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Battleground: How Rural Resentment Changed the Outcome of the 2016 Election

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Oftentimes when people think about conflict within the realm of politics, they immediately focus on the ongoing battles between Republicans and Democrats in Washington; however, the most consequential discord that decided the 2016 Election was, in actuality, between urban and rural voters in the Upper Midwest. With the spotlight of the 2020 Election focused on the battleground states of Michigan and Wisconsin, we have to look back four years to understand why these two states, which had voted Republican for the first time since 1988 and 1984, surprised the nation and decided the election.¹ The story of these two states' defiant acts is a story of their populace and how the rural-urban divide had reached a point of climax. President Trump appealed to rural counties throughout the country, but his ability to get through to rural voters in the Upper Midwest proved to be the decisive factor in the election. The susceptibility of rural Midwestern voters to become true undecided voters in 2016 materialized through a combination of factors that focused on the emerging division between rural and urban Midwesterners, which ultimately decided the election.

The “why” behind the President’s victory is, of course, a complicated question to answer; however, it becomes clearer when we further investigate what Katherine Cramer calls “rural resentment.” Through her study and focus of people living throughout different parts of Wisconsin, Cramer discovered two common themes: “a significant rural-versus-urban divide and the powerful role of resentment.”² She goes on to further this form of resentment by saying “disagreements about basic political principles can be rooted in something even more fundamental: ideas about who gets what, who has power, what people are like, and who is to blame.”³ The focal point for Upper Midwest voters seemingly shifted from partisan politics to a pushback of the societal norms

¹ “Michigan Presidential Election Voting History,” 270toWin, 2020, <https://www.270towin.com/states/Michigan>.

² Katherine Cramer, *The Politics of Resentment: Rural Consciousness in Wisconsin and the Rise of Scott Walker*, (The University of Chicago Press, 2016), 5.

³ Cramer, *The Politics of Resentment*, 5.

which those living in rural areas felt favored urban parts of the state. The bottom line became this: “what might seem to be a central debate about the appropriate role of government might at base be something else: resentment toward our fellow citizens.”⁴

This type of division speaks directly to the rhetoric that has plagued the cohesiveness of the American public for generations. Even before the modern era of partisan discord, there was disunity and discord that shrouded the positive, connective virtues of our nation. The aforementioned type of divisive rhetoric may seem commonplace at the end of a presidential administration that thrived off of negative magniloquence, but it is surprising to see it come from the American people even before obstruction and absurdity became the backbone of daily American political news. A distinction between the urban and rural populations must be made to understand why the electoral outcomes of each state were so dramatically affected by their divide. First, we need to define what urban and rural areas are. For perspective, “the U.S. Census Bureau identifies two different kinds of urban areas: ‘Urbanized clusters’ with 2,500 to 49,999 residents, and ‘urbanized areas’ with populations of 50,000 or more. All non-urbanized land area — any place that isn't part of a city or town of at least 2,500 people — is considered rural.”⁵ Wisconsin has a rural population of around 1.5 million. Despite this being a large number in proportion to the overall state population, it is shrinking. At the time of the 2016 Election, 40 of the 72 counties in Wisconsin had a smaller population than it had during the 2012 Election.⁶ The shrinking rural counties coupled with Wisconsin’s record 70% urban population created a culture shift that divided

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Malia Jones, “Putting Rural Wisconsin on the Map: Understanding Rural-Urban Divides Requires a Complex Spectrum of Definitions,” Wiscontext, November, 2016, <https://www.wiscontext.org/putting-rural-wisconsin-map>.

⁶ Todd D. Milewski, “Wisconsin Population Trends Show Urban Areas Growing, Rural Areas Shrinking,” The Cap Times, March, 2016. https://madison.com/ct/news/data/wisconsin-population-trends-show-urban-areas-growing-rural-areas-shrinking/article_96978d1b-31c0-5def-8715-efde4e3700aa.html.

urban and rural people further. This contributes to Cramer's idea of "rural consciousness," which she defines as:

an identity as a rural person that... includes a sense that decision makers routinely ignore rural places and fail to give rural communities their fair share of resources, as well as a sense that rural folks are fundamentally different from urbanites in terms of lifestyles, values, and work ethic. Rural consciousness signals an identification with rural people and rural places and denotes a multifaceted resentment against cities.⁷

This is a dramatic development Cramer points out, one that speaks volumes when we contextualize it in terms of the 2016 Election. Secretary Hillary Clinton was the first presidential nominee since Richard Nixon in 1972 to not visit the state of Wisconsin even one time during the campaign circuit.⁸ This feeds directly into the idea that "decision makers routinely ignore rural places" and contributed to the growing disdain the rural population held towards those in urban ones. Couple Clinton's lack of presence with President Trump's persistence in the state, continually making trips to rural areas, and the idea that rural voters are ignored was realized.

President Trump's visits and rallies have shown to be a successful way of mobilizing and exciting his voting base; however, it would be naive to think that this was the only factor in rural voters shifting partisan lines. With urban areas seemingly guaranteed to vote Democratic (with Milwaukee and Madison having a 300,000-vote difference in favor of Clinton) rural areas could possibly have used the Republican ticket as a means of rebellion against the wishes of urban residents. Cramer overwhelmingly found that rural residents identified less with political parties in favor of an identification "rooted in place and class."⁹ With individual likeness more focused on where they were from, it is not difficult to imagine their shift in political preference being based

⁷ Cramer, *The Politics of Resentment*, 5-6.

⁸ *Ibid*, 27.

⁹ *Ibid*, 6.

in their contention with urban voters. Abandoning hypotheticals for a moment, it is important to look at the statistics we have from the 2016 Election.

For reference, Hillary Clinton won 12 counties in Wisconsin (down significantly from President Obama's 36 carried counties in 2012) as compared to President Trump's edge in 60 counties. As a matter of fact, Secretary Clinton was victorious in the two most populous counties in the entire state; Dane (which encompasses Madison) and Milwaukee counties gave her ~ 500,000, or 36%, of her eventual vote total of just under 1.4 million votes.¹⁰ In Michigan, Clinton won only 8 counties as opposed to Trump's 75. Yet, she was victorious in the two most populous counties with the cities of Ann Arbor and Detroit accounting for 38% of her total vote count in the state.¹¹ Of the 12 most populous counties in the state, of which, all are (sub)urban areas, Clinton won 7 of the 12, whereas President Trump was victorious in 70 of the remaining 71 rural counties. This is a staggering statistic for a state that had been dominated by the Democratic Party for the previous thirty years. President Obama won Michigan by 9.5 percentage points in 2012; however, when we look at the voting statistics of each county closer, we see that all 83 counties, without exception, saw an increase in Republican leaning as compared to 2008 voter turnout.¹² Despite the vast differences between President Obama in 2012 and Secretary Clinton in 2016, the most evident being that the latter was victorious in the state, both candidates experienced a decline in percentage point performance. This signals a larger issue than simply Clinton ignoring the region or her being an unpreferred candidate.

¹⁰ "2016 Wisconsin Results," The New York Times, August, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/elections/2016/results/wisconsin>.

¹¹ National Election Pool, "Michigan Presidential Election Results," The New York Times, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/11/03/us/elections/results-michigan-president.html>.

¹² Ibid.

Suggesting that President Trump’s success in these states is completely personal and void of political or economic influence is not the intention of this argument; “instead, the results are perceptions of who is getting what and who deserves it, and these notions are affected by perceptions of cultural and lifestyle differences.”¹³ The behavioral and lifestyle differences, “in a politics of resentment, [are] intertwined [with] economic considerations [regarding] social and cultural considerations in the interpretations of the world they make with one another.”¹⁴ The main idea here is this: “perhaps issues are secondary to identities.”¹⁵ Politics of resentment take into account partisan expectations but are more concerned with the differences at a personal and cultural level. As the entire globe becomes more urbanized, so does the United States, and the creation of a dynamic, diversified culture that differs from the small-town feel of the rural Midwest. Culture clashes have long been the root of political and social tension across the history of the US, and President Trump’s seemingly revolutionary campaign appealed to the rhetoric that glorified and venerated a callback to the values which many Americans in small towns yearned to reclaim.

Cramer’s ethnographic inquiry was made up of her interactions with rural residents at places like gas stations, diners, and churches, with the majority of her conversations being with older white males. In fact, Wisconsin is 87%, and Michigan is ~80% white as of 2019, which was a primary reason why diversification and urbanization were an expansive root in the growing cultural and lifestyle differences between rural and urban voters.¹⁶ Milwaukee is only 43% white and Detroit is only 14% white, which is a stark contrast to the rest of the states’ diversity statistics.¹⁷

¹³ Cramer, *The Politics of Resentment*, 7.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ “Quick Facts: Michigan,” United States Census Bureau, 2019, <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/MI>.

¹⁷ Ibid.

It is no coincidence that the heavily dominating white population of the rural counties had an issue with the diversified populations of urban counties. The “deep resentment” for these people was rooted in the idea that “no one was listening to their own ideas about how things should be done or what needed attention.”¹⁸ This, compounded with the idea that “the big decisions that regulated and affected their lives were made far away in the cities,” fueled the growth in resentment.¹⁹

As previously mentioned, the issues are not solely rooted in cultural differences, but also encompass a political and economic division. To be clear, the political and economic differences do not drive the resentment, but they help to bolster it. In this vein specifically, Cramer shows that rural residents “believed that Madison sucked in all of their taxpayer dollars and spent them on itself or Milwaukee, not on their own communities” and that “they were struggling to make ends meet, and yet all the money seemed to be going to the cities.”²⁰ Despite this belief, the poverty rate in rural counties was basically equivalent to what it was in urban areas; the United States Department of Agriculture’s Economic Research Service found that the poverty rate in rural areas in Wisconsin was at 11% of the population, while it was at 11.1% of the urban population.²¹ This directly contradicts the idea that poverty and ways of life were astronomically different between the two groups of people. A prevailing rhetoric within rural residents is that “city folks called people like them ignorant racists who could not figure out their own interests. To them, urban types just did not get small-town life — what people in those places value, the way they live, and the challenges they face.”²² Rural citizens of Wisconsin and Michigan do live very different lives

¹⁸ Katherine Cramer, “How rural resentment helps explain the surprising victory of Donald Trump,” The Washington Post, November 13, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2016/11/13/how-rural-resentment-helps-explain-the-surprising-victory-of-donald-trump/>.

¹⁹ Cramer, “How rural resentment helps explain the surprising victory of Donald Trump,” 2020.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Timothy M. Smeeding, and Katherine A. Thornton, *Wisconsin Poverty Report: Progress Against Poverty Stalls in 2016*, (Institute for Research on Poverty University of Wisconsin–Madison, June 2018).

²² Cramer, “How rural resentment helps explain the surprising victory of Donald Trump,” 2020.

than that of urban residents; however, the feelings of being misunderstood and taken advantage of are common to the rural residents, regardless of political affiliation. This is not to discount the feelings or ideas of these people, but rather to point out that the feelings and experiences of the people they resented were actually very similar to their own. According to the Pew Research Agency's polling during the summer of 2016, 69% of rural voters were concerned about the difficulty of finding jobs in their community, as opposed to urban voters' 45% concern. While both urban and rural residents carry similar concerns, it shows that going into the Election of 2016, rural voters were far more concerned about jobs and the idea that decisions were being made without their consent or opinion. Again, this points to the success of President Trump's campaign and how his appeal to this set of beliefs (through frequent visits, large rallies, targeted advertising, etc.) vaulted him into the White House.

Moreover, we can compare President Trump's performance in these areas with those of past Republican nominees to further develop the claim that this cultural resentment is only partially supported by political and economic ideology. It is easy to look at the raw statistics of the Democratic performances of President Obama and Secretary Clinton and reach a certain verdict; however, it is also important to view President Trump's performance in historical context as well in light of the concept of rural resentment. As compared to Mitt Romney's showing in Wisconsin in 2012, President Trump gained 6 percentage points, but also underperformed in certain Conservative strongholds like the Milwaukee suburbs.²³ This also alludes to the rural resentment and the ideological and cultural divide because it shows that the suburbs which are located closer

²³ Malia Jones, "How and Where Trump Won Wisconsin in 2016: Lower Voter Turnout and Community Size Defined the Presidential Vote," Wiscontext, November 2016. <https://www.wiscontext.org/how-and-where-trump-won-wisconsin-2016>.

to the cities are not as disconnected as the far away rural counties are, and do not share the resentment that the latter mentioned counties hold for urban areas.

Despite the outlying underperformance of President Trump in a couple of counties, his attempts to appeal to the people of Wisconsin and Michigan were largely successful. He visited the two states over ten times in the final few months before the election, whereas Secretary Clinton never travelled to Wisconsin and went to Michigan only three times total. Trump's national appeal to working-class voters was the main driving force behind his victory, and this proved true in the two battleground Midwestern states. The small towns of America bought into President Trump's campaign and ideology of bringing America back to prominence, resulting in 62% of national rural counties voting in favor of the eventual President.²⁴ These small towns across the nation may be vastly different in their demographic makeup and may have entirely different political, cultural and social priorities; however, exactly like it was in Michigan and Wisconsin, these people were all brought together using rhetoric focused on returning their counties and state to an idealized version of the past.

This idea is rooted in the notions of social identities and is bolstered by political expectations. That being said, "not all social categories [or identifiers] are relevant to politics, but it does not take much for [them] to have an impact on the formation of preferences regarding the distribution of resources—an issue at the heart of politics."²⁵ This is when group formations occur, and the division of groups is accentuated in the public forum. As it pertained to the main issues of Wisconsinites, allocation of resources, especially the disparity when compared to urban developments, became the social issue that formed their common identity. Cramer used basic

²⁴ Rich Morin, "Behind Trump's win in rural white America: Women joined men in backing him," Pew Research Center, November, 2016, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/11/17/behind-trumps-win-in-rural-white-america-women-joined-men-in-backing-him/>.

²⁵ Cramer, *The Politics of Resentment*, 8.

psychology to back up this claim, stating that “when people feel unsure and insecure about the amount of money available to go around, the situation is ripe for a politics of resentment. People are especially likely to rely on their group identities in situations of uncertainty.”²⁶ President Trump came directly into play here because resentment is the easiest and most socially acceptable form of public expression when a person or group feels slighted. This, in turn, is easily manipulated as a political tool to gain support and backing of an ideal system (i.e., “making America great again”). Cramer adds,

a politics of resentment arises from the way social identities, the emotion of resentment, and economic insecurity interact. In a politics of resentment, resentment toward fellow citizens is front and center. People understand their circumstances as the fault of guilty and less deserving social groups, not as the product of broad social, economic, and political forces.²⁷

Thus, instead of seeing their current economic and social standing as a result of the politicians and their decisions themselves, resentment creeps in and instead shifts perceived blame onto those who are different from them and are the supposed beneficiaries of what they are being slighted.

The rural residents of the Midwest saw their misfortune and struggle as a direct result of the urban areas taking their resources and making the decisions that would have a direct impact on their lives for them. Instead of looking at the political deficiencies of those they have elected during the past few decades that developed their strife, they chose to aim their disapproval at their fellow countrymen; specifically, those who seemingly abided by an entirely different lifestyle from them. This recurring theme presents itself despite the aforementioned 11% poverty rate being a connective statistic that highlights the shared struggle amongst Midwesterners, rural and urban.

It is abundantly clear now that self-identification is at the very heart of Midwestern rural resentment. What Cramer refers to as “social class identity” defines the scope of their opinions

²⁶ Cramer, *The Politics of Resentment*, 9.

²⁷ Ibid.

and frames their political placement.²⁸ Some may look in hindsight at President Trump's administration and see a lack of competence combined with a lack of remorse for their actions. But it is vital to remember that different opinions and different rhetorical strategies can resonate with one group of voters and entirely miss others. This was precisely the case with rural voters in Michigan and Wisconsin. During Cramer's interactions with the people of this region, she noticed that "many of the things that were turning people off from Trump were things that ... weren't registering with people [in rural Wisconsin]." ²⁹ This included, but was not limited to, the Access Hollywood tape scandal and the "Trump University" scandal. Despite President Trump's numerous personal missteps, his campaign was able to maneuver past these faults and still reach a base of voters that possibly did not fully pay attention to, or care about his scandals. The agenda of candidate Trump was similar to the desired outcomes of Midwestern citizens, specifically, "the notions of shaking things up, 'draining the swamp' of Washington, D.C.—those are really things that [the rural people of Wisconsin would] say."³⁰ For a group of people that do not identify as intrinsically political, supporting a candidate like President Trump was their way of showing their disdain for their perceived slights when it came to decision making that would affect their daily lives. With a historical trend that was already drifting Republican, it only seemed as if it was a matter of time before this pushback occurred.

Another interesting point to think about is the idea of race and how it relates to rural resentment towards urban areas like Milwaukee, Madison and Detroit. As with almost every other historical development that the United States has dealt with, race played a part in the decision for a rural "uprising," of sorts. Think back to the statistics given earlier about diversity demographics

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Sommer Mathis, "The Reality of Rural Resentment," Bloomberg CityLab, November 2016, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2016-11-15/the-role-of-rural-resentment-in-trump-s-victory>.

³⁰ Ibid.

in urban vs. rural areas: rural parts of the Midwest were 80% white, whereas Milwaukee was only 43% and Detroit was only 14% white. That means, in parts of Michigan, there was an outlook that the 80% of whites in rural areas were being taken advantage of by the 86% minorities in the cities. Even if race was not a factor, it would be ignorant to not acknowledge this as a particular place of possible tension. Cramer, in her interactions, acknowledged this as a possible outcome, saying:

Politics as usual, for them, is something for other people, not for them. And part of it is resenting urban elites who look down on them. And also it is partly a perception that what government does is suck in taxpayer dollars to support these social programs that go to undeserving “others.” Their stereotypes of who’s receiving social welfare benefits are illegal immigrants and people of color. They don’t think about say, workman’s comp, or mortgage interest tax deductions as social programs.³¹

This type of rhetoric is something that is both politically and socially dangerous and leads to certain acts of rebellion that can either take the form of violent protest, or political strong-arming. Rural Wisconsinites saw education, taxes and public funding as something that not only benefited urban communities more than them, but also as a direct result of their increased participation in the form of higher taxes.³² Creating divisive narratives invites racism to become an impactful developer of one’s opinions. If you are already looking to create distinctions between yourself and the urban population, it is only a matter of time before a candidate who fosters this kind of divide (i.e., President Trump) is able to mobilize you in support of himself and through capitalization on existing racist ideologies in rural areas, in addition to the rural-urban divide.

How long can this type of narrative be successful? Well, one can look at the 2020 Election and try to discern some truths from the data we have. In Wisconsin, President Biden won two additional counties that President Trump won four years earlier.³³ The vote count in an additional

³¹ Ibid.

³² Cramer, “How rural resentment helps explain the surprising victory of Donald Trump,” 2020.

³³ National Election Pool, “Wisconsin Presidential Election Results,” The New York Times, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/11/03/us/elections/results-wisconsin-president.html>.

seven rural counties was not only closer than it was in 2016, but was within a thousand votes.³⁴ With voter turnout increased throughout the country, there were an additional 320,000 votes across the state, of which, 92% of black voters chose Biden and 52% of white voters state-wide chose Trump.³⁵ President Biden also had the highest percentage of votes in Waukesha County, a Conservative stronghold, since 1976.³⁶ In Michigan, President Biden carried two additional counties that the President had previously won, and narrowed his defeat in nine other counties to less than a thousand votes.³⁷ Here as well, 93% of black voters chose Biden, while 55% of white voters chose Trump. The former President's triumph in 2016 was by a margin of 0.3% over Secretary Clinton, whereas President Biden defeated the incumbent by a margin of 2.8 percentage points.³⁸ The successes experienced by the Biden campaign compared to the previous election could speak to a number of possibilities; the preference of Biden to Clinton, the numerous controversies of President Trump, or even a slight shift in general ideology. The election's closeness and lack of shifting back to the Democratic dominance of prior elections shows that rural resentment is still a prevalent theoretical basis for these voters and will be something to continue to monitor going forward.

The Democratic victory is a positive development for those who were fearful that the results in 2016 were the beginning of Michigan and Wisconsin turning into Republican-leaning states. With all of this being said, the results in 2020 may be misleading. Undeniably, President Biden was the victor and successfully mobilized his voting base (particularly, college-aged voters, garnering 61% of the 12-29 vote), as well as the mail-in and early voting strategies; however,

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ David Leip, "Dave Leip's Atlas of the U.S. Presidential Elections," USElectionAtlas, 2020, <https://uselectionatlas.org/RESULTS/>.

³⁷ "Michigan Presidential Election Results," The New York Times, 2020.

³⁸ Ibid.

despite the Democratic trends we saw this past November, there were also some continuing trends that clearly show rural resentment is not a relic of 2016. For example, President Trump defeated Secretary Clinton in Wisconsin by 0.77%, whereas President Biden won by 0.63% over Trump.³⁹ Both elections were virtual ties and begs the question: did the COVID-19 Pandemic and Biden's successful mobilization of mail-in and early voting push him over the edge? The answer, seemingly, is yes and without the pandemic, we will never know if the president would have carried Wisconsin. The fact that the black and white vote was, once again, divided, and shows no sign of evening out, clears a path for rural resentment to continue to be fostered. Now that President Biden has won, and the (sub)urban areas pushed him to victory, will we see increased tension within the state between rural and urban groups? How will the Republican Party respond to this loss, and will it choose a different strategy of mobilization or continue the divisive rhetoric of President Trump? These questions, and many more, will be on full display in the coming four years, and beyond.

The 2020 Election was the culmination of a variety of storylines that defined and decided the election, vaulting Joe Biden into the presidency. In the midst of an unprecedented pandemic, Biden's campaign mobilized alternative methods of voting to triumph against a sitting president - a difficult task in the annals of history. Michigan and Wisconsin still clearly have issues of rural resentment, and it is clear that they will continue to be battleground states moving forward. Now that a new administration has taken power in Washington, some Americans may see a greater sense of hope that our ability to come together despite our differences will be seen through. Regardless of whether or not we agree with the results of an election, every presidential succession has the ability to offer the American people a heightened sense of hope. Hope that we will continue to

³⁹ "Wisconsin Presidential Election Results," The New York Times, 2020.

improve on our faults and that the issues that plague our nation will be fought against. For the people of the Midwest, this hope has taken the form of shifting their state's presidential decision in recent elections; however, it will be President Biden's task, and all those who govern afterwards, to help mend the differences that divide us as a people.

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