

The Politics of Resentment

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

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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?⁶ 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, Wisconsinites 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 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. 1981). 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 McCarthyites (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 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[ming] 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 bounty 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?