan municipal elections, and until the recent passage of voter identification legislation, very lenient voter registration laws (Epstein 1958, 22–32).

This independent streak is especially strong in rural areas of the state.[4] That, combined with the fact that most of the population lives outside the two metropolitan areas, make the rural areas of the state a political battleground. Whereas only 10 of the 64 nonmetro counties voted for the Democratic gubernatorial candidate in 2010, only 10 of them went for the Republican

[2] Rural is defined here as nonmetro (http://www.ers.usda.gov/Briefing/Population/).

[3] http://jeremisuri.net/archives/tag/tea-party, but see Fowler 2008, 161–62.

[4] A University of Wisconsin–Madison Survey Center Badger Poll, a statewide public opinion poll of Wisconsin, conducted June 17 to July 10, 2011, found 42% identifying as independents or leaners, 62% among people identifying as rural, and 56% among those identifying as urban or suburban (χ^2 2.51, $p = .113$).

John McCain in the 2008 presidential race. (There are 72 counties in the state).

Before we proceed, a few words on the definition of *rural* are in order. Clearly, there is no one single way to define what constitutes a rural area, even according to government agencies such as the USDA that allocate large sums of money by type-of-place designation.[5] Moreover, residents often classify their communities in ways that contradict analysts' classifications.[6] This study focused on residents' perceptions of their communities and of how their communities compared to others. The important distinction in their comments emerged as metro vs. nonmetro, or major urban area vs. other areas. I thereby refer to a place as rural if the members of the group regarded it as nonmetro.

METHODS

The fieldwork analyzed for this study began as an investigation of the role of social class identity in political understanding. Recall that the purpose of this study was not to generalize to a population in the statistical sense; thus my concern with case selection was not whether Wisconsin was more or less typical of all U.S. states. Instead, I chose a state that has a good deal of economic heterogeneity across communities and therefore was likely to provide variety in perceptions of social class. As I conducted my fieldwork, I became aware of the prominence of rural consciousness in individuals' attempts to understand politics. Fortunately, Wisconsin has a salient urban vs. rural divide, facilitating my attempts to examine how this lens structures understanding of politics.

I chose the sites to study by sampling particular communities using a stratified purposeful approach (Miles and Huberman 1994, 28). I categorized the counties in Wisconsin into eight distinct regions, based on partisan leaning, median household income, population density, size of community, racial and ethnic heterogeneity, local industry, and agricultural background. Within each region I purposely chose the municipality with the largest population, and randomly chose a smaller municipality. I included several additional municipalities to provide additional variation. The result was a sample of 27 communities.

To identify groups to study in these communities, I asked University of Wisconsin Extension educators and local newspaper editors to suggest groups of people who met regularly and informally of their own accord in a gathering place to which I could gain access. My informants typically suggested groups that met in local restaurants, cafés, or gas stations early on weekday mornings. (See supplemental Online Appendix A – available at http://www.journals.cambridge.org/psr2012011 – for descriptions of these groups and communities.) When possible, I spent time with multiple groups in a given municipality, to provide greater socioeconomic and gender variation. I visited each of the groups between one and five times between May 2007 and May 2011.[7] To protect the confidentiality of the people I studied, I use pseudonyms and do not identify the communities by name, except for the largest municipalities, Madison and Milwaukee.

To gain access to a given group, I greeted the members and asked for permission to sit with them. I passed out my business card and explained that I was a public opinion researcher from the University of Wisconsin–Madison, and said that I wished to listen to their concerns about public affairs and the state's flagship public university. I asked for their permission to record our conversation,[8] and gave them "tokens of my appreciation" such as football schedules, donated by the Wisconsin Alumni Association. I then asked, "What are the big concerns for people in this community?" and continued with other questions on my protocol (see supplemental Online Appendix B), adjusting the order and number of questions asked when necessary.

This strategy meant that the people I spent time with were predominantly male, non-Hispanic white, and of retirement age. Of the 37 groups I studied, 12 were composed of only men, 4 were exclusively female, and the rest were of mixed gender, but predominantly male. Most groups (20) were composed of a mix of retirees and currently employed people, though retirees were in the majority in these groups. Of the other groups, 5 were composed solely of retirees, 8 of people currently employed or unemployed, and 4 of high school students (4H groups). Although each of the 37 groups was mainly homogenous with respect to occupational and educational background, across groups I obtained socioeconomic variation, from people who were "one step from homelessness" to wealthy business owners. I categorize the groups in this study as lower-income or upper-income by inference from their stated occupations.

Because this sample is composed of voluntary groups, the people I studied may be more attentive to current events, be more talkative, and have larger social networks than the average person. Many of the groups contained local political or business leaders. That is, many of these people were opinion leaders in their communities (Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet 1944). This slice of leaders varied across the municipalities I sampled. In some places they were executives of multinational corporations; in others, the owners of the businesses on Main Street. Their perceptions may not be representative, but they are likely consequential for the way others in their community think about many public issues.

[5] See http://www.ers.usda.gov/Features/RuralData/#ruralstatus.

[6] A Badger Poll conducted June 9 to July 10, 2010, included a subjective measure of residency in a rural area. ("Would you describe the place where you live as urban, suburban or rural?" When necessary, interviewers used this prompt: "Urban is a big city like Milwaukee, Madison, Green Bay, etc. Suburban is a built up place close to a big city and Rural is less built up with fewer people and further away from a big city.") Respondents' classifications were consistent with standard Survey Sampling International classifications a maximum of just 60% of the time (58% for rural, 60% for suburban, and 49% for urban).

[7] The size of the morning coffee klatch groups varied from about 4 to 10 members.

[8] All but two groups allowed me to record their conversations.

Of course, my presence altered these conversations. I intentionally steered the conversations, and the participants likely altered what they said because of my presence. When I sat in a restaurant, café, or other venue before asking the group members for permission to join them, I glimpsed what their talk was like in my absence. They appeared to swear less and talk politics more when they knew I was listening. More importantly, my presence as an outsider and urbanite most certainly raised the salience of place identity for rural groups. Because the purpose of this study is to investigate not whether place matters but how people use it for understanding, this heightened salience facilitated the investigation.

I designed my interview protocol to generate talk about several topics that pilot studies suggested were likely to invoke economic considerations and references to social class: tax policy, immigration, higher education, and health care. To analyze my data, I used data displays and adjusted my collection as I proceeded to test the conclusions I was reaching (Miles and Huberman 1994). That is, as I collected transcripts from the conversations, I read through them, looking for patterns across groups with respect to the kinds of considerations people brought to bear in talking about public affairs. I displayed my data in a matrix in which the rows represented particular groups, and the columns represented different characteristics of the group and the broader community.

As I proceeded, I wrote memos detailing the patterns I perceived (Feldman 1995). I analyzed what additional evidence I would need to observe in order to validate my conclusions (and altered my protocol accordingly), and used the visual displays to test whether the patterns were pervasive and whether they varied across group type (Miles and Huberman 1994, chap. 10). To further verify my conclusions, I considered how my presence affected the conversations, reexamined conversations I deemed inconsistent with the patterns observed, considered spurious relations, added additional groups to test for similar patterns among people of different demographic backgrounds, and sent detailed reports and gave brief verbal reports of my results to the groups I visited so that they could comment on my conclusions (Miles and Huberman 1994, 262–77).

EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS

Wisconsin has two main metropolitan centers, both located in the southern region: Milwaukee, the main industrial area, and Madison, the state capital and home of the state's flagship public university (University of Wisconsin–Madison). The rest of the state outside these urban centers is often called "Outstate," and the northern tier of the state, largely a tourist area, is typically called "Up North."

For many rural residents, their identification as people living in a rural area was central to the way they talked about themselves and current events. For example, 18 of the 24 nonmetro groups called themselves "rural people," or people "out here" or "up here," referencing the rural/urban geography of the state.

Consistent with classic conceptions of group consciousness, identification as a rural resident was more than a geographic reference for many of the people I studied. It was imbued with perceptions of inequalities of power, differences in values, and also inequalities in resources. In the following sections I explain these three elements of this group consciousness, and then illustrate its particularity by contrasting conversations in groups exhibiting this rural consciousness with conversations in urban and suburban groups.

Power

The rural vs. urban lens structured many rural residents' ideas about which geographic areas of the state had the ability to force other areas to do something they otherwise would not (i.e., the classic definition of power, Dahl 1961) as well as ideas about who had power over the agenda (Bachrach and Baratz 1963). Commonly, people in rural areas would claim that the major decisions in the state were made in the urban areas, by urban people, and communicated outward. Madison was the main target, because it is the state capital. Rural residents complained that authority flowed out from both Madison and Milwaukee, never in reverse, and was exercised without regard for the concerns, values, or knowledge of people in rural areas.

For example, in a far north central resort community, I met with a group of leaders from the local government and public schools who gathered every morning in the town hall. On two different visits, the members of this small group asserted that the cities in the state held the majority of power. They complained that even state employees living in rural areas had little say in the regulations governing their communities. One man, a former employee of the state Department of Natural Resources, remarked that he had little control over the way in which policies were implemented because "Now the governor appoints all the big shots and they don't know [about our needs]."

Complaints of powerlessness were not just expressions of antigovernment or limited government sentiments: Half of the nonmetro groups perceived that public officials were *particularly* dismissive of nonmetro people.[9] That is, these antigovernment perspectives were rooted in residents' place identities. They claimed that officials had little experience of or understanding with rural life and made little effort to listen to rural residents' concerns. One member of a group of retired and working women meeting for breakfast in a rural, far northern resort community explained:

> Theresa: As a former educator, I resented, highly, comments such as, "There is no education north of Highway 8 [a U.S. highway that runs East-West across the middle of the state]. These kids aren't—" and we send them such absolutely excellent and well prepared students there that

[9] This perception was volunteered (i.e., I did not ask whether people agreed with such a statement.) Unless otherwise specified, that is the case for all other findings reported.

> they—the attitude that the hick area of the state—was painful.
>
> KCW: So who did you get that from? Recruiters?
>
> Theresa: Professors.
>
> KCW: Really? When they would visit?
>
> Theresa: Yeah, or publish in newspaper articles or other, you know—and that was a little distressful because I think northern Wisconsin feels a little far away from Madison anyway. And we keep waving our hands and saying, "Yoo hoo, there's another half of a state up here! Up north is not Wausau [the main city in the central part of the state]!"

The rural consciousness I observed contained attitudes of trust, alienation, and efficacy with respect to powerful institutions including the flagship university and the government. Many rural residents identified as rural people and equated membership in that category with systematic disenfranchisement from the exercise of power in the state.

We expect that who has a say in politics is understood in terms of haves and have-nots. But for rural residents, the identification as rural drove notions of who constituted the "haves" and "have-nots" and thus who got attention. In this way, they intertwined place and class. Even higher income people in nonmetro areas used this lens. They saw themselves as of a lower status than upper income people in the metro areas. For example, one group of professionals meeting for coffee every morning in a diner in a city in the center of the state remarked that it was unusual for someone from Madison to go to an outstate community to listen.

> I think that we are impressed [that you come up here to visit with us]. Because most of us, particularly in a state like Wisconsin where politicians—none of the national ones come and see us—you know we only have 10 electoral votes. I mean none of the politicians come to see us at all.

Such comments were often resentful and defensive. Thirty percent of nonmetro groups in places with populations under 10,000 ($N = 20$) assumed that public decision makers in the metro areas held common negative stereotypes of rural residents, such as "hicks," "country bumpkins," "rednecks," and uneducated folks (Creed and Ching 1997; Jarosz and Lawson 2002). They fired stereotypes back: Slightly more than a third of these groups ridiculed urbanites' lack of common sense, and prided themselves on understanding the land and earning a living using their hands rather than sitting behind a desk.

In other words, like other group consciousnesses, this rural consciousness simultaneously conveyed a sense of pride in the ingroup and a sense of relative deprivation. Rural residents' resentment of cities was not a perception that cities are idyllic places to live. Conversations in 11 of the 20 groups in nonmetro places smaller than 10,000 in population included comments that despite the hardships of rural life, they preferred their lifestyles to the fast pace and lack of rootedness of city living.

Values and Lifestyles

The second important dimension of this rural consciousness was the way the identification as rural was imbued with claims that rural people have distinctive values and lifestyles in contrast to people in metro areas. Rural residents often talked about themselves as a particular kind of people, and invoked this distinctiveness to talk about the relative economic positions of their communities.

In a small hamlet in the northwestern part of the state, a group meeting in the basement of the local church Tuesday mornings described their community as poor and lacking in jobs. They viewed health care as part of an overarching crisis of inequality in which decision makers in the urban power centers of the state were out of touch with the lives of rural, ordinary folk. They perceived that they had to work harder than people in other parts of the state, and that people in urban areas, especially professionals, were lazy. When I asked them what the University of Wisconsin–Madison does not do well, they explained that people in Madison and Milwaukee have qualitatively different lifestyles than people in the rural parts of the state.

> KCW: What do you think the University of Wisconsin–Madison does not do well? When you think about [it]. . . .
>
> Martha: Represents our area. I mean we are like, we're strange to Madison. They want us to do everything for Madison's laws and the way they do things, but we totally live differently than the city people live. So they need to think more rural instead of all this city area.
>
> Donna: We can't afford to educate our children like they can in the cities. Simple as that. Don't have the advantages.
>
> Ethel: All the things they do, based on Madison and Milwaukee, never us.
>
> Martha: Yeah, we don't have the advantages that they give their local people there, I think a lot of times. And it is probably because they don't understand how rural people live and what we deal with and our problems.

These comments exemplify how rural identity often included claims that rural people live a particular lifestyle and those claims were interwoven with claims about inequality. People perceived that members of the outgroup were a threat to their community, their values, and their livelihood. For example, one April morning in 2008, a group composed mainly of retired public school teachers that met in a service station in a rural hamlet in central Wisconsin criticized the public schools funding formula implemented under former Republican governor Tommy Thompson. One man said,

> We know that many areas in northern and central Wisconsin, there are schools that are going to be forced out of their communities, and the problem with that really in a small town like this is that the only identity this town has anymore is the school. The school is the most important business in town, and if the school wasn't here, especially with the higher fuel costs, there's really no reason that all the people who live here would choose to live in a small place. . . . It's not the first time in history that small towns

> have been dried up and blown away, you know, in the boom days of the West, they did that all the time, but it's really going to change the fabric of rural America.

Rural residents often blamed threats to rural life on cold, distant bureaucracies located in cities. They often regarded governments, WalMarts, and even headquarters of corporate farms as urban entities, out of touch with the values that had at one time made rural communities stable and secure places to live. In this framework, rural residents readily viewed government as antirural.

Hard Work

One value in particular that was central to the rural consciousness I observed was a belief in hard work. Many Americans value hard work (McClosky and Zaller 1984, chap. 4). But many of the rural people in this study understood even this common value through their group consciousness, and used these notions to talk about government and government employees. To illustrate, I examine the way Republicans and then Democrats invoked this value.[10] Many Republicans in general, regardless of type of place of residence, linked ideas of hard work with opposition to social welfare programs. They would say that people do not work as hard as they used to, or that certain people work less than others and thus are less deserving of taxpayer money. For example, in a breakfast group in a Milwaukee suburb, the members repeatedly lamented that young people are not willing to work as hard as people in older generations. Rural Republicans, in contrast to metro Republicans, would express similar sentiments but would emphasize their commitment to a work ethic by claiming that the rural way of life in particular mandated hard work.

Democratic groups talked about hard work in a different way from Republican groups: Hard work was important, but not necessarily enough to make ends meet. For example, Democrats among a group of loggers meeting in a rural, northwest town talked about how much people in their community work, and said that people in general should work for the benefits they receive (akin to comments in Republican groups). But when I asked them a standard survey question to probe their ideas about income inequality, their comments departed from the typical Republican group conversation:

> KCW: In America today, some people have better jobs and higher incomes than others do. Why do you think that is, that some Americans have better jobs and higher income than others do? There is a bunch of different reasons people typically give—and you all tell me whether you think it is a bunch of bunk, or whether you think that is a good reason. One is, because some people have more inborn ability to learn. How important do you think that reason is for why some people have better jobs?
>
> Charlie: Basically what it amounts to is who has more ambition than the next person.
>
> KCW: More ambition? Yeah?
>
> Charlie: Some people don't have any ambition and they don't wanna work.
>
> Sam: That doesn't mean you're going to make more money. Mexicans got more ambition than anybody. They keep the wages low.
>
> KCW: Yeah? So one of the standard reasons they give is because some people just don't work as hard. Is that—is that kind of what you are talking about?
>
> Jim: Yeah Sam kind of hit the nail on the head.
>
> Sam: He goes to work every day, does the same thing, if they cut the price [of timber], you ain't gonna make no money. Cut the price, work longer.
>
> Stu: Yeah—I worked all weekend.
>
> KCW: So even working hard, that's not what counts for earning a higher income?
>
> Jim: Well no—what are you going to do? We're in that industry. . . .
>
> Sam: You're really not rewarded a lot as far as. . . .
>
> Jim: No you're not.

The members of this group called themselves "a bunch of sawdust heads," in other words, loggers, or people who earned a living in a distinctively rural industry. They saw themselves as rural people: people who worked hard and who are by definition of a place that is economically disadvantaged.

The manner in which rural consciousness worked in these conversations illustrates how people use group consciousness as well as partisanship to understand politics. Partisanship helps explain how these people relate hard work to economic success. But their rural consciousness is doing part of the work as well.

If rural consciousness is not subsumed by partisanship, then is it explained away by race? The widening conflict between urban and rural areas is driven in part by racial mobilization (Gimpel and Schuknecht 2003); racial resentment is likely a big part of the resentment toward urban areas. The striking extent of racial segregation in Wisconsin makes it undeniable that when people refer to "those people in Milwaukee" they are often referring to racial minorities. However, it is a vast oversimplification to regard the rural vs. urban sentiments in these conversations as simply racism. For example, when white outstaters complained of the laziness in the cities, their comments were almost always directed at white people: government bureaucrats and faculty members at the flagship public university.

If we simply write off rural residents' antipathy toward urban areas as a cover for racism, it does three unfortunate things for our understanding of public opinion. First, it implies that urban life is less racist than rural life, an assumption belied by the striking level

[10] I assessed partisanship via listening to volunteered identities, responses to questions about voting history, and perceptions of attentiveness of the parties to concerns of "people like you," and also by bluntly inquiring about partisanship. If such direct prompts were not fruitful, I did not classify groups as leaning toward one or the other party.

of racial segregation within U.S. metro areas. Second, assuming that rural consciousness is centrally antipathy toward people of color in urban places prevents us from recognizing the orientations toward government in this group consciousness. Tea Party campaigns may partly appeal to racism, but they also resonate with many of the perceptions of inequality and alienation from government observed in these conversations. That is, the preference for limited government that stems from this particular intertwining of class- and place-based identity and perceived deprivation in itself suggests attraction to many Tea Party messages. Third, writing off rural consciousness as just about race prevents us from confronting the complexity and intractability of the racism that did emerge in these conversations.

Resources

The third prominent dimension of the rural consciousness I observed was an understanding of the distribution of resources such as jobs, wealth, and public expenditures in rural vs. urban terms. Seventeen of the 24 nonmetro groups perceived that their communities did not receive their fair share of resources, and also believed metro residents misunderstood this inequality. They felt that people in the urban areas downstate believed that those "Up North" lived leisurely lives in idyllic recreation areas. They said that such perceptions obscured the "fact" that economic resources were concentrated in the cities. They perceived that urban areas had less unemployment and the best jobs. They regularly complained that their tax dollars were "sucked in" by Madison and spent on that city or Milwaukee, never to be seen again.

These perceptions are only partially supported empirically. In Wisconsin, rural counties do receive fewer public dollars than urban counties.[11] However, when analyzed on a per capita basis, rural residents do not receive fewer federal tax dollars than urban residents, and actually receive more state tax dollars.[12] Also, when we move to the municipal level and look at the allocation of resources by county governments in this state, rural residents appear to be getting more than their fair share of resources (McGee 2002). With regard to taxation, rural residents do pay more state and local taxes on a per capita basis.[13] Regarding income, average household incomes are higher in urban areas in this state, but there is only slightly more poverty and unemployment in the rural areas.[14]

Although the empirical evidence does not consistently support the view that rural residents suffer from economic distributive injustice in Wisconsin, the rural residents I observed often assumed otherwise. They perceived that the rural vs. urban distinction was *the* main way to characterize the distribution of taxation, wealth, and the cost of goods and services in the state. In the breakfast group of women in a rural tourist town, people complained that their utility and public service bills were much greater than in the urban areas of the state. One woman said,

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

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

These comments display the ways people used their rural consciousness to understand the aggregate distribution of wealth. Rural residents also used this consciousness to understand the individual-level distribution of wealth, claiming that all the wealthy people live in urban areas (cf. Bell 1992, 78). For example, in the diner group just mentioned, a man remarked, "Everybody in [the] northern [part of the state] makes money off of tourists . . . [the tourists] bring some of that fresh money up." On a different visit to the same group, a different man said simply, "When you get down in the city, people are making more money." A woman in a northwest rural town said, "Just remember that up here many people have two and three part time jobs to survive," implying that people in other areas of the state do not need to work multiple jobs.

[11] The analyses supporting this paragraph were conducted by county, as correlations between percentage rural (according to the 2000 U.S. Census) and the variable of interest. Because this is census, not sample, data, I do not report significance levels. Regarding whether rural counties receive fewer public dollars than urban counties, the 2002 Census of Governments shows a negative correlation between ruralness and total federal allocations at $r = -0.37$ and between ruralness and total state allocations at $r = -0.55$.

[12] The correlation between percentage rural and federal dollars per capita was $r = 0.05$; between percentage rural and state dollars per capita $r = 0.31$. Also, an analysis of federal dollars allocated through the 2009 stimulus legislation, as indicated by Propublica.com, a public interest investigative journalism Web site (http://projects.propublica.org/recovery), showed only a slight relationship on a per capita basis with ruralness ($r = 0.17$), although rural counties receive less in the aggregate ($r = -0.55$).

[13] Based on the 2009 Wisconsin Department of Revenue Report on Revenues and Expenditures, in the aggregate rural counties pay less local ($r = -0.64$), state ($r = -0.55$), and federal ($r = -0.38$) tax than urban counties, respectively, but per capita, people in more rural counties do pay more local ($r = 0.62$) and state tax ($r = 0.47$), but slightly less federal tax ($r = -0.19$).

[14] The county-level relationship between percentage rural and average household income is $r = -0.64$; percentage rural and percentage below federal poverty line is $r = 0.01$; percentage rural and percentage unemployed is $r = 0.09$.

When residents of rural tourist areas complained about the mistaken impression that they live leisurely lives, they would explain that it was impossible for them to enjoy the good weather months because they were too busy working multiple jobs at that time of year. In addition, they said they were too poor to live a tourist lifestyle. Tourism jobs are seasonal, low-paying, and insecure, they said, necessitating hard work, not leisure.

The rural perception of being on the short end of economic inequality was often expressed as statements of systematic injustice. Ten of the 24 nonmetro groups assumed that people in the metro areas are taxed at much lower rates than rural residents. Another common perception was that urbanites had driven up property values in their communities by purchasing expensive vacation homes. Some claimed these increases had driven locals out of their own communities. They described these rising property values, driven by urbanites, as a threat to their personal and community identities (cf. Bell 1992, 76). For example, on the first morning that I met with the group of women in the rural northwest tourist town, one member showed me a list she had composed of 60 people who had been forced out of their homes by urbanites buying expensive vacation homes. "The old time families have left or are leaving," she said. "The character of the town is changing and it is just too bad."

Rural Consciousness in Contrast to Urban and Suburban Conversations

To further clarify the nature of this rural consciousness and explain how it structured political understanding, I contrast conversations in rural groups with those occurring in urban and suburban areas. Many urban and suburban people mentioned place when describing themselves and their views to me. However, it was only among rural residents that I observed the use of perspectives that equated where one lived with the distribution of power, values, and resources in society. For example, a group of African-Americans in Milwaukee that met in the basement of their church after Sunday services referred to their ZIP code while arguing that city officials give them little power in city decision making. Suburban Milwaukee groups pointed to the city as attracting an unfair share of resources. However, when these metro-area residents described unjust allocations of resources or power, they did not refer to place. Instead, they referred to race, political ideology, or citizenship status.

To illustrate the particular way rural groups used their place consciousness, I first contrast discussions about health care within a northern rural group with those within a suburban Milwaukee group. Both groups are comprised of self-proclaimed conservatives, and both are comprised of retired and current small business owners, and also retired public school teachers. The northern group also includes one current state Department of Natural Resources employee. Both meet every weekday morning. The rural group is the group that meets in the town hall, and the suburban group meets in a local diner for breakfast.

Both groups complained that people in government do not listen to their concerns, described themselves as hard-working Americans, and believed that taxpayers too often cover the cost of social welfare benefits for lazy, undeserving people. The suburban Milwaukee group argued that the main problem with health care is that we already have national health care in the United States: We pay for the entire cost of emergency room visits for illegal aliens and lazy "welfare immigrants" from Chicago. They complained that hard-working Americans like themselves die because they cannot afford better care.[15]

The rural group likewise said the health care system is broken. (It was the first community concern they mentioned when I first invited myself into their group in January 2008.) In contrast to the suburban group, however, they said that health care was a major concern in their community because rural economies were so downtrodden. They portrayed the inability to pay for health insurance as simply part of rural life. Also, they blamed the inability of their community to overcome economic challenges on urbanites' bad decisions. One man explained that "Another of the big concerns up here is that people have moved in here, and they've been here for two or three years, and then they start telling the people around here how the county should be running [laughter], and they don't know anything about it." Within minutes of my meeting them, the group members had introduced me to the perspective that rural residents face special problems: an economy in which jobs are scarce, and when available, only seasonal, low-paying, and without benefits. And they did so by contrasting themselves against city people (those who have "moved in here") who assume they understand rural life but make decisions to the contrary.

In other words, both groups made references to place in their conversations about health care. However, members of the rural group talked as though they are *of* a particular type of place and that affiliation is synonymous with their relative position in society. That basic identification conveyed their perception of inequality, power, and values and their sense of right and wrong. People in both groups considered themselves hard-working Americans. But the rural group saw themselves as a particular subgroup of hard-working Americans: rural folks, who truly knew what it was to live in difficult circumstances.

Another illustration of the way consciousness as a rural resident structured understanding comes from conversations that took place several months after Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker took office in January 2011 and gained national attention for his budget proposals. These proposals, issued in early 2011, eliminated most collective bargaining rights for most public employees, and required public employees to substantially increase their contributions to health care

[15] I visited with this group four times in January and February of 2009, before the peak of the health care reform battle, in the summer and fall of 2009.

and pension benefits. Hundreds of thousands of people demonstrated at the state capitol in protest over a period of several months. I contrast the reactions to these events among two blue-collar groups, many members of which said they vote Democratic, but often expressed moderate or conservative views. Both are located in predominantly Democratic areas of the state. One meets every morning at a diner in Madison, and the other is the one that meets every morning in a gas station in a rural northern town. Both groups are composed of current or retired laborers; many in the Madison group are former union members. Most of the members of the rural group are currently working in the logging industry, as owners of small logging businesses. One of the members of that group is a current local elected official (a Democrat).

During my visits prior to 2011, members of both groups had complained that state employees have exorbitant health care and pension benefits, are inefficient, and do not work very hard. However, in 2011, the Madison group talked about the protests and budget issues with reference to their individual status as hard workers, whereas the rural group discussed the protests and budget through the lens of rural people governed by arrogant urbanites.

On a February 2008 morning visit to the Madison group, I asked what the important concerns were in their community. Immediately, their resentment toward public employee benefits was clear. One man turned to me and asked, "How about wages for people? Ya educated people get all the money. . . . I worked, we worked in the trades, we don't get anywhere that kind of money that they get, and all the benefits they get." Then another man, Harold, turned to me and said, "That includes you, too. They bleed the rest of us to death."

When I visited this group shortly after the protests erupted in Madison in February 2011, all of the members agreed state workers should pay more into their pensions and health benefits, but only Harold agreed with Walker's attempts to eliminate most collective bargaining for most public employees. "The teachers' union—they been in there—they were in there like the cat at the bowl of milk. Then they turned it to cream. And then they turned it to *ice* cream. And finally it's *gonna melt*!" And then one of the pro-union members said:

> Stu: Oh no it's not only the teachers' union, it's all the unions—state employees.
>
> Harold: You name me one thing that they've given up in the past 45 years. It's nothing, nothing, nothing.
>
> Stu: It's not a matter of what they are giving up. It's taking away collective bargaining.
>
> Harold: I'm sick of collective bargaining. And I'm a taxpayer. And you are too! And you sit here bellyaching about paying taxes and you don't want to. . . .
>
> Stu: No no no no!
>
> ["Time outs!" from some members. KCW: "I don't mean to start a fight here."]
>
> Harold: Let me tell you something. There is nobody that had a rougher childhood and place to stay than I did.
>
> Stu: I'm not—
>
> Harold: Now wait a second [wagging his finger]. I used to work and swing a 16-pound maul. I built the first pier in front of The Edgewater [a lakeside hotel in town], see, and I was about 12, 13 years old and swinging a 16 pound sledge from the minute I got out of school until the sun went down . . . and I got a quarter a week *if* the guy got paid by the sorority house/fraternity house [behind which he also built piers] . . . I used to have to catch 100 fish before breakfast if the whole family was going to eat that day. Clean 'em and skin 'em and sell them for a quarter a dozen or 2 cents a piece. *So I know what it is to be on the bottom.* And I would do it all over again. But the people at the top, they are just milking us dry on taxes. That's what it is. And 90% of 'em, up in that state office building or wherever the hell they are working, if they lost the job they got, they would lay down in the gutter outside here and die, since they don't know how to do anything else. There ain't very many of 'em that sweat. . . . I still know how to work. I'm 82 years old and I'm driving a semi!

Harold's notions of deservingness centered on his personal identity as someone who has labored extremely hard his entire life. The members of this group in general interpreted the merits of Walker's budget proposals by considering whether or not public employees worked hard and were therefore deserving of taxpayer support (Soss and Schram 2007). This contrasts with the group of loggers who used their place consciousness, not personal identity, to talk about deservingness.

When I first visited the group of loggers, in June 2007, I asked them whether they thought they paid their fair share in taxes. Their perception that government is wasteful and government workers are lazy was quickly evident as they talked about the state government wasting money on road projects. That part of the conversation ended this way:

> Jim: Too many studies.
>
> Fred: Not enough work.
>
> Jim: Too much bureaucracy in the system.
>
> Fred: They do waste a lot of money on surveying roads.
>
> Sam: All those state employees we look at 'em and we don't think they do much.
>
> Later in my visit, I asked the group about hard work:
>
> KCW: Sometimes people say—survey researchers ask about different occupations and they ask people which one they think works the hardest. Tell me what you think—if you compare a professor, a public school teacher, a waitress, a farmer, and a construction worker, which ones do you think work the hardest?
>
> Sam: The last three.
>
> Steve: Yeah.
>
> Sam: And for no benefits.
>
> KCW: Yeah? How about those first two—like—

> Sam: I think a school teacher—I know it can be hard. But they got great benefits. Tremendous benefits. And if you've been there for 15, 20 years, you're making 50 grand a year. There's nobody in town other than them making 50 grand a year. The guys in the [local] mill make 20 thousand.

During this and other visits, they explained that rural communities like their own faced especially difficult economic circumstances. They said that unlike the metro areas, their community's economy was not in a temporary downturn or recession, but rather was enduring a long, slow death. During my first visit to their group in June 2007, they explained:

> Louis: [It's a great place to live] if you like poverty.
>
> Frank: Yeah, it *is* poverty [describing their town]. [The group chuckles.] There ain't no businesses going in up here.
>
> KCW: Yeah, a lot of folks leaving?
>
> Louis: No, most of us can't afford to leave.
>
> Frank: Yeah.
>
> Charlie: Well I stayed here all my life, I never made enough money to leave.
>
> KCW: Gosh.
>
> Frank: No industry up here.
>
> Jim: Only thing we have up here is lumbering, trees, or logs or what have you. Every one of us here—
>
> Fred: We're all a bunch of sawdust heads.

In April 2008, when I asked them what they thought about the presidential race, they said the outcome did not matter to people so far removed from the urban centers. Steve put it this way: "I can't see the difference it's gonna make up here anyway. We've been in a recession up here for 30 years, 40 years. We don't know any different. People talk about recession, you oughta come up here."

This consciousness of themselves as people perpetually in economic hard times characterized their conversations long before Walker became governor, and it structured the way they talked about state politics once he was in office. When I revisited this group in May 2011, several months after the protests, just a few men were present, all self-proclaimed Walker supporters.[16] Two of them had recently attended a nearby Republican fundraiser at which Walker spoke. I asked them why they leaned Republican even though the surrounding area tended to vote Democratic, and they said that they were both small business owners, and their economic views better aligned with the Republicans.

I asked Ron why the prevailing economic divide is public workers versus private workers, rather than the people versus big business. He responded through the lens of his rural consciousness. He said big business produces things beneficial to society, whereas state agencies do not benefit society. They just meddle in people's lives, especially the lives of people they know nothing about—rural people.

> Ron: The Koch brothers [major funders of Walker and other conservative candidates nationwide], they're private individuals, private businesses. OK? The only ones that are paying, they're charging their customers like you or I whatever you're using. They're dumping all that expense onto their customers, the consumer. And the, and the, and the whole ball of wax, the consumer is paying, one way or the other. But, like, Koch brothers or whatever they're into, they are creating jobs that are producing something that are beneficial, like, whatever they're, like electricity or whatever, you know? So you—just tell me, how can I put this politely?
>
> KCW: Oh you don't have to!
>
> Ron: No, no, I'm just saying—
>
> KCW: You don't have to put it politely.
>
> Ron: How can you, I mean state employees, I mean you've got lots of, lots of divisions in the state that are just, just take like the DNR, ok? You've got the DNR with all this environmental bullshit, we got a job, 1700 good paying jobs if this mine starts up [referring to a controversy over a proposed nearby iron ore mine that would allegedly have major environmental impacts yet provide an estimated 800 jobs for 15 years.] They're all fighting it. . . . Because of the water pollution and the air pollution and everything else. But it's, the chances of [pollution] happening are so slim that it's, you know, because they're gonna be so dictated to, what they can do and what they can't, but [the politicians and state workers] are not worried about the 7 or 800 jobs, they already got their jobs with their benefits and everything else.

Later in the conversation, another logger arrived just as I was about to leave. I explained that I hoped to be back within the year, and he mentioned the mine issue (unaware that others in the group had talked about it earlier).

> Luke: Come back if they shoot down this mining. Then we'll really be mad.
>
> Ron: Well, the thing is, if they do it the way it's set up right now it would take 10 years to get all the permits and. . . . We need jobs now, not 10 years from now.
>
> Luke: Well in 10 years, this probably won't be here probably [motions to the town outside.]
>
> Ron: Yeah we won't be here in 10. You know, I mean we need 'em now. And the local people are, truthfully, 90, probably 98 percent of the local people are for this mining, you know, but you got these small groups that, you know, every day you look in the paper there's somebody writing articles against it, you know. . . . We need good paying jobs. Simple as that. . . . We can't afford to lose them up here. People down south have good, basically have some good advantages, getting some good paying jobs. . . . They have no clue, other people don't have no clue what's going on up here.
>
> Luke: No.

[16] When I first arrived, there were three men present, but over the course of my hour-long visit, attendance ebbed and flowed between one and four people.

Ron: Down in the cities, they don't even know their neighbors most of 'em.

KCW: Well yeah, I just meant—

Luke: What I, what I get a kick out of is now, with this going on, is now it's garnering like national attention and everybody from out of the area rushes up here and says how great and wonderful it is and how much they love it up here. They probably never been here before in their life. But they want to save it. Well where that mine is gonna go is where my deer stand is. . . . But, for the general good of my grandchildren, and the other children and the people that live in this area who've been struggling to get by their whole life: Hey, put the mine in.

Ron: Yeah.

Luke: Let's get some, let's get some life in this area.

Ron: Yeah.

Luke: Let's re-, let's rejuvenate our future.

Ron: Our lights are just about shot.

Luke: Yeah. . . . They all have their big jobs and their big fancy cars.

Ron: Yeah.

Luke: And their lifestyle and they come up here and tell us how to live.

Ron: Yeah, yeah.

Like Harold in the Madison group, these men have been "struggling to get by their whole life." But in contrast to Harold, their economic circumstances are inseparable from their identification as people of a certain type of place. Harold's attitudes about benefits to public workers are a function of his individual experience, but for the men in this rural group, they are a function of their rural consciousness. That is, because this rural consciousness is a lens through which they view the world as rural residents/people of relatively lower income/ people of less power, they screen out the possibility that public workers are people like themselves. They view those workers as outgroup members, as wealthier people with different values and interests that are inconsistent with their own.

In this and other groups, is it the case that my presence as an outsider and urbanite in the rural groups made people use the lens of rural consciousness? In rural areas, my presence likely heightened the salience of the outgroup of urbanites of which I was a part (Turner et al. 1994). However, rural consciousness was not an artifact of my presence. First, the contrast with the urban and suburban groups underscores that rural consciousness was not just a place identity. It contained perceptions of the distribution of power, values, and resources that could not have been constructed suddenly in my presence. Second, the readiness with which rural consciousness arose in conversations suggests the people I spent time with used it frequently even before I met them. Third, rural consciousness was so fundamental to the manner in which rural residents made sense of public affairs, that when I asked about it directly (such as asking whether they perceived that rural residents did not get their fair share of resources), people were often astonished that I found it necessary to ask (Soss 2006, 319).

CONCLUSION

This study contributes to the preoccupation with why people vote against their interests by implementing an ethnographic approach to the study of public opinion. It draws attention to an important form of group consciousness, rural consciousness. That is, studying conversations about public affairs among 37 groups of people that meet of their own accord across 27 communities in Wisconsin reveals the role that class- and place-based social identities combined with perceptions of distributive justice play in the construction of political meaning. The study explains the nature of rural consciousness among particular people in Wisconsin, and how it works to frame their understanding of politics.

The reader may wonder whether rural consciousness is just epiphenomenal— a byproduct of feelings of distrust, alienation, and lack of efficacy, or simply a way for people to rationalize those sentiments. The foregoing analyses instead show that rural consciousness is more accurately understood as an explanation for these orientations to government. Treating orientations to government as more central to political understanding than group consciousness assumes that politics is more central to most people than their social identities. The theories of psychological understanding considered earlier, as well as the conversations investigated in this study, suggest otherwise.

What does this examination of rural consciousness do for our explanations of political understanding and for future positivist analyses? First, it suggests hypotheses. Beyond the questions of generalizability (e.g., Does this rural consciousness show up in other states? Does group consciousness matter for rural Americans?), it suggests the use of different hypotheses in researching the gap between interests and votes. In the conversations of this study, it is not the case that people express a reluctance to tax the rich because they believe they too may be rich someday. Indeed, many of the rural residents in this study perceive that they and their communities are stuck in endless cycles of poverty. Instead, their reluctance to tax the rich is rooted in a complex narrative in which government action is by definition an injustice to themselves, and taxation only results in rewarding the antithesis of good Americans' work ethic. We also do not see people focusing on social issues such as abortion. In fact, in the 82 conversations observed over the four years of this study, no one ever mentioned abortion.[17]

Thus, this analysis suggests that in future positivist approaches we hypothesize that preferences for small government are a function not just of policy type,

[17] Surely at least some of the people I spent time with felt intensely about abortion, but perhaps guarded their views on the assumption that I was pro-choice. Nevertheless, the lack of mention of this topic is striking.

whether or not a respondent is a recipient, and respondent attitudes toward the target population, but also of the ways people intertwine their perceptions of political elite-induced deprivation with their class- and place-based identities. One measurement implication is that our surveys should include items that tap respondents' perceptions of where resources are being allocated, as well as to whom, and their perceptions of the fairness of this allocation.

This study also suggests hypotheses related to research on social class identity, a topic that may gain importance in the current context of increasing income inequality. Is class identity more generally a function of community identity? Perhaps we should measure social class not just via items asking people to place themselves in a social class category, but also with measures of people's perceptions of their communities' standing relative to other places.

This study likewise suggests hypotheses with respect to orientations to government such as trust and efficacy. To what extent are these attitudes a function of perceptions of government responsiveness to people in one's geographic community?

Recognizing the way particular people melded their class and place identities with notions of deprivation also has implications for future work on mobilization. Take the Tea Party, for example. Wisconsin is a swing state in which Tea Party appeals have had traction. A majority of Wisconsin voters sided with Barack Obama in 2008, but just two years later, the state elected a relatively unknown Tea Party candidate, Ron Johnson, over their three-term incumbent Democratic Senator, Russ Feingold. Public opinion polls do not suggest that the Tea Party is stronger in rural than urban areas of Wisconsin.[18] However, the rural consciousness observed here may help explain why Tea Party candidates across the country have had success in rural areas.[19] The opposition to government we see in these conversations is intertwined with perceptions of deservingness (Williamson, Skocpol, and Coggin 2011) and attachment to place, resulting in geographic areas that are ripe for mobilization.

This study also opens up important possibilities for positivist work because it highlights the importance of the category of rurality for some individuals' interpretations of politics. It continues to be a matter of debate whether urban/rural distinctions matter for political behavior. Decades ago, scholars presumed that differences between urban and rural life underlie much of the structure of society (Tönnies 1957) and readily recognized rural/urban divides in political behavior (Key 1949; Lipset 1981). But this presumption gave way to arguments that globalization, the advance of mass media, and reapportionment of U.S. Congressional districts were leading to the disappearance of a rural/urban cleavage (e.g., Knoke and Henry 1977). Now, it is conventional in contemporary urban studies scholarship to regard the distinction as meaningless. Rural communities are conceptualized not as a distinct type, but just as less urban than cities (Parker 2004; see also Creed and Ching 1997).

Some scholars have attempted to remind political scientists that the urban vs. rural distinction is undeniably important for politics (Gimpel and Karnes 2006; Gimpel and Schuknecht 2003). Even though the United States is increasingly urban, most of the area represented in U.S. legislative bodies is rural (80% of U.S. land is rural).[20] Nevertheless, opinion scholarship has not examined how *identification* as rural matters for public opinion. When students of politics have paid attention to rural/urban divides, they typically have done so by paying attention to whether location affects votes; that is, by examining the size and significance of a coefficient on a variable representing location in a multivariate model. This study suggests that rural identity deserves attention as well.

Another contribution of this study is in illuminating puzzles uncovered in positivist work. Take, for example, the link between geography and partisanship. Gelman (2008) points out that because rural America increasingly leans Republican (Gimpel and Karnes 2006, 467), we erroneously infer that the poor are voting for the Republican Party. Within counties, the poor still side with the Democrats. However, within states, poorer counties lean Republican. This study offers one possible explanation. If the perspectives observed in these rural Wisconsin communities are indicative of a wider range of rural places, it may be that it is the perceptions of power and cultural differences that are interwoven with rural identity that lean a rural county as a whole toward the Republican Party. In other words, the correlation between rural county residence and support for the Republican Party may not be about income but instead about rural consciousness.

The ethnographic approach used here also complements positivist approaches by providing unique supporting evidence of contemporary claims. Take, for example, the question of mass polarization. As Gelman (2008) notes, there is little evidence that the public's issue positions have diverged over time. Instead, many people are moderate compared to increasingly extreme party elites and are thus "stranded in the center and disillusioned about politics" (136). The conversations in this study support this. The most important political identification I observed was not partisanship. All of the groups, even the ones that claimed a party identification, eventually asserted that no party or politician represents their concerns. The main orientation to government was a sense that people are ignored by the political system. This study has drawn our attention to the fact that there are other perspectives than partisanship that guide public opinion, particularly in a country in

[18] Badger Poll June 17-July 10, 2001. Studies of Tea Party activism question whether Tea Party support is particularly strong in rural areas nationwide (Cho, Gimpel, and Shaw 2012).

[19] Of the 110 Tea Party-endorsed candidates who won U.S. House seats in 2010, their districts are 29.61% rural, whereas among the non-Tea Party candidates who won, just 18.11% of their districts were rural. (Compiled from data from Census 2010 data and http://projects.washingtonpost.com/congress/112/house/1/votes/690/.)

[20] http://www.ers.usda.gov/Briefing/Population.

which one in two U.S. adults does not engage in the simplest expression of partisanship, voting in national elections.

In general, this study argues for more attention within the study of public opinion to what people have rather than what they lack, and a welcoming of methods that enable this. We need to do more listening in the study of public opinion. We should pay attention to the social categories that people find meaningful, as opposed to the categories we presuppose are important. Also, we need to listen to the ways people intertwine their social identities with perceptions of distributive justice and how they use these perspectives to interpret public affairs. Perceptions of the relative position of self and others are not a given—they are created by people through actions both formal (e.g., policy) and informal (e.g., conversation) (Abdelal et al. 2006). This is even the case with something as seemingly concrete as geography (Agnew 1987; Johnston 1991; Low and Altman 1992, introduction, 5).

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