



'None of the Politicians Come to See Us at All' – How Rural People View Government and Political Parties

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How can it be that in rural areas, where many communities are dying and lots of individuals are struggling to make ends meet, there is a strong preference for limited government and thus considerable support for conservative politicians and the Republican Party? In rural areas as in cities, many poor individuals vote for Democrats. But research also shows that, within states, poorer rural counties lean Republican overall.

Noting that rural places often get extra government help – and pay lower taxes per person, compared to suburban and rural areas – some analysts suggest that rural citizens just do not understand their own economic interests. Rural people are distracted by cultural appeals, these analysts imply. Guns, abortion, and religion are pegged as hot-button diversions that allow conservative politicians to gain office with appeals against government.

I present a different answer: Many Americans living in places outside of big cities and nearby suburbs think of themselves first and foremost as “rural people,” as members of communities that get short shrift from government and politicians. For Americans with what I call “rural consciousness,” government is not understood policy by policy. It is viewed more in its entirety, as an outside force that largely ignores rural places and is unlikely ever to understand the true needs of rural people or give them their fair share of public resources.

An Innovative Way to Learn How People Think about Politics

Most research on public opinion involves national surveys, where randomly selected individuals answer a series of questions. Thousands of responses are analyzed by broad categories such as age, gender, educational level, income level, and whether disconnected individuals say they trust government and support Democrats or Republicans. What gets ignored is how people interact in daily life and look at the world from the perspective of “people like us.”

My research took a different approach. I sampled 27 communities from across the state of Wisconsin, including urban, suburban, and rural areas. After identifying 36 groups of people that met regularly of their own accord – at gas stations, diners, restaurants, and other publicly available locales – I repeatedly participated in their conversations between May 2007 and May 2011. By talking with groups, I heard (and occasionally asked directly about) people’s outlooks on community problems and the role of politicians and government in addressing matters ranging from economic development and poverty to health and education. In their own words, I heard how Wisconsinites see themselves and understand politics.

Rural Consciousness: We are Ignored and Left Out

As I listened to ongoing conversations, I found that many rural residents perceive their communities as the victims of government decisions that routinely ignore or misunderstand rural needs and use rural resources to disproportionately help more privileged urbanites. Wisconsin has two large metropolitan areas: Madison, where the state capital and the top university are located; and Milwaukee, the biggest industrial and commercial center. In the areas of Wisconsin away from those metropolitan centers, many people perceive that Madison draws in all of the state's resources and spends most of those resources on itself or Milwaukee. Seldom, as rural people see it, are resources returned to the rest of the state.

Urban decision-makers, as nonmetropolitan Wisconsinites see them, have little understanding of rural lifestyles and values – insufficient appreciation of the continuous hard work and neighborliness that go on in most rural communities, where people have long struggled with difficult economic circumstances. Rural people perceive that Wisconsinites in the big two metropolitan areas hold all of the decision-making power. From the rural perspective, decision-makers from Madison and Milwaukee make little effort to listen to the concerns of rural citizens.

The Bottom Line for Politics

This way of understanding the world is important because, even when rural people badly need publicly funded safety net programs, they may oppose such interventions out of the sense that people like them are invariably marginalized and treated unfairly by government.

One way we can see this is in the way groups of Wisconsin people talked about Republican Governor Scott Walker and his controversial budget proposals, which not only cut public spending for many programs, but also eliminate most collective bargaining rights for public employees and require from them increased contributions for health and pension benefits. I was especially interested in why manual laborers supported Walker's proposals aimed at public employees. Why did they do so? The reasoning was different in urban versus rural areas:

- Conversations among urban manual laborers revealed resentment about generous pensions and health care plans for public sector employees paid for by hard-working taxpayers.
- Talk among laborers in rural communities echoed that same theme – and added another morally charged layer. Public employees were pegged as urbanites who unfairly meddle in the lives of rural people they know nothing about.

In sum, the link between the Republican Party and rural areas is not simply about economic interests. Much of the explanation lies in the social perspectives rural residents use to interpret politics. For many people in rural communities, government policies championed by Democrats are the work of urbanites understood as culturally distinct from – and dismissive of – rural people like themselves. Support for Republicans, even for extreme anti-government manifestations such as the Tea Party, is just a way to fight back.

Read more in Katherine Cramer Walsh, “Putting Inequality in Its Place: Rural Consciousness and the Power of Perspective.”