A GEOGRAPHY OF POWER:

RURAL PERSPECTIVES OF POLITICAL INEQUALITY

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Abstract: The globalization, advanced media technology and increased mobility of modern life has not erased the importance of place for politics. How does place matter for the way people make sense of political affairs? This study examines the use of place, particularly the rural vs. urban divide, among rural residents. It does so through a conception of public opinion as perceptions that are formulated in the midst of interpersonal interaction. It uses observation of multiple conversations among 36 groups in 27 communities sampled across a Midwestern state. The analyses reveal that rural residents imbue the urban/rural divide with perceptions of who has decision-making power, who has values consistent with their own, and who has resources. The anti-urban perspectives the paper reveals are not simply reducible to racism or partisanship. The importance of the rural/urban lens for rural residents suggests that place is a powerful identity on which political mobilization can occur.

When people attempt to make sense of the political world, what do they draw upon to do so? They use considerations (Zaller 1992) or opinion ingredients (Kinder 1998), such as partisanship (Campbell et al. 1960), values and principles (Feldman and Zaller 1992), and self-interest (Chong et al. 2001). They are guided by their predispositions (Zaller 1992), the frames provided by elite rhetoric (Chong and Druckman 2007), and informal talk in their social networks (Huckfeldt and Sprague 1995; Walsh 2004). In addition, their social identities and their categorizations of people into us and them guide whom they listen to and what considerations they bring to bear when understanding politics (Campbell et al. 1960, chaps 12 and 13; Conover 1988).

Our knowledge of these inputs to public opinion has been gained largely through analyzing *evaluation*, in other words, attempting to predict the political choices people make. We know much less about *understanding*, or the process by which people arrive at these choices.

When we think about the vast array of political information available in the contemporary media context, the job of the ordinary citizen seems daunting indeed. How do they interpret politics in such an overwhelming world? Perhaps they draw inwards, relying upon tools for understanding that are close to home. However, globalization and modern technology lead scholars to expect the opposite. We give little attention to the ways in which people make use of one of the most local tools of understanding of all: place (Agnew 1987). Social science often assumes that distinctions between places are fading and becoming less relevant to social life (Knoke and Henry 1977). But modern life has not erased the importance of place. It may have increased the need for people to draw boundaries, more crisply define their geographic community (Cohen 1985; Bell 1992), and perform those

elements of their identity such as speech patterns that run against the grain of globalization (Purnell et. al. 2005). As Agnew eloquently argues,

> But it is still in places that lives are lived, economic and symbolic interests are defined, information from local and extra-local sources is interpreted and takes on meaning, and political discussions are carried on. (1987, 2-3)

People make sense of the world as people in particular places, even when the information they are trying to interpret is from outside their local community. People make physical spaces meaningful as they imbue them with emotion and memories (Low and Altman 1992). The places that people identify with represent the type of people that they are (and are not). Scholars commonly focus on race, gender, social class and partisanship as the social identities that matter for politics. However, place identity is a tool for understanding that people commonly use to make sense of many aspects of life (Boroditsky 2000; Soja and Hooper 1993; Creed and Ching 1997); therefore, we should expect this tool matters for political understanding as well.

In particular, we should expect place to matter for political understanding because representation is allocated by geography in the United States. Government resources are allocated largely according to these districts. Therefore, individuals' perceptions of which places get which resources, and which places have power are likely integral parts of the way they think about the political world. I call these perceptions individuals' geographies of power.

Second, even though we are in an era of globalization, U.S. intergovernmental relationships are in an age of devolution, suggesting a renewed attention to specific, local places. Third, in the economically tumultuous time of the early 21st century, attachments to place are likely to be especially salient for the public (Low and Altman 1992, 6).

Another reason to pay attention to individuals' geographies of power is change within the field of political science itself. The blossoming of research using geographic information systems technology has meant a surge in attention to place. Public opinion scholarship has shown that it is individuals' perceptions—not objective facts—that matter for political attitudes (Kinder and Kiewiet 1981; Erbring et al. 1980). Thus, as political science strives to bring in geography, behavior scholars can contribute by understanding how people interpret their geographic community's relationship to power (Wong 2010).

This study hones in on the use of a particular geography of power—perceptions of rural vs. urban—among people in rural communities. American politics has long been characterized by regional conflicts, but the main regional conflicts in the contemporary period are "within states, rather than across them" (Gimpel and Schuknecht 2003, 17), and the urban vs. rural gulf remains an important and widening conflict (Gimpel and Schuknecht 2003, esp. 385). Metro and nonmetro areas are in conflict over a variety of policy areas including transportation, poverty, and gun rights, suggesting the divide is salient for the public. Nevertheless, we have little understanding of what drives this divide. This study probes how people use the urban vs. rural distinction for understanding by focusing on rural residents since rural residents are a minority (17% of the population).[1] As such, their comments are especially likely to enable an investigation of the use of place in political understanding (Wong and Cho 2005; Creed and Ching 1997, 4). Also, rural residents are significant politically. Most of the area represented in U.S. legislative bodies is rural (80% of the land in the United States is rural).[2]

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

[2] See previous footnote.

One might ask, reflecting on historical electoral maps (e.g., 1896, 1948), whether it is necessary to point out that perceptions of rural vs. urban are important for political understanding. However, it is a matter of debate whether the urban-rural distinction matters for political behavior. Decades ago, scholars presumed that differences in 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 the presumption of rural/urban divides 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 as just less urban than cities (Parker 2004; see also Creed and Ching 1997).

However, recent electoral maps and analysis of divisions within states make the urban vs. rural distinction undeniably important for politics (Gimpel and Karnes 2006; Gimpel and Schuknecht 2003). Nevertheless opinion scholarship has not examined the *how* this divide matters for political understanding. 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, through examining the size and significance of a coefficient on a variable representing location in a multivariate model.

When work has examined *how* or *why* location matters, it has not in fact examined how perceptions of rural vs. urban matter for political understanding. First, previous work has looked for composition effects, or the way that other social categories exert effects on behavior (Agnew 1987, ix; Keith and Pile 1993, 2; Freudenburg 1991). For example, we expect that rural residents are more likely to be non-Hispanic whites than urban residents,

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and thus expect rural residents to express different preferences. Also, we expect urban areas are more politically diverse, inviting greater partisan competition (Webster 1987). Second, scholars have expected that different demographic compositions across geographic areas have resulted in differences in social structure and culture (Wirth 1938; Knoke and Henry 1977) and thus in socialization (Agnew 1987; Lipset 1981, 263-7). For example, Campbell et al. 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 (1960, 425-430). Third, scholars have also conceptualized rural/urban differences as labels for underlying class conflict (Key 1949, Black and Black 1987). Finally, another argument has been that the rural/urban divide is a conflict that arises from competition over material resources (Bowen et al. 2006).

This paper makes a different contribution. It shows show how rural residents use the rural vs. urban divide itself as a framework to 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 perceptions of rural vs. urban themselves structure understanding of class, resources, and power.

To investigate how perceptions of rural vs. urban structure political understanding, this study uses an ethnographic approach. The intent was to examine what tools people draw upon of their own accord to make sense of the political world, and how they do so in the course of everyday life while interacting with members of their social networks. I studied

public affairs conversations among people embedded in a broad array of communities across one Midwestern state,[3] in order to control for state-wide current affairs. Within this state, I sampled 27 communities that varied in political and economic characteristics. (I elaborate on the details of this sampling procedure below). Within each of those communities, I sought a group of people who met regularly of their own accord in a place that I could get access to, and asked permission to join their conversations.

These observations revealed the way in which rural identity and individuals' perceptions of the rural vs. urban divide structured their perceptions of the distribution of resources, the distribution of power, and the application of values to political topics. The people I studied commonly used the rural-urban divide as a lens to view themselves as powerless people, whose wealth, values, and authority was continually being usurped by the major urban centers in their state.

Studying public opinion via this ethnographic method is admittedly unusual in the field of American politics. The intent here is not to make claims about what all people in the United States think, nor even what all rural residents of the United States or this particular state think. Instead, the generalization this study attempts is explanatory and conceptual. That is, this is not a study of the politics of one particular state. I use one state to study the role of place in political understanding. The focus is on a small set of communities in order to achieve the extensive listening necessary for the question at hand.

In addition, because these data were collected through observing conversations among people who regularly visit with one another, I am able to examine the way people offer up their opinions in the midst of the social settings of their everyday lives. In taking

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[3] The name of this state and all identifying information is suppressed for purposes of review.

this approach, I am conceptualizing public opinion as understandings that people create together. That is, even if the individual group members were to talk about the very same issues in different ways in different contexts or in one-on-one interviews with me, the opinions that they express in a given moment in the back of their local gas station is worthy of study in its own right. In classic understandings, public opinion is not the aggregation of the expressions of isolated individuals, but the product of groups of people competing with one another (Blumer 1948), and what is created as citizens and journalists share their impressions with others (Bryce 1913). The group members I observe here are typically opinion leaders and opinion crystallizers in their communities (as I explain below). This study assumes that what gets said in these groups are important manifestations of opinion in their own right.

UNDERSTANDING AS CATEGORIZATION AND SOCIAL IDENTIFICATION

When people try to understand the world, they process information as if they are asking, "What is this an instance of?" This is at root the act of categorization, and at times the act of social identification. We should expect place to be especially powerful for understanding because it serves both functions. First, categorization is a ubiquitous way in which people interpret the world around them (Medin and Cooley 1998; Chi, Feltovich and Glaser 1981; Hinsley, Hayes and Simon 1978). The basic cognitive act of regarding things as an instance of a certain type enables people to simplify the vast array of stimuli they encounter. When it comes to abstract concepts, especially those that people do not have physical experience with, we commonly categorize them as a type of metaphor (Lakoff and Johnson 1980). Thinking of objects, events, people or concepts as a certain type of thing or

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metaphor influences the considerations that come to mind as people think about the object, event, or person.

We should expect place to be powerful for understanding politics because spatial metaphors are powerful tools for understanding the world in general. For example, spatial metaphors influence the way people think about abstract concepts such as time (e.g., "the meeting has been moved up") (Boroditsky 2000). Spatial understandings underlay many abstract yet fundamental concepts of politics: ideology (left/right), and social class (upper, middle, lower) for example.

Place is also likely important for understanding politics because it serves as a social identity, another type of categorization that matters for understand. As people classify things, events, and other people, they also assess "What type of person am I?" It is this basic tendency to categorize self and others that has been called the work of social identity (Tajfel 1981) or self-categorization (Turner et al. 1987). Identities with social groups, whether friendship groups or society-wide 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., Tajfel et al. 1971; Brewer and Miller 1984; Sears and Kinder 1985; Tajfel and Turner 1986). This common way of making sense of the world is no less common in the task of making sense of politics. Decades of research have found that social group identities, or psychological attachments to groups in society, 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, 13; Conover 1984, 1988; Huddy 2003).

One of the reasons that social identification and social categorization have important implications for politics is that these perceptions matter for preferences over the distribution

of resources. When people identify with a particular social group, they are more likely to favor other members of that ingroup in the distribution of resources (i.e., the minimal group result, Tajfel et al. 1971). Identifying with a group does not necessarily entail derogating members of ourgroups (Brewer 1999). However, in the realm of public affairs, the distribution of resources is often a zero-sum game. Whom people perceive as deserving has consequences for who is treated as undeserving.

Place identity and the rural/urban ingroup/outgroup distinction are likely important for political understanding because these perceptions are important for understanding in general. One of the first questions we use to make sense of new acquaintances is, "Where are you from?" We craft our sense of ourselves and our sense of other people with reference to particular places (Moore 1998). The importance placed on candidates' biographies suggests we find this information useful for making sense of politicians, too.

Another reason geographic categorizations are important for politics stems from the fact that social identities are especially likely to affect political behavior when they are connected to identities about which groups have power and which groups do not (Miller et al. 1981).[4] Because power, is allocated according to geographic districts, we should expect place identity to be especially important for political understanding. With respect to rural identity in particular, 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 (Mellow 2005; Bell 1992).

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[4] By power, I mean the ability of A to get B to do something he/she would not otherwise do (Dahl 1961); control of the agenda (Bachrach and Baratz 1962); and also influence over individuals' perceptions of their situations and opportunities (Lukes 1974, Gaventa 1980).

Before proceeding, a few words on the definition of rural are in order, given its ambiguity. 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 community in ways that contradict analysts' classifications.[6] This study focused on residents' perceptions of their communities and their perceptions of how their community 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 on political understanding. Recall that the purpose of this study is not to generalize to a population in the statistical sense. Therefore, the question driving my case selection was not whether the state was more or less typical of all U.S. states. Instead, since the generalizable contributions of this study are explanatory and conceptual, I chose a state

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

[6] A statewide public opinion poll of the state in this study 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 [examples of metro areas given]. 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 just 58% of the time.

for this study 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 place identity in individuals' attempts to understand politics. Fortunately, the state in which I began the study has a very salient urban vs. rural divide, facilitating my attempts to examine how this lens structures understanding of politics. Whether this divide is unusually salient in this particular state compared to others is not the object of this study.

I chose the sites to study within this state by sampling particular communities using a stratified purposeful approach (Miles and Huberman 1994, 28). I categorized the counties in the state into 8 distinct regions, based on partisan leaning, median household income, population density, size of community, racial and ethnic heterogeneity, local industry, and agricultural background. I then purposively chose the city or population center in each region, and also 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 each of these communities, I asked university county extension offices and local newspaper editors for advice. I sought a group of people who met regularly and casually of their own accord in a gathering place to which I could gain access. The groups my informants suggested were typically informal groups that met in local restaurants, cafes or gas stations early on weekday mornings, or periodically in a local place of worship, or through a club such as a 4H group. [See Reviewer Appendix A 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 1 and 5 times between May 2007 and May 2010.[7] To protect the confidentiality of the people I studied, I use pseudonyms and do not identify the communities by name.

My visits took the following form. The first time I studied a group, I arrived at the location at the time an informant suggested the members would be meeting. Once I arrived, I greeted the members and asked for permission to sit with them. I explained that I was a public opinion researcher from the state's flagship university, traveling around the state to get a sense of the issues people were concerned with and their ideas for ways in which the university could better serve the people of the state. I asked for their permission to record our conversation, and passed out "small tokens of my appreciation" for their time— incentives, such as football schedules, donated from the university alumni association. I then asked, "What are the big concerns for people in this community?" and continued with other questions on my protocol [see Reviewer Appendix B], adjusting the order and number of questions asked when necessary.[8] All of the conversations were recorded and transcribed, except for two groups, which permitted me to take handwritten notes instead.

My strategy for finding groups to study meant that the people I spent time with were predominantly male, non-Hispanic white and of retirement age. Of the 36 groups I studied, 12 were composed of only men, 3 were exclusively female, and the rest were of mixed gender, but predominantly male. Six of the groups were composed solely of retirees, 5 of people currently employed or unemployed, and 4 of high schoolers. The rest were composed of a mix of retirees and currently employed people, though the majority of the members in

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

[8] The questions in Reviewer Appendix B were tailored to be relevant for the 4H groups.

these mixed groups were retirees. Each of the 36 groups was composed of people of a similar occupational and educational background, although almost all groups contained some variety in that respect (e.g., one group of loggers included a local public official and a real estate agent). My strategy resulted in a good deal of socioeconomic variation across groups, from people who were "one step from homelessness" to wealthy business owners. I categorize the groups in this study into lower-income and upper-income based on levels of income inferred from their stated occupations. (Asking group members directly about income in a pilot test not surprisingly insulted people and threatened my chances of maintaining access.)

Because this sample includes people who were spending time in groups of their own accord, they may be more attentive to current events, more social, and have larger social networks than the average person. Many of the groups contained local leaders either in politics or in their occupational community. In other words, many of these people were opinion leaders in their community (Lazarsfeld et al. 1944; Katz and Lazarsfeld 1955). Their perceptions and preferences may not be representative, but they are likely consequential for the way others in their community think about many public issues, including health care policy. This slice of opinion leaders varied across the municipalities I sampled, since I had chosen the communities to vary by key community characteristics. For example, although the groups often contained local business leaders, in some places these people were executives of multi-national corporations, in others, the owners of the businesses on Main Street.

The within-group homogeneity along racial, gender, and socioeconomic lines may have led me to perceive more unity in their identities and orientations toward government than might have been expressed had I interviewed each member of the group individually.

As noted above, this paper conceptualizes public opinion as something that people create together through interpersonal interaction. That is, I am intentionally not attempting to describe opinions that would be offered to pollsters by solitary individuals, but rather am focusing on the understandings that groups of people generate.

Of course, my presence altered these conversations. I intentionally steered the conversations, and the participants likely altered what they said somewhat because of my presence. When I sat in the restaurant, café, or other venue before asking the group members for permission to join them, I glimpsed what their talk was like when they were not aware I was observing them. The members of these groups appeared to swear less and talk about public affairs slightly 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. Since the purpose of this study is not to investigate 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, and whether and how they mentioned social class identity in these conversations. As my analyses alerted me to the common perception of distance from government, and the common use of the urban vs. rural lens, I reanalyzed the conversations asking, "What does distance look like and how does that vary across these groups?" and "When do people use the urban vs. rural lens

and which groups are using these identities to interpret issues?" I displayed my data in a matrix in which the rows represented a particular group, and the columns represented different characteristics of the group and the broader community, and the existence of various patterns.

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 used the visual displays to test whether the patterns were as pervasive as I had first concluded and whether they varied across type of group (Miles and Huberman 1994, chap. 10). For example, after the first round of investigations, it became clear that a key consideration in these discussions was geographic identity (i.e., rural vs. urban), and I adjusted the protocol to include questions about perceptions about the balance of power in the state across rural and urban areas, as well as additional questions about attitudes toward government in general. To further verify my conclusions, I considered how the conversations might have been affected by my presence, re-examined conversations that were not consistent with the patterns I identified, considered spurious relations, added additional groups to the study to investigate whether conversations among people of different demographic backgrounds exhibited patterns similar to the groups already in my study, and sent detailed reports of my results to the groups I had visited and gave them brief verbal reports on subsequent visits so that they could comment on the conclusions I was reaching (Miles and Huberman 1994, pages 262-277).

RESULTS

When the people I observed talked about the issues facing their communities, they often referred to the geography of the state. There are two main metropolitan centers in this

state, both located in the southern region. One of these urban centers is the main industrial area of the state, the other is home to the state capital and the state's flagship school in the state public university system. The rest of the state outside these urban centers is referred to as "outstate," and the northern tier of the state, largely a tourist area, is typically called "Up North."

It is with reference to this general map that the people I observed constructed a geography of power. They perceived a divide between the urban centers and outstate, and this cleavage served as a framework through which they understood inequalities of power, differences in values, and also inequalities in resources. In the following sections I address the way in which the rural vs. urban distinctions structured the way people in rural areas understood each of these elements of politics.

Power

The rural vs. urban lens structured rural residents' ideas about which geographic areas of the state had the ability to force other areas of the state to do something they otherwise would not (i.e., the classic definition of power, Dahl 1961). In addition, their classifications of places around the state as urban or not guided their perceptions of other, less public, faces of power, (Bachrach and Baratz 1963), such as who set the agenda of key institutions in the state, including state government, industry, and higher education. A common way this worked was for people in rural areas to claim that the major decisions in the state were made in the urban areas—primarily the state capital—and emanated outward. They complained that authority flowed out from the urban centers, never in reverse, and was exercised without regard for the concerns, values, or knowledge held by 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 around a coffee machine in the town hall. On two different visits, the members of this small group made it plain that they believed that the cities in the state held the vast majority of power. They complained that even state employees living in the rural areas of the state had little say in the regulations governing their community. One man, a former employee of the state Department of Natural Resources remarked that he did not have much control over the way in which policies were implemented. He said that things had changed such that now politicians ran government agencies, and had little interest in local needs. "Now the governor appoints all the big shots and they don't know. Before a guy had to work from the bottom all the way up and then become the head of the DNR. Now they just pick some guy off the street…. A buddy of the governor."

Complaints of powerlessness were not just anti-government or limited government assertions: these rural residents understood their distance from government through an urban vs. rural lens. That is, they perceived that public officials ignored the public, but they understood public officials as urban people, and the public as themselves, or rural people. For example, a group of retired and working women meeting for breakfast in a rural, far northern resort community claimed that both the state legislature and the flagship state university spent little time listening to the concerns of people in the northern half of the state.

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

absolutely excellent and well prepared students there that they – the attitude that the hick area of the state, was painful.

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

Theresa: Professors.

Author: 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 [the] northern [part of this state] feels a little far away from [the state capital] anyway. And we keep waving our hands and saying, "Yoo hoo, there's another half of a state up here! Up north is not [the main city in the central part of the state]!"

[Laughter and a chorus of "That's right!" follows.]

We might expect that who has a say in politics is understood in terms of haves and have-nots. But in these conversations, people used the metro/nonmetro divide to make sense of to whom policy makers listened, and also to whom candidates listened. Even "the haves" in nonmetro areas used this lens.[9] 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 the capital city 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 [this one] where politicians—none of the national ones come and see us—you know we only have [a few] electoral votes. I mean none

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[9] Please see [citation omitted] for a discussion of differences in orientations to authority between upper-income and lower-income individuals.

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of the politicians come to see us at all. We, I don't think we had a presidential candidate in [this city during the 2008 election].

One way to see how geography mattered for perceptions of whom public officials listened to is to notice how these nonmetro residents assumed that public officials held common negative stereotypes of rural residents, such as "country bumpkins," rednecks, and uneducated folks (Jarosz and Lawson 2002). Such conversations often contained claims that urbanites did not value rural residents' common-sense knowledge. For example, one member of the group of men who gathered for coffee in a northern community town hall told a story about researchers constructing a set of elaborate and expensive cribs for fish to spawn around in one of the lakes he regularly fishes on, far off of any highway.

> I went looking along and they had--there were bass spawning and there was a little peg in the ground with a little red flag with a number on it. I seen these all over the lake. Well they were there one day when I was fishing and I said, "What's with the red flags?" and [they] said, "Oh we're trying to determine if bass spawn in the same place every year." And I said, "Well if you'd have asked anybody who lives up here they could've tell ya 'yes' and just save yourself a whole bunch of trouble." [laughs] They don't want anything to do with ya. They think they're smarter than ya. Got that book learning.

In such conversations, urban vs. rural distinctions served as a spatial map with which people made sense of abstract conceptions such as authority, listening, and knowledge. Considerations of place meant that claims about what authority figures consider valuable knowledge did not stop at who had a formal degree and who did not. Instead, people understood the distribution of formal degrees in spatial, urban/rural terms: people assumed

that people with formal education were centered in cities, and people with common sense resided primarily in nonmetro areas.

One might find these results implausible: People living in nonmetro areas can not possibly be jealous of cities, given the crime, educational problems, and pollution commonly associated with metro areas. However, notice how rural residents' resentment of cities was not a perception that cities are idyllic places to live. In this respect, their urban resentment is akin to racial resentment (Kinder and Sanders 1996): when whites express racial resentment, they are resentful of the special treatment that they perceive society confers on people of color, but they do not themselves express a desire to become a person of color. Likewise, in none of the conversations I witnessed was this resentment toward the major urban centers of the state a desire to move to one of the cities.

Values and Lifestyles

The rural vs. urban divide was a central organizing structure for the way these rural residents understood politics because they imbued it with distinctiveness with respect to values and lifestyles, as well as with respect to the distinctions in decision-making power discussed above. They would at times openly contrast their values against those of city people. In a small hamlet in the northwestern part of the state, a group meeting in the basement of the local church described their community as very 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 folks like themselves. They perceived that they had to work harder than people in other parts of the state, and that people—especially professionals—in urban areas were lazy. When I asked them what the flagship state university does not do well, their response was

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that people in the two major cities have qualitatively different lifestyles than people in the rural parts of the state.

> Author: What do you think the [university] does not so well? When you think about [it] …
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> Martha: Represents our area. I mean we are like, we're strange to [that city]. They want us to do everything for [that city'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.
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> 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 [those two big cities], 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.

People living in a hamlet in the central part of the state similarly claimed that people in metro areas lived by different values and were ignorant of rural ways of life. In that community, I met with a group of retired public school teachers and administrators who meet every morning in the local service station. After I had turned my recorder off, a retired principal remarked that because laws governing public schools are made in the state capital city, they do not apply well to his community. He said that laws made in the state capital city, the most liberal area of the state, do not reflect what state residents in general want or need.

In this way, the urban/rural distinction was about more than who made the decisions that governed lives. It also guided a perception that the exercise of that power meant a threat to community values. This threat was most palpable in conversations about education. The

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group mentioned just above talked about a former Republican governor and the funding formula for public schools implemented under his administration one April morning in 2008:

> As far as schools, the whole transition from [that governor] forward was to take a… schools weren't handled uniformly, so tech schools versus private schools versus colleges and universities were all handled in different ways, and I know the political motivation of [him] when he did that, but it's really created a problem with funding formulas for schools, and we know that many areas in [the] northern and central [part of the state], 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 because many of them work in [larger cities] and… 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.

This comment displays the way references to place were not just incidental comments in conversations about policy, but instead provided a structure through which people understood values and orientations to government. Rural residents often conceptualized threats to rural life as cold, distant bureaucracies, located in cities. People regarded governments, WalMarts, and even headquarters of corporate farms all 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 anti-rural.

Hard work

One of the most important of these values was a respect for hard work. Consistently, people equated government and other large institutions (such as the state's flagship public university) with not only bureaucracy but with a lack of a work ethic. Many people believed the two major cities were places in which information and networking count more than effort. This belief was not restricted to Democrats or Republicans, nor just to rural residents. However, it was the rural residents who understood hard work in terms of place.

In more detail, many Republicans in general, regardless of type of place, linked ideas of hard work with opposition to social welfare programs. They would say that people do not work hard like they used to, or that certain people worked less than others and thus were less deserving of taxpayer money. For example, at a breakfast meeting in a diner in the central Wisconsin city, when I asked whether the group favored one of the presidential primary candidates, one man said:

> No, I don't like any of them. I'll take-- I'll take somebody that will let me keep some of my money rather than have to, have to pay for everybody's free lunch. And what happened to this world where we all started out in a world where we had to work our ass off to uh to get where we are. Nowadays nobody wants to work their ass off and they just want to have it handed to them. And I mean, that's-- that's the scary part.

Likewise, a suburban Milwaukee breakfast group of retired men and women, all Republicans, argued that they were not supportive of Democrats because they believed that "Democrats take hard working Americans' money away."

Rural Republicans, in contrast, would talk about the value of hard work by referring to rural life in general. They would claim that the demands of rural life required a devotion to hard work. At times, they would use this sentiment to explain why young people in their communities often chose to move to a city after high school. When I asked a group of Republican men in a northern tourist town about poverty in their area, they explained:

> Dean: There's lots of jobs, but everybody, the younger generation, they want twenty dollars an hour to rake leaves, you know? These retired people can't afford to pay some guy twenty dollars to come in. But everybody wants big money, and… the greed, everybody wants big money to come in and work….Instead of like us guys; we had to work hard all our lives.

> [laughter]

> Jack: I was cutting pulp with an axe and a sweep-saw when I was thirteen, fourteen years old.

> [Author]: No kidding?

> Jack: Put myself through college.

Democratic groups talked about hard work in a slightly different way: they saw effort as not necessarily enough to make ends meet. For example, a Democratic group in a rural, northern west logging town talked about how much people in their community work, and felt that people in general should work for the benefits they receive, a sentiment akin to that expressed 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:

> Author: 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

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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.

Author: 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.

Author: 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?

Stu: 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.

Author: So even working hard, that's not what counts for earning a higher income?

Stu: Well no—what are you going to do? We're in that industry...

Sam: You're really not rewarded a lot as far as …

Stu: No you're not.

Like the Republican rural groups, this Democratic group also understood the value of hard work through their place identity. They talked about their discomfort with the notion that hard work leads to success by referencing their industry—logging—a distinctively rural industry. In other words, people in many types of places brought in

notions of hard work to talk about social welfare policy, but rural residents talked about hard work in terms of place.

As explained above, we should expect place to be more salient for rural residents than urban residents because they are a numerical minority. However, the reasons likely extend beyond numbers. In United States society generally, as in urban studies scholarship, urban is the normative category, or the category against which we compare other places. Thus urban-ness becomes invisible in a way, just as whiteness is typically invisible when people consider race.

Recognizing the centrality of the spatial map for rural folks is important because doing so helps us see how partisanship matters, but is nevertheless insufficient for explaining the way these people are making sense of public affairs. Looking at the above conversations, we could say that whether people leaned Democratic or Republican explains how people related hard work and economic success. However, ignoring the role of place identity prevents us from understanding how people personally connect with the notion of hard work, and why people might feel so intensely about challenges to these understandings. The predisposition of partisanship goes a long way toward explaining which messages people attend to, and which they ignore (Zaller 1992), but partisanship is intertwined with other identities and lines of conflict that are more intimately connected to individuals' sense of the way the world ought to operate.

The conversations observed for this study suggest that partisanship only gets us so far in the realm of political understanding for yet another reason. Even when asked directly about the parties, each of the groups in this study eventually talked about how no party or politician represents the concerns of people like themselves. This was even the case in groups that openly identified with a party (Democrats and Republicans), contexts in which

we might expect people would be less likely to steer away from partisanship to avoid conflict (Mackuen 1990). Given that approximately 1 in 2 U.S. adults do not vote in even national elections, that is, do not display that partisanship is meaningful to their lives in this basic way, it is worthwhile to acknowledge frameworks other than partisanship that guide political understanding.

The reader may wonder that if the rural/urban framework is not subsumed by partisanship, then surely it is 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 the state chosen for this study makes it undeniable that when people refer to "those people in that city" this is often coded language for racial minorities. However, it is a vast oversimplification to regard the rural vs. urban structure of these conversations, across partisan leanings, as racism. When white outstaters complained of the laziness in the cities in the conversations I observed, 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. This assumption is simply belied by the striking level of racial segregation within metro areas across the United States. Second, assuming anti-urbanism is centrally about racism prevents us from recognizing the complex ways that place identity guides interpretations of politics. Third, writing off rural vs. urban frameworks as just about race prevents us from seeing the complexity of racism itself. Anti-urbanism was multi-layered in these conversations, rooted in values and allegiances such that

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people were willing to express these sentiments, even at the risk of sounds racist in front of a visitor from the university.

Resources

The rural residents I observed for this study readily understood resources such as jobs, wealth, and public expenditures in spatial terms. Many resented what they believed urban residents thought about their communities. They felt that people in the urban areas downstate believed that those "Up North" lived leisurely lives in idyllic recreation areas. For example, the group of people meeting in the church basement in the northern hamlet described it this way:

Martha: We were told many, many years ago that anything north of Highway XX is all recreational land.

[Groups says "yep" and "yes" in agreement.]

Mark: No! People that are retired and on welfare!

[Laughter]

And in a northern logging community, which was not far from that hamlet:

Erik: You get north of Highway YY and there's, we're in the end of the world.

Author: That's what a lot of people say, I mean…

Erik: Wha—that's the way it is, that's the way it's always been.

Cindy [cashier, joining in]: And then if you ever live south of there, they're glad it's like this up here.

Erik: Well yeah.

Author: Yeah.

Cindy: I lived down there for (all my life…) [She had explained that her husband

was from this northern community, and they had returned to live there together 6

years ago.]

Author: Yeah.

Erik: We like our poverty, we enjoy it. Right?

In these conversations, people intertwined geography with conceptions of the distribution of wealth (e.g., mentions of "welfare" and "poverty"). People in rural areas often claimed 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 the state capital and diverted to the other major metropolitan area in the state, never again to be seen.

These perceptions are only partially supported empirically. Rural counties do receive fewer public dollars than urban counties in this state, but on a per capita basis rural residents do not receive fewer federal tax allocations than urban residents, and actually receive more state tax dollars. 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 [citation omitted]. Regarding income, average household incomes are higher in urban areas in this state, but there is only a slightly more poverty and unemployment in the rural areas.[10]

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[10] The following analyses were conducted by county, as correlations between percent rural (according to the 2000 U.S. Census) and the variable of interest. I do not report significance levels here, since this is census data, not data from a sample. Using data on federal and state allocations from the 2002 Census of Governments, for total federal allocations: r=-.37. For

Although not necessarily consistent with this empirical evidence, the people I observed in rural communities often assumed the rural vs. urban distinction was the main way to characterize taxation, wealth, and the cost of goods and services. In the breakfast group of women in a rural tourist town, there were complaints that their utility and public service bills were much greater than in the urban parts of the state.

> Sally: The cost of the water and sewer here is outrageous compared to what they pay in [the state capital]. So here is [the] big rich [state capital], with all the good high-paying jobs, getting the cheapest water, and we have people up here who have 3 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 [the state capital] to help offset...

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total state allocations: $r=-.55$. However, on a per capita basis, the correlations between percent rural and public dollars were, federal: $r=.05$; and state: $r=.31$. 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 ($r=.17$), although rural counties receive less in the aggregate ($r=-.55$). With respect to tax dollars (2002 Census of Government figures), in the aggregate rural counties pay less than urban counties ($r=-.60$), but pay basically no more or less per capita. With respect to the county-level relationship between percent rural and percent below federal poverty line: $r=.01$. Regarding percent unemployed: $r=.09$. With respect to average household income: $r=-.64$.

Dorothy: I just moved from [a city in the central part of the state]. A quarter of water

in [that city] is 70 bucks...70 dollars every *three* months for [that] water. Up

here, which we constantly have been paying, every second month, the bill—

and sometimes we're not here—is 70 dollars every *second* month.

A man in a grocery store/gas station/gift shop/tackle shop/hardware store in a rural logging town 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 man in a morning dice game in a diner in a rural, west central town remarked:

Every time the state has a program, where do they, where do they implement it? [He

names the major cities in the state.] They give everything to [the largest city]. You

know all the programs in education they want to try a new program, where do they

put it? [He names that city.] Dead at the start. Why don't they put it out here where

we can do something with it? Dead at the start.

And 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 [cities south of where they live]…"

The comments mentioned above display the ways that the rural vs. urban lens was used to understand the aggregate distribution of wealth. People in rural areas also used this lens to understand the distribution of wealth on the individual level. That is, they claimed that all the wealthy people live in urban areas (cf. Bell 1992, 78). For example, in the diner

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group just mentioned, a man remarked, "Everybody in [the] northern [part of the state] makes money off of tourists...they 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." On the west side of the state, still in the northern region, a woman in a 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. Later in the conversation, it was clear she and others in the group perceived that wealthy tourists are from urban areas either downstate or in neighboring states.

In tourist areas, many people complained that urbanites mistakenly think they live leisurely lives. They remarked that they were too busy working multiple jobs during the tourist season to enjoy the good weather. In addition, they said they were too poor to live a tourist lifestyle. Tourism jobs are seasonal, low-paying and insecure, they said, making for less-than-ideal employment.

The rural groups' perceptions of being on the short end of economic inequality were often expressed as overt resentment toward urbanites. Many assumed that people in cities 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. Rural folks claimed that the result was that long-time community members could no longer afford to live there, and certainly could not achieve their dream of living on a local lake. They saw 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 northern-west tourist town, one member showed me a list she had comprised of 60 people who had been forced out of their homes by rising property taxes, driven up by urbanites' 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."

This resentment of urban residents and urban areas often manifested itself through jokes, perhaps because joking was a polite way to criticize the metro areas in my presence (an urbanite from downstate). One instance of such joking took place in a small logging community in the west central part of the state, in which I met with two groups of men on their way to work. One gathered at a gas station, and the other met in the back of a local restaurant to play "Ship, Captain, and Crew," a common dice game. On my third visit to the group, several members of the group asked me if I was going to a horse auction being held in town that day.

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

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

Author: Not sure where I'd keep him.

Henry: Hunh?

Author: I'm not sure where I'd keep him!

Henry: Keep him in [the state capital city, where I live]. That's where they keep all
the bullshit.

[Laughter]

Henry: Well basically all you gotta do is buy the front end of the horse, they got the
back end in [that city]!

As we talked, I won a few rounds of dice. As a guest to the game, I tried to joke to ease the tension.

Author: I come and ask for your thoughts and I take your money.

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

Author: And it all goes to [the state capital] anyway [joking along with them].

Howard: We expect nothing less from [that city]!

Richard: It won't cost any postage to get it down there now!

This overlap of geography and wealth was so commonly assumed that some people talked about social class itself in geographic terms. For example, one woman in the women's breakfast group in the northern tourist community said,

If you look at the *rural class* [emphasis added]. We've never had jobs here, it's not like this is part of the economy that there are no jobs, but I think one of our big concerns is the coming tourist season and the decrease in funding from the state for tourist-related activities, 'cause so many people here rely entirely on tourists coming so it's just a real uneasy feeling about what's gonna happen this year. Nobody really has a good sense of how bad the economy's gonna hit travel.

Comparative perspective from metro-area groups

The content of conversations among suburban and urban groups provides comparative perspective on the manner in which rural residents in this study used place to understand politics. Place worked differently for urbanites. Place still mattered in their conversations, and as with rural residents, they used place to define "us" and "them." However, the urban vs. rural map played no role in their conversations. Even when asked about this distinction directly, urban residents would deny elements of it, such as disparities in tax rates or inequities in the distribution of resources. In addition, even though people in metro areas used place to understand politics, it was not the primary lens they used to make sense of politics, as it seemed to be in the rural areas.

One way to observe how thee urbanites used place, but not the urban vs. rural divide, is in the way they attributed blame. When suburban and urban groups attributed blame for the problems in their communities, they typically mentioned members of the opposing political party, government, or wealthy or low-income people. For rural groups, the culprits were typically understood as urban residents, a category which contained each of these groups (especially among rural Republicans, who talked of cities as Democratic strongholds).

In a suburb of the largest city, I met with a group of three public high school teachers at the end of their workday in a classroom. Given the context and their occupations, it is not surprising that their comments about the major concerns in their community focused mainly on education. Their main concern was inequality in access to good education, particularly access to an education at the state's flagship public university, not by geography but according to individual wealth. One female teacher said,

> So I think part of it, too is when you see that [the competition to get into the state flagship university] you kind of go ok when is it going to end? How is it going to change? Because you see the tuition costs skyrocketing and it is harder to get in and you start looking at the haves and have-nots and how do we make that all happen? I think those are some of my concerns. Some of the big picture. I mean do I have solutions to them? No, I think those are just observations of things that our community and some of our kids deal with, too, and I think people out in [the rural community where I am from] and any school district probably deal with the same thing.

In this excerpt, as in much of our conversation, the teachers pinned ills of education on the haves limiting the opportunities of the have-nots, not urbanites limiting the

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opportunities of rural residents, or vice versa. This teacher also denied that the rural vs.

divide was meaningful for making sense of access to higher education.

In that same suburb, I met with the group of self-proclaimed conservatives who

meet every morning in a restaurant. Place arose as an important element of their

conversations in the form of one metro area vs. the other: the state capital city against the

metro area in which they lived. Their conversations also reveal, though, that place was less

prominent in their understandings than partisanship and ideology. For example, on the

second morning I spent with them, one of the members complained that government hurts

small business. While doing so, he talked about the state capital city being a "place unto

itself" because he believed the Democratic-controlled state legislature was anti-small

business.

> Terrence: Like I mentioned last time, I'm 65 years old, I still work 5 days a week. To
>
> keep our home going, to get, help our kids out. To do things for family, or
>
> so Beth and I can live a more comfortable life. But I'm figuring, why should
>
> I keep working hard if my tax dollars are all gonna be diminished and they're
>
> gonna take more and more away? Now who is it last night said we definitely,
>
> or was that this morning? [Then-presidential candidate and U.S. Senator
>
> John] McCain. I think on TV said we have to give a tax break to the working
>
> people right now. We have to give tax breaks to the business people and that
>
> should be the stimulus. Not going out for all this extra stuff.
>
> Simon: That doesn't get them re-elected.
>
> Terrence: Give a break to the working people.
>
> Simon: They want to go to the constituents and say, "I brought 50 million dollars to
>
> our community for that bridge over there. I brought 25 million dollars into

our community" [shaking his head no]. You just give me a tax cut or

something [instead of bringing pork to my community].

Terrence: But the workers will benefit. On the tax cuts.

Simon: Oh sure. Also, without the big newspaper no Republican stands a chance of

winning ever again. With NBC, ABC or CBS, no conservative, I should say,

no conservative stands a chance of winning. Because they, they will say

anything they want and we were talking about this last night, we really feel

that the Democrats put us in this position of such dire straits.

Author: Yeah?

Simon: And they helped to drag us, uh the economy down.

Nancy: And they're still fueling the fire.

Simon: They're fueling the fire.

Nancy: They're still fueling the fire.

Simon: And the Nancy Pelosi and that group of them, Barney Frank, knew what was

going on and we really feel that--

Nancy: Bill Clinton knew what was going on

Simon: We were duped. We were really duped. And uh...

Author: So how, uh, so say more about, not necessarily specifics, but what kind of

things the Democrats did to get us where we are?

Simon: The mortgage--

Nancy: Well they lost everything--

Terrence: Well they mandated the mortgages, you can give to people that really

couldn't afford 'em. That's what, that started this mortgage crisis.

Like many conversations among conservative groups in rural communities, these people pinned blame on Democrats, liberals, and anti-business government. But in contrast to the rural groups, metro residents did not understand these other groups through the lens of the urban vs. rural divide.

In some urban communities, geography played an even larger role than in the suburban conversation above, but it did not operate as the aspect of their identities that helped structure the many other inputs to their political preferences. Take for example, the conversations of one metro area group for whom geography seemed especially central to their understanding of politics and policy—a group of African- Americans meeting in an HIV/AIDS advocacy group after their church service. A female preacher in the group described their feeling of being ignored by public officials with reference to their zip code.

> I've got a few things also, that I just noted, and I think and somebody mentioned this earlier, the facts about our community. If we look at the fact that our city or our public officials would think about doing things *with* us rather than doing things *to* us…And when people don't come to the table and they don't say, just like you're saying, Author [referring to my intention to gather their thoughts on what the university could contribute to their community], what is it? What do you want? What do you need? And then somebody in [the state capital city], or somebody in Washington decides what the people in [our zip code] need. And I think that gives two things, it gives the people in [our zip code] the feeling that their problems can not be conquered by them. And then they look to those people in [the state capital]. Now the other thing that the people in [the state capital] do is they never ask the people in [our zip code], like you are coming to this table and you're saying to us, many of whom don't even know poverty, I want you to know that, but it's a step in

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the right direction, [Author], you're saying to us, what do you see? I mean who says

that? I mean we are about to hire a new police chief in our city, and tell me that

somebody in [our zip code] is on the hiring committee, since all the policemen are in

that zip code, please tell me that.

This woman made sense of her community's relationship to government through reference

to their geographic community, underscoring that it is not the case that geography is not

important or salient to the way people in metro areas understand politics. But for this group,

geography arguably was itself structured by another very prominent element of their

identities: race. In other words, they used spatial considerations when describing their own

powerlessness, but intertwined it with a salient racial identity to make sense of political

power, values, and resources.

Like the suburban group quoted above, this group also used the metro area vs. metro

area divide to talk about public issues, but they also used place to talk about divisions within

their city. This is one example of how across the metro groups, there was no clear

consistency in the aspects of place that mattered for their understandings of public affairs.

This is in contrast to the striking consistency across the rural groups in the use of the rural

vs. urban divide. In other words, rural residents shared a common frame of reference, but

urban and suburban residents did not. This likely has implications for whether and how

place can be used to mobilize within each type of location.

Is it the case that my presence as an outsider and urbanite in the rural groups made

people use the urban vs. rural frame? Previous work suggests that my presence likely made

more salient the relevant outgroup of which I was a part (Turner et al. 1994). In rural areas, I

was an urbanite; in the largest city, I was someone from that other city; in my own city, I was

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treated as a person from "that campus over there." But these various reactions underscore just how prominent place was in the groups' attempts to make sense of the world.

With respect to the urban vs. rural frame in particular, there are multiple reasons to expect that the use of this perspective in the rural areas was not an artifact of my presence. My presence likely made this frame more salient, but the ubiquity with which it was used across groups, and the way in which it was so readily used to make sense of power, values, and resources suggests that the members of these groups had already practiced making sense of the world through this lens before I invited myself into their group.

The rural vs. urban divide was so fundamental to the manner in which rural residents made sense of public affairs, that when I asked about it directly, I was often met with expressions of astonishment that I would even have to ask. For example, in a small hamlet about an hour's drive from one of the major urban centers, a male and female group of retirees and people on their way to work met every morning in a gas station. Over the course of several visits I asked them what the major concerns in their community were. They spoke about injustices in the way property taxes are implemented, the inefficiency of state government, and state workers' exorbitant salaries and health benefits. Eventually, on my third visit, I asked them directly about this obvious anti-government attitude.

> Author: So sounds like the state government, boy, doesn't have a very good
>
>   reputation out here.
>
> Theodore: It doesn't in most rural areas
>
> Michael: No.

Their blunt response suggested that a central aspect of their anti-government attitude was geography. Even given my question wording ("out here") and my presence as an

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urbanite, the quickness of their response and the astonishment in their voices suggested that the rural vs. urban divide was salient before I arrived.

SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

This study investigated the manner in which people use place identity, particularly rural identity, to understand politics. It did so by studying conversations about public affairs among 36 groups of people that meet of their own accord across 27 communities in a Midwestern state. The conversations revealed how rural residents use the rural vs. urban to understand public affairs. People imbued this geographic distinction with notions of who has decision-making power, who has values consistent with their own, and who has resources. They used this geography of power to make sense of policies, candidates, and their own potential to influence political outcomes. Their conversations revealed how place identity was thus an integral part of their political selves and the manner in which they made sense of the political world.

This study has intentionally taken an unorthodox approach to the study of public opinion. I investigated conversations among a nonrandom selection of groups in one particular state in order to give intensive attention to the tools that people draw upon in the course of their everyday life and how they do so in their own contexts with the people with whom they regularly talk. Thus this study provides rare insight to the way in which people make sense of geography and how their identities with a type of place structures political understanding.

By spending time in rural communities and listening to the people who live there, this study hopefully dispels some of the idealization that political behavior scholars sometimes confer on such places. Take, for example, the common assumption that rural

areas and small towns exhibit high levels of efficacy and social capital. Although the rural people I studied felt warmly about their own communities and connected to the people within them, they felt a large distance from their government institutions. Their sentiments are a reminder that interpersonal ties on the local level do not necessarily translate into healthy democracy.

Although this paper has focused on place identity, the conversations observed nevertheless have much to say to our understanding of social class. For many people observed in this study, place was a meaningful part of their perceptions of their status and power in relation to others in society. People weave into the concept of place, specifically here the rural vs. urban divide, many elements that various schools of thought perceive to be important for social class in contemporary society: relationship to authority (Weber [1946] 1968), objective markers of status and relationship to the means of production (Wright 1997), perceptions of one's status relative to others (Jackman and Jackman 1983), and differences in worldviews, values, and lifestyles (e.g. Bourdieu [1979] 1984; Lamont 1992, 2000; Lareau 2003).

The fact that people actively construct their understandings of themselves and their location relative to others underscores why it is necessary to pay attention to the content of conversations. Through interacting with other people, individuals try out, practice, and learn what it means to be a person like themselves and how that matters for politics. If the reader has questioned whether the claims of the people in this paper have a basis in reality, the awareness of the potential mismatch between their claims and empirical evidence is itself a recognition of the importance of the process of constructing meaning. If the question is whether rural folks are really devalued by urban residents, evidence of that dynamic exists in the stereotypes urban residents hold of rural residents (Creed and Ching 1997; Jarosz and

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Lawson 2002). There is also some verification of that perception in evidence that rural interests are underrepresented in terms of who runs for statewide offices: typically people from metro areas (Gimpel, Lee, and Thorpe n.d.). However, if the question is whether rural communities actually do not get their fair share of resources, there is only partial support for this empirically, as outlined above (see footnote 10). 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 (conversation) (Abdelal et al. 2006). This is even the case with something as seemingly concrete as geography (Low and Altman intro, 5; Agnew 1987, Johnston 1991).

The implication for the study of public opinion is that we ought to pay attention to the rich processes that underlie how people think about the categories that scholars of politics use, and how they identify themselves or not with them. This underscores the value of open-ended items such as "what comes to mind when…," even given the cost of collecting and cleaning such data. The results of this study also suggest that we pay more attention to place as a social identity that matters for political thinking. Place can encompass region, but should also include intrastate distinctions such as rural/urban/suburban, as well as other distinctions that are meaningful to our respondents.

The results of this study are also important in light of the recent Tea (or T.E.A.) Party activism. Tea Party rallies and campaigns are notorious for their anti-government or small-government activism. But Williamson et al. (n.d.) suggest that Tea Party supporters' opposition to government is not opposition to government in general; it is opposition to government programs that seem to be handouts rather than help for hard working Americans. In that analysis, opposition to government is intertwined with perceptions of deservingness. In the present study, we see how people can intertwine both orientations to

government and perceptions of deservingness with place. Given this, and the fact that votes are counted by geographic districts, we should acknowledge the prominent role of place not only because of its relevance for mobilization, but because place itself is a politically meaningful category to the people being mobilized.

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Municipality Description	Group Type	Municipality Population (2000)	Median Household Income (1999)
Central hamlet	Daily morning coffee klatch, local gas station (men)	500	38000
Northern tourist location	Weekly morning breakfast group, local restaurant (women, primarily retired)	500	32,000
North western hamlet	Weekly morning coffee klatch, local church (mixed gender, primarily retirees)	500	35,000
North central village	Group of library volunteers at local library (mixed gender, retirees); also, daily coffee klatch of male local leaders meeting in the local municipal building	500	34,000
North eastern resort village	Group of congregants after a Saturday evening service at a Lutheran church (mixed gender)	1,000	41,000
North western village	Daily morning coffee klatch, local gas station (men)	1,000	32,000
Northern American Indian reservation	Group of family members, during a Friday fish fry at a local gas station/restaurant (mixed gender)	1,000	35,000
South central village	Daily morning coffee klatch, local gas station (mixed gender, working and retired	1,500	31,000
North central village	Daily morning breakfast group, local diner (men)	2,000	38,000
South central village	Women's weekly morning coffee klatch at local diner; also group of male professionals, construction workers, retirees meeting later there	3,000	43,000
Central west village	Two daily morning coffee klatches, one at a local gas station, the other at a local diner (men)	3,000	30,000
Central east village	Kiwanis meeting (mixed gender, primarily retirees); also daily morning coffee klatch of male retirees at local fast food restaurant	3,000	45,000
Suburb of a city located in adjacent state	Daily morning coffee klatch, local diner (male local business owners, lawyers, retirees)	9,000	51,000
Southeastern city on northern edge of one of the two main metropolitan areas	Daily morning coffee klatch, local diner (men)	10,000	54,000
South central city	Middle-aged man and woman taking a mid-morning break at a local café	10,000	36,000
Central city	Daily morning coffee klatch, local café (middle-aged professionals, mixed gender)	38,000	37,000

Table is continued on next page.

Municipality Description	Group Type	Municipality Population (2000)	Median Household Income (1999)
East central city	Daily morning coffee klatch, local gas station (retired men)	42,000	41,000
Suburb of one of the two main cities	Group of teachers and administrators at local high school (mixed gender); Daily lunch group of middle-aged men; Mixed gender breakfast group of retirees	47,000	55,000
Western city	Daily morning coffee klatch, local café (middle-aged professionals, retirees, mixed gender)	52,000	31,000
South eastern city	Weekly morning breakfast group, local diner (mixed gender, retirees and currently employed)	82,000	37,000
North eastern city	Daily morning breakfast group, local diner (men)	100,000	39,000
State capital (Major city 1)	Middle-aged, female professionals' book club; also, daily morning coffee klatch of male retirees at bakery; female resident volunteers in food pantry in low income neighborhood	200,000	42,000
Major city 2, northern neighborhood	AIDS/HIV activism group meeting after services in a Baptist church (mixed gender)	600,000	32,000
Major city 2, southern neighborhood	Group of Mexican immigrants, waiting at a pro bono health clinic (mixed gender)	600,000	32,000
South western village	4H group (mixed gender)	4,000	42,000
Central village	4H group (mixed gender)	10,000	33,000
South eastern city	4H group (mixed gender)	28,000	48,000
Central east village	4H group (mixed gender)	4,000	38,000

Note: Population and income figures have been rounded to preserve anonymity of groups observed.

INITIAL VISIT PROTOCOL
Most important issues:
What do you think are the major issues facing people in [name of municipality] these days? Which of these issues are of special concern to you all personally?
[*If issues include taxes, health care, or immigration, skip to relevant questions below.*]
What do you think should be done about this?
Why do you think this has been overlooked?
Whom does the current policy benefit?

Taxes [if not addressed above]:
With respect to property and income taxes, do you think people similar to yourself currently pay a fair share?
Whom do you think benefits from our current tax policies?

Health care [if not addressed above]:
Now I would like to talk about health care for a few moments. Do you feel that you have been able to obtain adequate health care for you and your families?
Are there people in your community who don't/do have adequate health care? Why do you think that is the case?

Immigration [if not addressed above]:
Is immigration an issue in this community? How does it affect you? How do you think immigration is affecting life in [this state] in general?

Self-description (identity and occupation):
How would you describe the kind of people that are a part of your group, to outsiders like me?
Do any of you work outside the home? What kind of work do you do?

Children, activities, and education:
Do you have children? How old are they?
What kinds of activities are they involved in after school?
For those of you with kids still in school, do you think they will go on to obtain some kind of post-high school education?
Would you want them to attend the [state's flagship public university]? Why/why not?
Did any of you attend school after high school? Did any of you attend the [state's flagship public university], or another state public university system school? [If the latter:] Which one?

State's Flagship Public University
What, in your opinion, does [the state's flagship public university] currently do well?
What, in your opinion, can [the state's flagship public university] do better?
What *should* [the state's flagship public university] be doing in your community?
Whom do you think the [state's flagship public university] currently benefits?
When you think about the students who attend [the state's flagship public university], and the faculty and staff who work there, what comes to mind?

Financial security:
Thinking about your overall situation here in [name of municipality], would you say that you struggle to make ends meet, or do you live comfortably?

Success and deservingness:

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 incomes than others do?
[Here are some reasons other folks have stated—how important do you think these reasons are?
'Because some people have more in-born ability to learn.'
'Because discrimination holds some people back.'
'Because some people don't get a chance to get a good education.'
'Because some people just choose low-paying jobs.'
'Because government policies have helped high-income workers more.'
'Because God made people different from one another.'
'Because some people just don't work as hard.'

What does the term "hard work" mean to you?
I'm going to give you a list of occupations. Tell me which of these folks work hard for a living, and why you think that's the case: lawyers, construction workers, waitresses, public school teachers.

Anything else you want to add?
May I come back sometime?
[End by thanking the participants, reiterate contact information.]

SECOND VISIT PROTOCOL
During my last round of visits with groups like this around the state, I found that many people were concerned about health care, higher education, and issues related to water. I would like to ask more about your thoughts on these topics.

Health care:
What ARE your concerns about health care?
Do you think people here in your community are better or worse off with respect to health care than people in other parts of the state? Why? The country? Why?
[The last statewide public opinion poll conducted by the state's flagship university] asked people which of four health care reform solutions they support. Let me describe these and then ask for your opinions. [Describe four alternatives, based on following question wording.]
A number of proposals have been made about ways to change the health care system in [this state]. I am going to read some of these proposals and for each please tell me whether you strongly oppose it, somewhat oppose it, somewhat favor it, or strongly favor it.
 [In the poll, the four questions below were randomized]
A. What about consolidating all the money and resources now being spent by employers, individuals, the state government, and insurance companies to operate the current health insurance system and replace it with a new system, administered entirely by state government and covering all residents of [the state]?
B. How about expanding the eligibility of existing state government health insurance programs for low-income people, such as [...] Medicaid, to provide coverage for more people without health insurance?
C. What about requiring every resident of [the state] to have health insurance, either from their employer or another source, and offer government subsidies to low-income residents to help them pay for it?
D. How about encouraging individuals to put money into a tax-free health savings account that they would use to pay for their regular health care bills and accompany this with a catastrophic insurance plan they must also purchase to help pay for major medical bills?

Higher education:
In what ways is higher education a big issue for people here in your community?
Is higher education more of a pressing concern for people here than in other parts of the state?

In general, whom do you think the [state's flagship public university] benefits? Whom do you think higher education in general benefits in this country?
Do you have children? Do/did you want your kids to go to college? Why/ why not?

Water:
Taking care of [name issue related to water mentioned in previous visit] will likely require broad support in the state legislature. Do you think it's possible to get that support? Why/ why not?
Is this an issue that all [people in the state] should be concerned about? How would you sell that to the broader [...] public?

Presidential race:
Which of the candidates would be most attentive to the concerns of people here in your community. Why? Most attentive to concerns of people in [this state]? Why?
What are your hopes for this presidential race?

Higher education:
[Repeat questions from first round]

Social class identity:
People talk about social classes such as the poor, the working class, the middle class, the upper-middle class, and the upper class. Which of these classes would you say you belong to?

THIRD AND ADDITIONAL VISITS PROTOCOL
Most important issues:
What are the major issues facing people in this community?
What do you think should be done about this?
Why do you think this has been overlooked?
Whom does the current policy benefit?

Power and authority:
How would you describe your group to an outsider like me? How do you think you compare to the rest of the community?
Who do you think has power in your community? In the state? The nation?
Do you tend to feel or not feel that most people with power try to take advantage of people like yourself?
How has this community changed over time?

Political parties:
Which party do you feel is more attentive to the concerns of people like you. Why?
Is it fair to say that Republicans are for the rich, and Democrats are for the lower income?
Which party do you trust to handle the economy? Why?

Attitudes toward government:
How much attention do you feel the government pays to what the people think when it decides what to do -- a good deal, some, or not much?"
Would you say the government is pretty much run by a few big interests looking out for themselves or that it is run for the benefit of all the people?
 [Agree/disagree:] People like me don't have any say about what the government does.
 [Agree/disagree:] Public officials don't care much what people like me think.

News use:
Over the past seven days, which of the following have you used to obtain news?

A) Read a newspaper
B) Read magazines like Newsweek, Time, or U.S. News and World Report
C) Watched the national news on television
D) Watched the local news on television
E) Listened to the news on radio
F) Read news on the Internet

Higher education:
[Repeat questions from first round]
Where do you usually get your news about the [state's flagship public university]?