

The Views of Populists:
What Trump Voters' Perspectives and
Perceptions of Trump Voters
Tell Us About U.S. Democracy

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Abstract: What does the current populist moment tell us about contemporary democracy? In particular, what does it tell us about civic identity? I look in close at the views that people have of the civic competency of their political opponents, in order to consider the potential for democratic innovation in the service of including greater voice in governance for a wide range of people. I draw on a decade of observations of conversations of people who eventually supported Trump in the 2016 presidential election in communities across Wisconsin, as well as analysis of correspondence from people reacting to their views. My findings speak to the nature of contemporary American democratic identity, and suggest a significant barrier to improving the health of democracy is an inconsistent emphasis on individual agency as a target of blame. Observing the construction of identity through these conversations and emails illuminates the way racial and civic identities are intertwined in definitions of “the people.”

1. Introduction

The election of Donald Trump to the presidency in 2016 made it clear that the United States, and arguably western industrialized democracy, is in a populist moment (Galston 2016). A great deal of energy has been spent trying to understand and diagnose the ills among people who have voted for recent populist candidates. I take the opportunity to instead examine and perhaps diagnose what is wrong with democracy.

Populism is a political discourse that pits a corrupt elite, including the government, against a pure and virtuous people (Mudde 2007; Laclau 2005; Oliver and Rahn 2016). Voters who support candidates using such rhetoric buy into the notion that “the people” (understood to include particular types of people) deserve more power than current government (and media and economic) structures give them. Populist messages do not typically assert that *all* people deserve more power, but inherent in populist messages is the idea that ordinary people and their common sense and lived expertise deserve to be inputs in governance.

Many people in the United States, not just those who support populist candidates, perceive that government is out of touch and unresponsive to their concerns (Oliver and Rahn 2016, 194-196). Why then, don’t we see organizing across a wide range of people to achieve greater representation?

This paper investigates civic identity, defined as psychological attachments to others whom people perceive are valid political participants in their democracy. I focus on how people perceive others in terms of their civic competence as a way to consider the project of “inclusive populism” (McKean 2016), or the possibility of people across current social divisions, especially racial divides, organizing to achieve better representation of a broader array of people in governance.

These notions of civic competence are not typically central to our consideration of populist attitudes. The focus is typically on attitudes toward government and elites. However, scholars do expect that members of the public who support populist candidates have distinctive views of democracy. Hawkins, Riding, and Mudde (2012) in an examination of sentiments within the American public that underpin support for populist candidates conceptualize populism as follows:

Specifically, we define populism as a Manichaeian approach to the political world that equates the side of Good with the putative “will of the people” and the side of Evil with a conspiring elite (Hawkins 2010; Mudde 2007). It is the moralizing, dualistic approach to our belief in popular sovereignty, one that exalts the opinion of the majority while characterizing opposition as immoral and malevolent. It stands in opposition to the approach of pluralism, which emphasizes the inevitability and desirability of differences of opinion. Whereas pluralism calls for institutions that enshrine and protect minority

rights in the pursuit of a majority will, populism craves moral clarity and posits a reified popular will that treats dissent as suspect and dangerous. Whereas pluralism sees political relations as essentially those of cooperation or even harmony, populism sees a world that is naturally antagonistic. (3)

Although examinations of populist sentiment typically focus on conceptions of elites and the government,¹ there is a consensus that populist sentiments entail a perspective on the role of ordinary people in democracy. People who support populist candidates appear to perceive that virtue is with the people and their common wisdom, rather than with experts or elites (Oliver and Rahn 2016, 190). The emphasis is on the goodness of rule by majority, as opposed to the protection of minority rights (190).

Given this heavy emphasis on the role of the people in populist thought, how do populist supporters conceive of the virtue of the people? What do they expect of other citizens as they exercise their voice in a democracy? What role do these expectations play as people construct their identities with “the people?”

Definitions of “the people” in populist rhetoric are inherently antagonistic and constructed in opposition to “others” (Oliver and Rahn 2016, 191). Because of this, and because my interest is in examining the possibility of organizing across populist groups who perceive a lack of representation, I examine the way people perceive the civic competence of their political opponents.

I am not presuming that it is ideas about civic competence that are the main thing that prevents people from forming political coalitions. A strong contender for that role is racism and nativism. It has long been advantageous for those in power and against redistribution to use racism to prevent coalitions between lower-income whites and racial minorities (Alesina and Glaeser 2004; Lipsitz 2006; Roediger 2007). Recent increases in immigration have been accompanied by anti-immigrant attitudes that have driven whites toward the Republican Party, away from potential coalition with Democratic-leaning racial minorities (Abrajano and Hajnal 2015). Anti-immigrant sentiments are playing a key role in populist support in the United States, as in other countries (Milner 2017). Donald Trump’s campaign rhetoric defined “the people” with frequent reference to immigrants as a threat (Lamont, Park, and Ayala-Hurtado 2017). The contemporary context of the first African-

¹ For example, in (Hawkins, Riding, and Mudde 2012), the authors use the following 4 items to tap populist attitudes: “Politics is ultimately a struggle between good and evil.” “The politicians in Congress need to follow the will of the people.” “The power of a few special interests prevents our country from making progress.” “The people, not the politicians, should make the most important policy decisions.” Oliver and Rahn (2016) measure populist attitudes through a 14-item battery of questions about “people’s feelings toward the political process, experts and common wisdom, and attachment to an American identity” (196).

American president has also given rise to a stronger role for racism in political preferences (Tesler 2012, 2016; Parker and Barreto 2013).

My point is not to set aside racism and anti-immigrant sentiments, but to examine how people intertwine them with notions of civic competency in their constructions of identity with “the people.” It should be a given that when examining public opinion in the increasingly racially diverse United States, we take into account the racial hierarchy that forms the backdrop of American politics (Masuoka and Junn 2013, 3). As Masuoka and Junn write,

Instead of a simple binary of being American or not, belonging exists on a continuum that reflects the racial hierarchy...The construction and maintenance of racial groups rely on the imperatives of preserving the privileges of higher-status groups. To keep the order intact, negative characteristics of lower-status racial groups are imputed to individual classified by race and ethnicity to justify their unsuitability for full belonging in the American polity.(4)

As a window to these perceptions, I focus my attention on understandings among white working-class rural residents who voted for Donald Trump in the U.S. presidential election of 2016, and in turn, understandings among left-leaning residents who are reacting to their perspectives. I focus my attention on white working-class rural residents not because they are responsible for the election of populist candidate Trump, but because they are regarded as a core part of the contemporary U.S. populist base.²

The data I draw on are transcripts and fieldnotes from an ethnographic public opinion study, and email correspondence from members of the public reacting to the views presented in that study. The ethnographic work is a study I have conducted with rural voters in the upper Midwestern U.S. state of Wisconsin since 2007 (Cramer Walsh 2012; Cramer 2016). Starting in 2007, I invited myself into the conversations of people meeting regularly in gathering places such as diners, gas stations and cafes in 39 groups in 27 communities that I had sampled across the state to represent a range of places varying in political, social, and economic indicators.³ I visited most of these groups repeatedly through the presidential

² We should be cautious in attributing the election of Trump to white working-class voters. As Carnes and Lupu have pointed out (2017), when defined by income, the majority of Trump supporters were not working-class. The indicator of class more commonly used by pundits is education and it is the case that the majority of Trump voters did not have a college degree. (See, however, Lamont, Park, and Ayala-Hurtado (2017) for attention to working-class defined as those without college degrees.) However, Carnes and Lupu point out, among Trump supporters without a college degree, 60% fell in the upper-half of the income scale. Perhaps a more appropriate way of describing Trump’s base is white voters (e.g. Coates 2017).

³ Extensive details on the methods used for this work are available in Cramer 2016.

election of 2012, and have returned to listen to groups meeting in rural places in the campaign and aftermath of the 2016 presidential election.

The emails I analyze have written to me about the book and op-eds that I have published and public talks I have given on this project, received since the 2016 presidential election. I include in this analysis 163 emails that commented on the portrayals of rural residents' views.⁴ The vast majority of these emails are from people I have never met, who are not themselves social scientists.⁵

1.2 A brief recap of rural consciousness and resentment

To set the stage, allow me to recap briefly the perspectives I have encountered in my fieldwork that I have focused on in my publications and speeches about this study. I have conducted this fieldwork with people who meet with each other regularly in gathering places of their choosing. These are not interviews, or focus groups, and I do not convene these gatherings. These are groups of people who assemble themselves, and in most cases do not know until I show up that I will be joining them that day.⁶ I do come equipped with questions to pose to the group, but for the most part allow the participants to choose the direction of the conversation.

About one year into my fieldwork (which started in 2007), it was undeniable that what I was hearing in the rural areas and smaller communities was a pervasive and intense resentment toward the cities. This was not a perspective I expected, nor intended to study. I have called this perspective rural consciousness, building off of the group consciousness literature that has helped us understand when social identities are likely to be important for political behavior (Miller et al. 1981). In short, this is an identity as a rural person infused with a sense of distribute injustice. In general, it took the form of people feeling as though rural residents like themselves were not getting their fair share of three main things: attention, resources, and respect. They perceived that the important decisions that affected their lives were made in the main urban centers in the state, and communicated out to them, with little listening going on in reverse. They also perceived that one of these centers, the state capital (Madison), pulled in their taxpayer dollars, spent them on itself or on the other urban center (Milwaukee), and spent less than it should on their own communities. Finally, they perceived that the people making these decisions had little experience or understanding of rural areas, and did not respect the people living there.

⁴ I excluded emails that consisted of questions solely about my research methods or what literature to consult for further reading. I use the content of the emails to categorize people as pro- or anti-Trump.

⁵ Of the 163 writers, I personally knew 23 of them, and 29 of them self-identified as academics.

⁶ The one exception is the Downtown Athletic Club (Group 1) whom I contact before I visit because they meet in a warehouse owned by one of them that is hard to access if they are not expecting me.

An important part of these perspectives center on notions of hard work and deservingness. Often, when people are explaining to me that they are not receiving their fair share of resources, they are making a judgment that they deserve more and that what they deserve is going to undeserving others such as welfare recipients who are racial minorities, lazy public employees who sit behind desks all day, and their white neighbors on disability. In these conversations, their definition of deservingness are a function of their perceptions of whom in the population works hard.

People who were making sense of politics through these viewpoints tended to be attracted to Donald Trump as a presidential candidate. Through this lens, Trump validated their frustration with politics as usual and their sense that they deserved more, and that what they deserved was being diverted to undeserving others.

I provide this background on the perspectives of many of the people I have met in my fieldwork to provide context for their views of the civic competence of Clinton voters. This animosity toward cities and city people—including racial and ethnic minorities and also white urban professionals—is an important perspective through which they viewed the Clinton candidacy and the people who supported her.

My fieldwork does not lend itself to a description of what all United States residents, nor even all residents of Wisconsin, think about the competence of others. My goal instead is to look closely at what it looks like when people doubt the competence of others to try to understand how these perspectives influence support for democratic innovation.

Although my goal is not to describe a cross-section of attitudes, an overview of evidence from survey data is a useful starting point. In short, surveys tell us that people in the United States think little of the competence of other people, and strikingly, often think little of their own abilities, too. Most people think that they are informed to just an average degree. When the GSS in 2012 asked, “Compared to most people, how informed are you about politics: not at all, a little, somewhat, very, or extremely?” the average response was “somewhat.”⁷ Unlike the typical over-reporting on self-reports of voting turnout, it does not appear that there is a social desirability bias toward the more informed response. In 1999 the IEA Civic Education Study of 14-year-olds showed results skewing towards “disagree” in response to the statement, “I know more about politics than most people my age.”⁸ And in response to the statement, “I am able to understand most political issues easily” more respondents said “Don’t Know,” “Strongly Disagree” or “Disagree” (N=1588) as said “Agree” or “Strongly agree” (N=1508).

⁷ General Social Survey, 2012 Merged Data, ICPSR study number 35478.

⁸ ICPSR study number 03892, “Strongly disagree” N=517, “Disagree” N=1058, “Agree” N=492, “Strongly Agree” N=172, “Don’t know” N=456.

We know that these perceptions of political knowledge and understanding are often not accurate, and that they are biased against politically marginalized groups. For example, women and men both perceive that women are less knowledgeable about politics (Banwart 2007; Mendez and Osborn 2010). I draw attention to these perceptions—accurate or not—on the basis of evidence that perceptions are an important mediator between reality and political choices and behavior (Bartels 2002; Erbring, Goldenberg, and Miller 1980; Miller et al. 1981). How we see each other is likely an important factor in the political actions we pursue, or not, with one another. Perceptions of the democratic capacity and political expertise of others enable or inhibit our willingness to engage in communication about politics with others (Huckfeldt 2001). They quite likely matter for how much attention we give to others' preferences. We are not likely to listen and take seriously (and be persuaded by) the viewpoints of people we think do not have sufficient political knowledge (regardless of their actual level of expertise) (Ryan 2011).

2. Empirical Evidence on Perceptions of the Competence of Others

I turn now to perceptions among the groups in my fieldwork that I have observed since the 2016 election. My conclusions in this paper are informed by my work since 2007 with the full set of 39 groups, but I will focus my examples on conversations that have occurred in 2016 and 2017.

Since the election, I have focused on 6 groups, which consist mainly of Trump supporters living in rural areas. For more details on the communities in which these groups meet, please see Appendix A.

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| Group 1 ⁹ | The “Downtown Athletic Club,” which is a group of white working and retired men who meet for coffee in a warehouse attached to one member’s business, every weekday morning, in a low-income agricultural hamlet in central Wisconsin. (The reference to “downtown” is a tongue-in-cheek reference to the fact that there is no downtown in this community.) I visited with them the Friday after the November election, and again in late January after the presidential inauguration. |
| Group 6 | A group of white working and retired men who meet for coffee in a gas station early every weekday morning in a low-income northwestern Wisconsin logging community. I spent time with them the Monday morning following the election, and then again in early July. |
| Group 8 | A group of white working and retired men and women who meet in a gas station in a small town in south-western Wisconsin. I spent time with them in late June. |

⁹ I am using the group number references I used in Cramer 2016 (p. 231-233).

- Group 9 A group of white retired and working men and women who meet in a diner in a small tourist town in north-central Wisconsin. I spent time with them in mid-June.
- Group 11b A group of white middle-aged working and retired men who meet to play dice and drink coffee every morning in the same town as the group of women just below. I spent time with them in mid-July.
- Group 11c A group of white middle-aged and senior women who meet for lunch once a week on the main street of a town in one of the poorest counties in central-west Wisconsin. I spent time with them in early January, before the inauguration, and in mid-July.

Perhaps the most striking thing about the perceptions of the civic competence of the people among these so-called populist voters is just how seldom such a topic comes up. Over the past decade, these groups have expressed in various ways that their views and concerns are not given adequate respect or attention, but they do not articulate a desire to be more involved in politics themselves, or that people in general should be. This will not surprise students of populism, since scholarship on populism recognizes that populist appeals play to the desire for greater representation, but typically through means such as direct democracy, rather than through participatory or deliberative democracy (e.g. Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017). The focus of their resentment is not the lack of participation of ordinary people, but on the nature of government. When they diagnose problems with democracy, the behavior they criticize is typically that of government or news media actors. Therefore at the same time that populist rhetoric posits virtue resides with the people, the people I have encountered who supported Donald Trump in 2016 have not spent much if any time talking about those virtues as the ability to participate in democracy.

2.1 City people are being fooled and can't reason

Nevertheless, the aftermath of the 2016 presidential election has afforded a chance to hear what they tell each other about the competence of their political opponents. One of the most striking perceptions I have encountered is the perception that people on the left are making uninformed or foolish decisions. I say that this is striking, because well-educated people on the left commonly claim that working-class people who vote in favor of smaller government are being fooled, distracted, or are uninformed, but the voters on the right that I have spent time with reciprocate with quite similar complaints.

They have had plenty to say about how people in the cities (or at least those who voted for Clinton) are the ones who are being fooled, who are not smart, and are not reasoning through information carefully. At the end of January, the men in the Downtown Athletic Club lamented that people are not reasoning through their choices, but instead are just voting the party line (Group 1).

Ben¹⁰: I guess what bothers me is I only know about 4 or 5 Democrats, but I'm just surprised how, Republicans are probably the same way, how they can see the country going to hell and still vote. One guy told me, if Hitler ran for president, if he was a Democrat they'd vote for him. He doesn't care how the country is going, he'd still vote for another Democrat.

KJC: [Restating to clarify] He's just going to vote for the party.

Ben: Just going to vote for the party. To me, that's the ruin of the nation.

Fred: Oh I said that about 15-20 years ago. I said they've got to throw the Democrats, Republicans, and everybody's just got to be an individual running to do what's best for the country, not what's best for their party.

This perception that city dwellers are less intelligent were typically aimed at white elites. Take for example, this sarcastic remark (made at the end of January) against Reince Priebus, former chair of the Republican National Committee, and whom Trump chose to be his chief of staff shortly after winning the election.

Lou: He's the guy who also helped engineer Trump's campaign. He's a sharp guy. He really is. I'm surprised he came from southern Wisconsin, he's a sharp guy [the group laughs hard-- he's making a joke about the lack of intelligence coming from the more urban part of Wisconsin.]

Across the years of my fieldwork, I regularly encountered people who told me that urbanites may be "well-educated" but have little common sense and can not actually make reasonable decisions. For example, one man in a group of men meeting every morning in the town hall of a northern tourist town told me in June 2008 that researchers from the university in Madison tended to look down on locals like himself. "They don't want anything to do with ya. They think they're smarter than ya. Got that book learning. People go to college they come out dumber than they went in. They got the books there, those books, it's not like the experience" (see also Cramer 2016, ch. 5).

Around the elections of 2008, 2012, as well as 2016, I regularly heard that people voted for Barack Obama and then Hillary Clinton because they were illogically voting on the basis of identity politics. The perception was that these voters were casting their ballots for these candidates "just because" Obama was Black and Clinton was a woman.

¹⁰ All names in the quoted discussions are pseudonyms. I use "KJC" to refer to myself.

On policy issues, these Trump supporters argued that Clinton supporters have their basic facts wrong. Their allegations were that people on the opposite side of the political spectrum were paying attention to biased news sources, or were being fooled by the Democrats. Here's one example from the Downtown Athletic Club at the end of January (Group 1).

Lou: When the Democrats tell you that Obamacare is really good for 20 million people, figure the odds. There's 300 million people in America. 20 million is maybe 6%. Maybe half of them get their premium subsidized, maybe they don't, but their deductible is so high that they can't use it anyway. You know, it's 4000-5000 [dollars]. That might be low. They can't use it. It's a fallacy that that's helping people.

In the months since the election, I have bluntly asked people how they respond to the claim that people who voted for Trump made an ignorant decision. To the group of women meeting for lunch (Group 11c), I asked (in early January),

KJC: How do you respond? What do you say back to that, to someone saying to you, like, "How can they not know that voting for Trump is voting against their interests..."

Carrie: Well, viewing what our viewpoint of Hillary or I should say my viewpoint of Hillary and what she has done and my viewpoint of Trump, what he has done. If we do pros and cons, Trump wins. I mean, that's all you can do.

Lucille: We need change.

Carrie: We need change.

Lucille: We really need the change. I think a lot of people were really hoping for that...I can't believe people voted for him [Obama] the second term.

Gladys: Well, I think if Oprah would have kept her mouth shut, he probably wouldn't have. [...]

Carrie: Well, people voted for Obama because he's Black.

Gladys: Oh, yeah. Oh, "I'm doing the right thing."

Carrie: Yeah, just like white people voted for Hillary because she's going to be the first woman. That's not the reason to vote for Hillary. If you're voting for her because you believe in what her goals are and achievements, then fine. Don't vote for somebody just because.

These voters perceive that whatever government is doing, it is not benefiting people like them, and they therefore found the Trump message of a need for drastic change appealing. They have a hard time understanding why people voted for Obama, especially for a second term, because they perceived his first term brought little change in politics as usual. They think the need for change is significant and is not outweighed by reasons such as a desire to elect the first female president.

Notice how partisanship, group identities, and perception of civic competence are aligned in these conversations. My claim here is not about causality, or which of these characteristics drive the others. Instead, my goal is to illuminate how people are constructing their notions of who are legitimate members of the virtuous “people” by questioning the utility of categorizations (Blacks, women) that are not typically included as the traditional mainstream.

2.2 Clinton voters are hypocritical

Part of these voters’ criticism of people who voted for Clinton was that they perceived that choice to be hypocritical. This has been especially apparent in conversations about sexism. When I asked the Downtown Athletic Club about Trump’s misogynistic comments in the Access Hollywood videotape that came to light during the presidential campaign,¹¹ they retorted that Trump’s behavior was not significantly different than Bill Clinton’s.

Fred: I get a kick out of Ken, our staunch Democrat. When Trump get in there he says, “Oh! I can't wait until the inauguration when that stripper walks down the aisle at the inauguration!” I'm like, really? That's any different than the president having sex in the White House with somebody? [pause] That's better? That's okay? That's okay for that to happen? What the hell are you thinking? Why would you even [shakes his head]? That's what blows my mind on some of these people. It's okay as long as it's for Ken and the Democrats and whatever, now it's okay, but God forbid something else happens on the other side.

I heard nearly identical comments from the group of women meeting in the central Wisconsin town (in January).

Carrie: I have a question for you, to be personal. Were you for Trump, or were you for Hillary?

KJC: I voted for Hillary to be honest.

Carrie: Why?

¹¹ <http://www.nbcnews.com/video/trump-on-video-making-lewd-remarks-about-women-781496387850>

KJC: Because Hillary, I have to say [pause] I did watch the videotape that was released with Trump bragging about grabbing this woman. And I really [pause] I couldn't get past that. I have a nine-year-old daughter, and...

Gladys: But Look at Slick Willie¹² [...] ¹³

Carrie: His choice of words were unappropriate. But we're all human. Even girls go out and get drunk and have a good time and say things maybe we shouldn't say in public.

Gertie: Bill Clinton, look at him.

Carrie: They didn't know that they were being taped. Again, something that happened in 2003 is going to come out now? Yet look at all the stuff Hillary's done. That's just goes underneath the carpet, which is a lot more harmful than what Trump ever said, not that it wasn't appropriate.

To many Clinton voters, voting for a person who openly bragged about sexually assaulting women is unconscionable. But to these Trump supporters, that stance is a self-righteous denial of that Democratic candidates have behaved inappropriately, too.

2.3 People on the left are not tolerant

Left-leaning voters and pundits commonly criticize those voting against big government, those voting “against their interests,” as not being sufficiently open to opposing points of view.¹⁴ Members of the conservative groups I spent time with expressed a similar view of people voting for Democrats.

Several men in the Downtown Athletic Club put it this way, at the end of January (Group 1):

Fred: Yeah he'd be ... Yeah that's the thing we've noticed, if you get a Republican and a Democrat talking, just talking about it, the Democrat seems like they just go ballistic over the top. Doesn't matter *what* you say, you're just totally wrong. Won't even allow you to listen. Won't even allow himself to listen to what you have to say.

¹² This is a nickname for former Democratic president Bill Clinton.

¹³ I use this symbol to denote dialogue omitted for the sake of brevity.

¹⁴ Surveys of voting-age U.S. residents show this perceptions among left-leaning voters (<http://www.latimes.com/politics/la-na-pol-polarized-voters-20160622-snap-story.html>) (Parton 2016).

Lou: You'll have a hard time in this country getting things together. The Democrats, they say I should be tolerant but they're not tolerant of anything. If I don't agree with them, they're not tolerant.

Similarly, the women in the lunch group in central west Wisconsin talked about the impossibility of discussing politics with people who opposed Trump (Group 11c, January).

Gertie: You didn't talk about Obama or any of them. Trump to them, I mean he was a dirty word.

Gladys: This is why I don't discuss politics because I'm not going to get scolded for how I think. "Who do you think you are telling me that I'm wrong and you're right?"

Gertie: I didn't talk to them. I just listened to them. If I said I was for Trump, oh ... I just listened to them. I didn't discuss it with them. Same way with family, I'm sure.

Lucille: I just said, "Mm-hmm, ah, oh. Isn't it scary out there?" and things like that.

These voters do not perceive much tolerance for their views. This is a reminder that improving the civility of discourse, or even the existence of discourse, across political divides is difficult in the contemporary era of contentiousness (Wells et al. 2017). While Trump voters are often accused of intolerance toward many social groups, these Trump voters perceive that those lodging such complaints have little tolerance themselves.

2.4 Democrats just vote for handouts

A common critique of low-income people voting for Republican candidates is that they are voting against their interests, but the low-income people I have spent time with who support Trump likewise perceive faulty motivations among the people voting for Democrats. One of their most common complaints along these lines has been that people are voting for Democrats because they want to continue receiving "handouts," or support from government programs.

For example, while meeting with the Downtown Athletic Club (Group 1) three days after the election, I asked about the members' faith in their fellow citizens. Lou's initial response was positive but then Joe lamented that people vote for Democrats because they are reluctant to "bite the hand that feeds them." Then Ken, the token Democrat that day, jumps in to say that farmers who vote Republican—and receive farm subsidies—are guilty of the same thing.

KJC: How do you feel about other people in the country, meaning, when you think about the future of democracy do you have faith in other people in the country being able to make good decisions?

Lou: Yah, you *have* to in this country.

John: Yeah, I think they'll be forced to make good decisions. Otherwise, the whole republic will crumble.

Joe: I think the voter base is messed up now. It won't get straightened out until, there's too many people on the government team now, which has screwed up the voter base. They expect all the working people to pay for all these people that don't work, and that's basically the Democratic voter base, is all these give away programs, and all these aid programs. It's better off, like Fred said, probably if he had thrown in the towel he would have been better off on welfare! Well that's, "Don't bite the hand that feeds you." I think that's the problem, mostly, is the voter base is so screwed up with the give-away programs because there's so many of them, and that's why it's hard for conservatives like most of us here to break through because they're, all the devils are voting Democratic because they don't want to bite the hand that's feeding them.

KJC: Yeah. [not said as a question, but in a tone that I am listening]

Ken: [Disagreeing.] This is a big farming area. You ever hear of farm subsidies? [He's perceiving that I am agreeing with these folks—so here he is partly arguing with me, as much as he is arguing with the others in the room.] That's a give away program. The biggest one in the United States history, and we got a lot of conservatives are all, "Oh, we're going to vote Republican." They're voting for the hand that feeds them because they look in the mailbox and they go, "Oh, look at them checks."

Joe: Ken, not everyone takes those.

Ken: You can go on the website, and I could read you off forty of them from around here that have taken them. So, I'm just telling you. That's a big give away. When they talk about give away programs, that's a hell of a big give away in this area.

Joe: The difference between that give away and that program is that those people are working.

Ken: They do not pay their fair share in taxes because I pay three and a half times. I have property in northern Wisconsin. I pay three and a half

times more than any farmer pays on a hundred and sixty acres around here, and mine is in a managed forest program. I still pay three and a half times more. That's not right.

When you're in a big rural area where you have all this, and they're not paying--just sayin.' We're kind of depressed in that area. Looking for money. Every municipality is looking for money. Aids have been cut to the schools, and we've got all these so-called conservatives, but they're worried about their own pocketbook, just like they're belly aching and crying about the Democrats waiting for their handouts.

It kind of goes both ways. Didn't mean to start an argument, but that's a fact. And you can go on a website and any county in the state and see where that money goes.

Lou: Like I said, those subsidies, the people that are getting them are working. They're working.

Ken: It's a hand out. It's a handout you should not get. Nobody gives to nobody else.

Later on in the conversation, Ben goes back to the theme of people voting because of handouts and urban people casting ignorant votes. He asks me to explain how can it be that city people see things so differently.

Ben: Okay, everybody that's sitting in here, not everybody, we depend on the government. There's four teachers in here, and I work for an operating engineers all of my life. So half of our work came from the Department of Transportation, federal money. I mean we all, well, I don't like to say all, but most of us depended on tax dollars, help from the government to keep the country going. And then, we see it this way, and then the cities see it the other way, so what are we missing there?

Jake: That's a trickle down, too, because he employed people in town, which in turn buy stuff from the stores.

Ben: Well, hell yeah. It's all a trickle down.

John: Everything is kind of a trickle down, but I mean more direct than ...

Jake: Yeah, I understand that.

Ben: Farmers get subsidies. You work for a farmer. Everybody depends on it so why is the attitude different? Some time somebody's got to tell me that. I'm surprised you can't tell me that. Why the difference in

Milwaukee and Madison and the cities, are different than rural America because we're all rural America. Hell, yeah, we depend on the government somewhere to keep us rolling.

John: If everything was government.

Joe: Isn't that some of the problem, though, that the government thinks they have to run your life so much that you've got to depend on them?

John: A big portion of it is the size of government again.

Lou: I think in the cities they have a lot of social programs that they help. Yeah, they have a lot of social programs down there. A lot of minorities, and that's to cost them a lot of money. You can't say they do a lot in roads because when you go to Madison their streets are all terrible. They don't take care of them because they don't have any money, I imagine, to do that. They've got a lot of other people they've got to take care of.

[...]

John: The farmers, it's feast or famine.

KJC: I'm trying to think of a good answer for you. I mean it's a great question. I ask because I was saying earlier to these guys I have a lot of people calling me and asking me, "How can it be that people in rural Wisconsin voted for Trump?" You know what I mean? Your question is exactly the flip side. "What's the deal with the city people, and the Democratic Party is so appealing?" Great question.

Lou: Handouts. Handouts. They get their ...

John: I just think in general now I don't know the magnitude of the country the size of the country, but the government is just growing at such a rapid pace that is it really necessary to have, I guess back to somebody said here, is it necessary to have that huge body of people working, and I mean with their hand in the pot in government grabbing a big salary, or a good salary? Do we need all those people on the dole, on the payroll?

Somehow maybe they can shrink the size of the government. Maybe they can't. Maybe we're just growing too fast that there's no way to shrink it.

Later on in the conversation, Ben brings up the question again of how could city people get it so wrong:

Ben: My question is, what was the concern of your young students?

KJC: A variety of things. One is there's a lot of fear among my students about Trump, how he's going to treat people in general. Immigrants, Muslims, gay students, you know, students, I mean, Madison is a place where, that's kind of all on the surface, you know what I mean?

Ben: It's almost ultra liberal, too, you know. That's part of the problem. You can go down to Madison, and them three people that you just talked about, we talk about them. We put the shoe on where it fits.

Ronny: In college, they have their view about all, when they're twenty-five and twenty-six and they're out working, they'll be switching because they'll find out about these things.

Ben: They'll have to be responsible because you know where rural America wants the immigrants? You know where? Where? BACK! Out of here. Tomorrow. [saying this with a lot of intensity] That's the way we feel about it. Freebies and they came in here, and they're freebies, and we don't need anymore freebies.

KJC: I think that's part of what scares some of my students.

Ben: I think that very well could be. They're too involved in that do-gooder stuff. I think they get that from the colleges. Wanted free tuition, which can never happen. I think that just grabbed them all.

Ben was not the only one in this group concerned that young people in the cities were making bad political decisions.

Ronny: I thought it [the election] got so stupid I was actually going to vote for Lady Gaga.

Joe: Oh no, Ronny, don't admit that.

John: No, I was just, why I asked that is I see the riots in all the cities.

Ronny: They're mostly young people, too.

John: They are young. I think they're under twenty-five, most of them. Obviously, there's a reason why they're doing that. They have this great distrust in Trump. I understand that, but they're supposedly educated kids. What I'm saying by that is they have to understand that some of this stuff just can't come about. It IS a chore to try to sort through it. [He is recognizing that understanding the issues can be difficult.]

Lou: He [Trump] can't do that stuff all by himself [such as starting nuclear war]. He can't do that.

The men meeting in the logging town 200 miles northwest across the state (Group 6, November) similarly complained about handouts. They did not state explicitly that handouts were driving votes for Democrats but I was struck by the way the complaints about handouts came up in the context of talk about the different way of life in the cities.

KJC: Tell me about your faith in your fellow Americans.

Bo: I got faith in the people I hang with because I trust them and they're, I consider them friends. Do I have faith in a lot of other folks? No.

Mitch: I'm a transplant and I come up here for a reason.

KJC: They're pretty nice to you though.

Mitch: Oh yeah, they beat me up frequently too [laughing], but I come up here for a reason. Because of the people. He's a good person, he's a good person, he's a good person [nodding his head at different people around the table]. The fellowship is fantastic. You can count on your fellow person here. You really can. Down by me it's dog eat dog. Is there some people you can trust? Yeah, but it's not the same.

[...]

Jerry: Why do you think [a friend of theirs] is trying to get up here so bad.

Mitch: What's he doing? Same thing I'm doing. I'm running from it.

Jerry: He wants to get away from that.

Mitch: You bet. I'm running from it. I would love to have my family up here with me. They don't ... I started coming up here 37 years ago. And when I get my time, I come. Now I probably spend 5 months a year here.

A younger man, perhaps in his 30s, starts talking about his life and his ex-wife.

Noah: No, my back's getting tired carrying 3 or 4 people around all the time. I wish they could chip in.

Ron: Yeah they get on disability and like you say...

Mitch: It doesn't matter if you're a Democrat or a Republican.

Ron: Once you get it, it's good. They throw the stuff at you—money at you...
OK, we're all dancing! [laughs]

Noah: My ex-wife-- Complain, complain, complain. Cause she can't find a man to take care of her. So she's on a disability now? So that's how she got her check? But she's fine! Just fine!

Bo: What's wrong with these doctors--

Noah: People are just giving it out--

Bo: That's right. What's wrong with these doctors approving these so-called disabilities? They give them out like they're aspirin.

Noah: Just give it away because of that. They give away billions of dollars...

Mitch: Absolutely.

The Downtown Athletic Club (Group 1) includes at least one person who points out that a wide range of people receive “handouts,” including even people within their coffee klatch. Even then, however, some of them are simply bewildered that well-educated people would vote for candidates from the party more likely to support such government programs. It is striking to me just how similar that view is to the astonishment I encounter in urban settings when people ask me how can it be that people voted for Trump.

In the other groups of Trump supporters I spent time with in other parts of the state, there is a strident belief that handouts are a major problem, and are at the core of many of our public issues. Many on the left criticize Trump voters for failing to see that they could benefit from the very government programs they are voting against. But listening to these Trump voters reveals a serious concern that those using and supporting the government programs are themselves deluded.

When people talk about handouts and “giveaways” the implication is that the people who receive them are not deserving of this support. They are often talking about white recipients of these programs, but racial considerations enter in through notions of deservingness. Throughout my fieldwork, as other scholars have noted, individuals’ assessments of deservingness are linked to ideas of who works hard (Soss and Schram 2007). Racial stereotypes in the United States often equate industriousness with whiteness and laziness with people of color (Winter 2008, 2006).

What work is being done to make these views appropriate in these conversations? The notion of industriousness and personal initiative enables people to write off entire groups of people as not deserving of inclusion in a civic community. So too,

does blaming the victims, and deriding the attempts to achieve greater representation (e.g., “now they think they have got a voice”).

When I met with the Downtown Athletic Club (Group 1), 3 days after the election, racism and ethnocentrism were undeniably a part of the conversation.

John: The reason the economy is an issue with me is because if you get the economy rolling many of the people that are not working are going to be working. Consequently, that should take some of the agony away from those people. Everybody will be happier. The idleness of it all right now, I think no jobs, and whatnot. I think people get disgusted. I'm talking about those people in Milwaukee, Madison, Racine, Kenosha. I'm not talking about rural America so much as I'm talking about the riots.

Ronny: I wasn't going to vote, but I wanted a sticker. I wanted a sticker.

John: Those are the people that I'm concerned with. The ones--The Ferguson people.

Ben: We've got to get our safety back. Obama let it just ... We're back in the sixties with the Black relationship. [other: oh yeah] He's got to get that back. I'm not going to Milwaukee.

Joe: Race relations are worse than ever with him in there.

Ben: Madison, though. All those cities. We've got to get that safety back. It's all we see are the shooting and shootings. Barack, he just let the Blacks, tried to give them so much, and now they think they've got a voice. This is going to tear the world--we're a minority – that's why he [Trump] won the election, won the election.

Later on in the conversation, as we were winding down and I was getting ready to leave, John asks me a question about crime in Madison, and the conversation turns to Muslims.

John: I would say, my question for you--

KJC: Yes.

John: [Are you] from Madison? [He is double-checking. They have known me for years and know I work in Madison.]

KJC: Yes.

John: How do the people, the common citizens, how do they feel about the criminal – do you have a problem in Madison—where people are afraid of the police, or afraid of moving up and down the street at night or anything?

KJC: I'd say not afraid of the police. I mean it's different if you're a white person. If you're a Black person living in Madison I think there is some fear right now.

John: Fear for them?

KJC: For their own safety.

John: Or by them?

KJC: For their own safety. Then I think in general there's a sense that crime is higher and it's doesn't feel as safe a city.

John: What about the Muslim community?

KJC: They're pretty scared at the moment.

Jake: Since that thing over there in LaCrosse or wherever it was [referring to a recent attack in which a Muslim student at the University of Wisconsin-Stout was beaten to death.]¹⁵

KJC: I got a letter from a Muslim student the other day after Trump won saying, "I'm afraid for my personal safety. What do I do?"

Jake: Is he a citizen or is he here just for school?

KJC: Yeah, he's been in the U.S. his whole life. I forget where he's from, but his family's Muslim. I *wanted* to say to him, "You don't have to be afraid. People are still decent and no one's going to hurt you."

Lou: He's not a refugee.

KJC: He's American.

Lou: He shouldn't have to worry.

¹⁵ <http://www.jsonline.com/story/news/2016/10/31/uw-stout-student-dies-after-assault/93091678/>

Jake: That don't make a difference. Right? "Muslim is Muslim. That's bad."
[He's referring to others' perceptions, and criticizing the current context that is making this student feel unsafe.]

John: The sense that I get from the Muslim community is that the vast majority of the people, the white people, don't care if they're here. It's just that, at least I somewhat feel this way, that my gripe with the Muslim community, is that I don't think they go out of their way enough to monitor their radicals. I mean you can not protect them. If you want to be in this country, fine, be here, but don't protect the bad eggs, the bad apples and stuff. You've got to come forth and say, "This person's got some awful radical ideas. We're going to have to deal with that."

Jake: Is their thought process the same as what we feel?

KJC: I don't know. That's a very good question.

Joe: There in Korea I had brothers, one in Hawaii and one in Japan. The one in Japan set right on the shores of Japan looking at South Korea, and he had two colored buddies, one on each side, when I get in combat they're going with me. They weren't discriminating in the service. They were treated like everybody else.

John: They're all brothers there. I mean, that's a different story. That's a different issue. I mean everybody looks out.

Joe: You want to go home, you've got to look out for your buddy. He's got to look out for you or you might not make it.

John: They're not worried about the United States at all. They're worried about, if we're all in one cluster. We're worried about this one saving it and that one saving it and that country's way the heck over there.

Joe: I know they wouldn't lie about it. If a guy was dragging his feet, they didn't care if he was white, black or purple. When it got dark they had a blanket party and beat the supreme hell right out of him, and nobody could do nothing because nobody knew who did it.

We see here some serious problems for democracy. In the conversation above, as in the conversations reported earlier that criticize a reliance on identity politics when making political choices, there is a frustration with having to pay attention to race, and a longing for race blindness. Rather than consider an expansive definition of the people, there is a desire to restrict which groups are acknowledged when considering political issues. Perhaps even more problematic than the resistance to recognition is the expectation of different standards of behavior for members of

various social groups. For example, there is an expectation that members of marginalized groups should police each other, but no indication of an equivalent expectation for whites.

In other conversations, they argue that protests about police brutality happened because Obama ignited racial unrest. They applaud Trump's efforts to deport undocumented immigrants because they perceive these residents are leeching off other taxpayers.

Ben: The people we're complaining about are the people you just mentioned [immigrants]. It's not the land of the free, it's the land of the *freebie*. That's this country. The people who elected the president, they are tired of it. That's why we don't get along with Madison, just for the attitude that you just brought up here from the people that are down there. That's not you. [Giving me a pass probably because they know me.] I don't care if that's the people that elected this president because we're tired of what you just said. You know, we're tired of the freebie. I've got nothing against immigrants, I've got nothing against that, but by God you better pay your taxes and be legal here. There's 13 million people in this nation that just shouldn't be here. To me, that's just-- I can't even imagine that, that aren't paying their fair share.

There is a desire for double standards here, which one might say is the essence of social injustice. These folks crave tolerance, understanding, and respect from others, but they are not trying to extend those same things to racial and ethnic minorities.

I draw these examples from just one group, in one state, in one community. It is by no means representative of people who voted for Trump, rural voters, or even Trump voters in rural Wisconsin. Its members are white men struggling to make ends meet and to do what they believe is right in a complicated world. Through their attempts to make sense of the world, we can see how they draw on notions of appropriate civic behavior and teach their conceptions of "the people" to each other.

White identity is a widespread identity, shared by roughly half of the U.S. voting-age public, but its relevance to politics is not always clear (Wong and Cho 2005). Our examinations of populism typically look for ways in which the rhetoric of politicians draw these linkages. However, we can notice in these conversations how everyday interaction among members of the public does this work as well.

Ideally, democracy requires members of the public to occasionally consider the lives and concerns of others in order to act on behalf of the public good (Arendt 1998 [1958]; Pitkin 1981). Racism prevents that from happening. The inconsistent applications of civic standards – driven by racism or otherwise—inhibit the ability of people to identify with one another as joint members of a civic community.

2.5. Perceptions of protest

Discrimination, or unequal treatment of people on the basis of their social group membership, is antithetical to democracy. In the views characterized above we see people criticizing other people who receive benefits from government social programs. We hear that the solution to social problems is not government intervention, but instead individual initiative.

Interestingly, these same individuals seem to have a different view of individual initiative or individual agency in the realm of political action. This is not unexpected: In U.S. culture, people apply different norms when thinking about the realms of economics and politics. While they use a norm of differentiation when it comes to economics, perceiving that people ought to be rewarded for hard work and individual accomplishment, they more readily apply a norm of egalitarianism, or one person one vote, in the realm of politics Hochschild (1981). In that light, it is not surprising that people might regard individual initiative differently across these two realms.

But it is nevertheless striking that people who argue so strongly in favor of pulling oneself up by the bootstraps denigrate individual agency when exercised in the realm of politics. Take, for example, their reflections on the Women's March the day after the presidential inauguration and on the Black Lives Matter movement.

At the end of January, visiting with the Downtown Athletic Club (Group 1), I heard these thoughts on the efficacy of the women's march.

Lou: Those college students, if they get through school ... Right now they could complain about it. They're 25-26 and [when] they're making 50, 60, 70, 80 thousand [dollars] a year they'll all be Republicans too. They won't be Democrats. They'll be tired of paying taxes and all that stuff. It's just like, what do the women *expect* out of this protest? What do they expect?

KJC: What do you think?

Lou: I think they're *dumb*. Wasting their time and money, they're not going to change anything. They won't change anything. [Pause] I don't think. Maybe *you* think [looking at me].

KJC: Well, we'll see.

Lou: Maybe you were in the protest.

KJC: No, I was in Alabama actually with my daughter.

Lou: All right!

Several months earlier, on the Friday after the election, they also criticized people protesting Trump's win.

Joe: I heard on the news yesterday they were interviewing some of the protesters, and they interviewed two of them were high school kids. Yeah.

Fred: Well, I heard on the radio this morning, or whatever there's protesting in California. They interviewed a guy, whatever, he says he threw something through a bank window or whatever, he said "Well I'm just mad because he won." I'm like, "That's a reason to throw a fucking chair through a damn bank window. Jesus, you ought to be thrown in jail with him."

At the end of January, they seemed puzzled by the tactic of protest in general, wondering aloud about why people would think it would make a difference and wondering how anyone could carve out time to participate. We were talking about tolerance, when Ronny asked me how students at UW-Madison got along with one another, and this led into a conversation about protest:

Ronny: Kids pretty much get along down there from different nationalities?

KJC: Yeah. It depends on who you ask. For the most part I would say they figure it out. But, yeah, I don't know. That's part of what I'm trying to figure out. Shouldn't it be the case that if we are talking to people who have different backgrounds than we do or have different lives that we understand one another? Do you know what I mean? Or—I just really— I don't know what we do from here.

Lou: Well, I know one thing, it don't do any good to protest all that stuff. That doesn't really help. They're not going to change anything, the protester.

KJC; Well, I think it makes people feel like they are.

Ronny: If it's about protest then protest, but when they start breaking windows and stealing stuff that's different.

Lou: A long time ago I was in the hospital, I had my gallbladder out. The Democratic Party was in Chicago and they rioted. The Supreme Court Justice said they have the right to protest but they do not have the right to block the street so that the common person could not drive his car to go from east or west or whatever. It's like you said, they don't have the right to break windows and do all that stuff. Protest not to do that, and that's what always happens. So what does it do? Makes

us, well there they are again. Protesting, breaking windows, burning cars ...

Fred: The thing is it got way worse in the Obama thing. When they were protesting, if they were a Black protester and you tried to do something, man you were prejudiced [you were called prejudiced.]

Lou: Racist.

Fred: Racist. This country has gotten that way, mamby pamby. I use this story all the time. I went to Madison one year to college. A short course. [A short-term, on-site course for people in the farming industry at the University of Wisconsin-Madison]. There was 365 of us kids in the short course. There was one Black kid. The one Black kid got caught for breaking into the dorms and stealing stuff. He got kicked out. Would that happen now? What would happen? "You're prejudiced. You're picking on that one kid." Well he was the only one that did it. It didn't matter who was there, he was the one that did it. It wasn't prejudice, but because they do it, it's back to prejudice again. He did it. Sorry. It doesn't matter what you are. You got caught, you did it.

Lou: The blacks, the whites, all those people ... Don't they work?

KJC: Sure.

Lou: How do they have all that time to do that?

KJC: To protest?

Lou: Yeah, and where do they get all the money to go to travel to do that? If I was working I wouldn't have time to take off and go do that.

Fred: Just to be devil's advocate I agree with you, but if they're in the city they could have a job where they work 11 [a.m.] to 7 [p.m.]. They might go there for 2 or 3 hours. Probably not, because you're tired. If you're a good employee, a good worker, you're going home and going to sleep, but there is that potential where you work 3 to 11 [p.m.] like Mike does, on shift work. That many? I don't know.

Lou: The youth, they're not working. The Black vote, that's a lot of them, they're not working, probably. A lot of them they haul them in to protest.

Fred: Bus 'em in.

Lou: They bring them in from outside to create chaos.

Notice how within this brief conversation there are contrasting views of the appropriateness of individual agency in the realm of economics and in the realm of politics. It is also suggestive that perceptions of the appropriateness of individual initiative in these two realms is dependent on which members of the population are taking the initiative.

Lack of initiative in the realm of employment is taken as a sign of the erosion of moral fiber, but the *exercise* of initiative in the form of protest is taken as evidence of lack of moral fiber, too. Here is the way the members of this group talked about protest on the Friday after the election.

Lou: You know Obama's philosophy, came from a far right, farther right than anybody thought.

Ken: [A Clinton supporter, disagreeing with him] I think you're wrong. Left!

Lou: Oh, yeah, left.

Ken: YAH! YAH YAH! Yeah, see I caught you. You don't know what the hell you're saying.

Lou: I'm wrong. [Ken laughs] That Reverend Wright. He [Obama] was indoctrinated with that Reverend Wright philosophy. They're against the Americans and ours. Well look what's happening in the riots today. Look what's happening.

Joe: Did you ever see riots like that when the Republicans lost?

John: I told you yesterday, that's a product of every time that there's an activity or something, the whole generation is used to never losing. They always give trophies to last place, for Pete's sake.

Joe: Exactly. Yeah. Everybody gets a trophy.

John: Everybody gets a trophy. Everybody's got to feel good about themselves.

Joe: There's never a winner or a loser. Everybody's the same.

Ronny: There was a really good book written on that: *Punishment By Reward*.

John: That's about the truth, too.

Ronny: All these schools giving things to kids that they didn't do nothing for.

This group calls the protests against the outcome of the election “riots,” and attributes them not to concern with democracy but to character flaws.

The women’s group meeting for lunch in a town 90 miles west of the Downtown Athletic Club had similar questions about the connection between contemporary youth culture and protest politics (Group 11c).

Dolores: All these young people they are complaining and demonstrating and doing crazy things. We tell them they should get a job. Even if it's a minimum paying job, it's something, it's training. They can go from there to the next job.

Jane: That's what everybody does.

Dolores: I think they're spoiled.

For the members of this group, individual initiative is a good thing when it pertains to the workplace, but not when it pertains to political agitation against the status quo. They considered time spent protesting as evidence of too much time on one’s hands.

The views of Clinton supporters as expressed among these rural Trump voters are not surprisingly rather negative. Some comments suggested a basic faith in others (“otherwise, the whole republic will crumble”) but many of their comments contained extensive doubts about the decision-making of their political opponents. They believed voters on the left are being fooled and have faulty reasoning. They talked about them as hypocritical and intolerant. They saw the motivations of left-leaning voters as faulty, perceiving that Democratic voters were being driven by a desire to continue receiving “handouts.”

Finally, the Trump supporters I spent time with criticized more than the nature and origins of the preferences of Clinton voters. They derided and discounted their political tactics.

Taken together, I have suggested that these views demonstrate an inconsistency, or ambivalence (Hochschild 1981) in the application of norms about individual agency. At the same time that these folks value individual initiative and hard work in the realm of employment, they see little value in individual initiative in the form of political action.

3. Reactions to rural resentment

When we turn to the way left-leaning people have responded to the rural resentment I have observed in the groups of voters I have encountered in my

fieldwork, there is likewise an inconsistency in the way people conceptualize the agency or initiative of their opponents.

In the following analyses, I draw from emails that I have received since the 2016 presidential election. Specifically, I am including in this analysis all emails sent to me in response to my work on rural consciousness that contained reactions to that work beyond questions about methodology, related literature, or speaking engagement invitations.

These emails are not necessarily representative of any population. What they give us is an opportunity to look in close at what it sounds like when people respond to empathetic portrayals of Republican-voting, rural, white working class people, and a call for more listening and understanding of the views of such people.

Most of the correspondence I have received has been expressions of gratitude.¹⁶ Many of those emails consist of people writing to tell me that my work helped them understand how someone could vote for Trump. Many others state that they have witnessed or experienced the views of resentment I explain, and thank me for giving those views some attention and for representing the people who hold them with dignity.¹⁷ Some share personal struggles with a dual identity, as people who grew up in a small town but moved to an urban area, who now find it difficult to encounter rural consciousness among people they know and care about.

But perhaps we can learn more from the emails who do something other than thank me. First, there are a handful (4) that criticize my use of the term “resentment.” These messages remark that resentment is an overly negative term, which downplays the legitimacy of the views and the legitimacy of their negative reaction to leftist policies.¹⁸

Even more revealing for my purposes here is that many people are compelled to explain to me that the real problem is that there is something wrong with these people. 28 of the 163 writers made this type of claim. They wrote to explain to me, often in detail, what is wrong with the Republican-voting, white working class rural people I have been writing and speaking about.

¹⁶ Of the 163 emails included in this analysis, 140 contained expressions of gratitude.

¹⁷ 24 of the emails I received stated that the perspectives of rural people I describe resonate with their own experience.

¹⁸ In response to these criticisms, I have asked people in my fieldwork how they feel about the use of the term “resentment.” They may be reluctant to criticize my use of the term to my face. But typically the response I have received is blank stares or puzzled expressions. When I explain in more detail what I am asking, people have said things along the lines of, “Of course we are resentful.”

These emails make this claim in a variety of ways. One woman wrote an email to me and a Washington Post reporter who profiled my work to say that the people I spent time with have a “real wish for a ‘benevolent dictator,’ a strong maternal or paternal figure who will listen to and care for them in ways not appropriate or possible beyond childhood. It is infantile to suppose that others will listen to us and understand us to this degree once we are adults.”¹⁹ Another outlined his theory that all people can be fit on a continuum between “people who are exploiters and predators” and “people who see their role in life as giving to and caring for others” and that a “logger whose family is barely getting by on his \$9 per hour [and] can identify with the likes of Scott Walker, Ron Johnson [a Tea Party Republican Senator from Wisconsin], and Donald Trump” occupies “a similar point on [that] continuum as Scott Walker,” implying that these voters are of questionable moral character.²⁰

Many have suggested that these rural residents ignore facts, are uninformed, and ignorant or pay attention to the wrong news sources. “Apparently the news sources for many folks are from their own corner of the universe” one former state legislator remarked, acknowledging that many people choose news this way. “Our fragmented information sources do not show signs of changing,” he wrote.²¹ Some of them worried about ignorance on particular issues. “Was there not a recognition in rural agricultural Wisconsin that Federal programs supporting dairy product price supports, crop insurance and other price support programs helped?” wrote one man.²² Another wondered whether these residents recognize the contributions that Hispanic immigrants are making to their communities, especially through dairy farming.²³

Many questioned the legitimacy of the rural residents’ grievances in more direct ways. One man argued that in fact rural and exurban areas have not less but disproportionately more than their fair share of power in Congress and that “increased power has legitimized a sense of grievance and desire for more power.”²⁴ Others questioned the nature and extent of their political participation. For example, one man wrote,

I suspect if you drill down the most disenchanting are also the most disconnected. That is, if they participate at all in politics it is to vote and even then, sporadically. I suspect that feeling of disrespect you document brought out the unengaged who voted their anger and resentment. Ok, fine. But they sent back to Congress and the legislatures the same cast of characters that gave them, and all of us, what we have. And they expect change?

¹⁹ Writer ID #159.

²⁰ Writer ID #60.

²¹ Writer ID #166.

²² Writer ID #170.

²³ Writer ID #171.

²⁴ Writer ID #163.

Which is to offer the idea that if you talk to politically active members of special interest groups—Farm Bureau, medical associations, poverty advocates, pick any—you might get a different perspective. Those people who keep on voting after the election by lobbying and advocacy are the ones who really make our democracy work. What your klatchers miss is that voting doesn't tell politicians what to do and, in Trump's case, it's hard to say even what he might do. They projected on to him their own myth.²⁵

Some said, in one form or another, "Pull yourselves up by your bootstraps. I did it. You can, too." For example, one man wrote that my book

tells a sad tale of a broad population that were promised that they were in a place and that place would always be there....They are entitled to a white life like it 'should be.' They need to do nothing but what was done before and it shall be theirs. An inherited life never to change....Universally this is a white issue, and although folks may sugar coat the message with 'we're not racist' what they believe is if they share the pie so to speak there is less for them, and proof to them is the uncomfortable feeling that a black President means less of a chance for them to be President so that image trickles down so to speak...They warm to you but they do not change their place, they nod but do not engage, they go home and believe that others have it better. Their loss is the result of others taking their rightful place or succeeding where they failed.²⁶

One man wrote about a generations-long selection process at work, in which

Who leaves and who stays [in these rural communities] is not random....When rural people complain about east coast elites, I bring it to their attention that many of those 'elites' are their own children who left to go where the opportunities are...Who stayed behind? Those shy of taking risks, those with conservative personality profiles....Those left behind find comfort in their own resentment of urban success.²⁷

He went on to argue that the "abandonment of rural towns, businesses, homes and schools" was not a failure as rural people see it but instead a success. "It was the shedding of unsustainable infrastructure so that the rest of the population could survive."

Many of the people questioning the choices, reasoning and perspective of rural folks exhibiting resentment toward the cities and supporting Trump had personal experience living in a rural area themselves. They acknowledged the resentment, but questioned its legitimacy.

²⁵ Writer ID #164.

²⁶ Writer ID #57. I have corrected small typos in the original.

²⁷ Writer ID #58.

One man disagreed with these residents' perceptions that they have not been listened to. He wrote that he grew up in a small Wisconsin town, but had moved to a city in the state and now he and his family are "the embodiment of the urban elite your article talks about."²⁸

You are certainly correct about the resentment that simmers in rural Wisconsin (and I'm assuming the rest of the country). I have seen it myself...But I have to push back a bit regarding a part of the article....It's the idea that they have not been listened to by 'elites.' What doesn't ever seem to get discussed in the various "think-pieces" is that many of us so-called elites they resent actually came from hotbeds of resentment. We grew up in small towns in rural America. We grew up listening to our rural families and friends. Listening to them complain about 'city people' and 'blacks' and 'Mexicans.' Often in much more colorful language.

We then left those towns to go to college – something our families were happy about and wanted us to do. We went, and we learned. And we came home and listened to our rural friends and families more. And we respectfully – for years, respectfully, would try to impart the things we learned in college (the place they wanted us to go) to them...And we, again for years, were brushed off....Told we "didn't know how the real world worked." Little of what we said or brought home was listened to. Rarely were we listened to at all. They were stubbornly uninterested.

It gets tiresome to not hear this side of the story ever discussed. It gets tiresome to be branded the villains...simply for understanding the changing dynamics of the country and its economy and acting accordingly. Rather than stubbornly, desperately holding on to a societal ideal that no longer and probably never existed.

When will their resentment be assuaged?....We've all spent over half a decade 'listening' to them. Yet we still hear the same refrain, 'Elites don't listen to us!' What will construe being listened to? When will they feel heard? When myself and my wife and our friends finally have our lives ruined by their resentments? When we all acquiesce to their retrograde and (largely) false presumptions about the world they live in? Honestly, when?

I love Wisconsin. I love my family, and my childhood friends, and generally enjoyed my upbringing in small town Wisconsin. But frankly, I have also had it up to my ears with being the scapegoat for the problems of rural Wisconsin, and more largely, America. We have not ignored them, we have simply not done exactly what they wanted.²⁹

²⁸ This is a reference to (Cramer 2016b).

²⁹ Writer #168. I have corrected small typos in the original.

Several emails I have received along these lines express frustration with having done the hard work of moving where the jobs are, paying attention to economic trends and acting accordingly, and getting branded as the enemy or an outsider for doing so. They argue that the choices they made are the right choices when considering the facts, and they should not be resented for having made them.

There is an expectation in these emails that rural Trump voters ought to fix their circumstances through individual initiative. This is striking because it is left-leaning political ideologies that we expect to be more attentive to structural concerns. For example, racial justice activism regularly draws attention to how racial oppression occurs at a far deeper level than interpersonal discrimination; it is perpetuated by laws and policies that institutionalize racism, such as discriminatory racist zoning laws or hiring practices that allow employers to discriminate against people with criminal records. But in the views I have just characterized, we see a call to pay more attention to the individual-level flaws of the attitudes and behavior of people, namely rural white working-class counterparts who have supported Donald Trump.

The resistance to acknowledging structural causes of individuals' behavior and attitudes is not limited to right-leaning members of the public, but may be better characterized as a function of group identity. This group-serving bias in attributions of responsibility (Hewstone 1989) is well documented in the realm of politics (Conover 1988; Rudolph 2003). When considering people we think are like ourselves, we are more likely to notice external challenges, not character flaws, but the opposite is true when we are considering "others." We recognize the tendency of populist supporters to attribute blame to racial and ethnic others, as a way of shifting responsibility from themselves (Oliver and Rahn 2016, 192), but this behavior is not restricted to people of a particular political leaning.

4. Conclusion: Focusing on the flaws of individuals

Throughout the views I have presented here—of both the rural Trump supporters and the left-leaning email writers—there are claims about which voices deserve to be listened to and which voices are worthy of attention and recognition. Again, these views are not necessarily representative of a cross-section of any population. But what is striking to me is how rare it is in the fieldwork or in the email correspondence for people to remark that perhaps the problem is not the character, knowledge, news habits or political tactics of this or that population, but instead the fact that so many people feel unheard.

If we return to the question of how do we increase the health of democracy, the views presented in this paper suggest that we are a long way off. The group consciousness literature suggests that people are most likely to engage politically on behalf of their social identities when these identities are infused with a sense of systematic injustice (Miller et al. 1981). We are a long way off from these email writers and rural Trump supporters from either sharing a common identity and even farther off from perceiving that the members of a common group are recipients

of shared systematic injustice. By drawing attention to the flaws of individual people, we draw attention away from the broader forces that resist justice and equality. To the extent that citizens and residents identify the problem as the attitudes and behavior of each other, there is little room for a significant restructuring and improvement of democracy.

At a minimum, the views I have presented are a caution against crafting democratic innovations that require joint buy-in from people with opposing political views. Stridently different points of view toward the role of government are themselves one barrier to democratic innovation. But the skepticism about the basic judgment of people who support innovation via the government, and sometimes about their right to equal respect and freedom, is perhaps an even more daunting hurdle.

Perhaps these conversations are reason to rethink the notion that the democratic innovation that would be most effective or most feasible can occur at the level of the ordinary citizen. The people I have encountered in my fieldwork have been telling me for nearly a decade that their opinions do not matter, that they are overlooked and ignored by the political process. They are not entirely wrong (Bartels 2013; Gilens 2013; Gilens and Page 2014). Perhaps our desire for democratic innovation should not focus on perspectives and preferences among ordinary members of publics, but should instead focus on the powerful elite who actually influence the shape of our institutions. What if, rather than expecting ordinary citizens to exercise empathy for people on the other side of political and social divides, we expected elites to debate the merits of investing in public goods that benefit broad swaths of society, such as education and the environment? Should our examination of this populist moment focus on the flaws of voters? Or should it perhaps focus on the flaws of those who develop the rhetoric that taps into the divisive us vs. them categorizations we find among members of the public?

In other words, this analysis is further support for the arguments in the recent Chris Achen and Larry Bartels book, *Democracy for Realists* (2016). They show us the very difficult truth that the folk theorem of democracy in which “good citizens would engage in thoughtful monitoring of their government...[d]emocratic norms would be enforced by the shared values of an enlightened populace...and [a] government derives its just powers not merely from the *consent* of the governed, but from their political *judgments*” (297), does not capture actual human behavior in democracies, and is not possible for even the most sophisticated and politically aware to achieve.

That heavily empirically supported conclusion is itself sobering. But perhaps most troubling is this claim:

Especially at the state level, proponents of mind-numbing clichés about giving power to ordinary people bear considerable responsibility for the domination of government by narrowly self-interested groups. In reforming government, good intentions and high-sounding rhetoric are not enough. In the end, it is the folk theory that props up elite rule, and it is

unrepresentative elites that most profit from convenient justifications it provides for their activities. (327)

We have seen in this paper that people in the public have the folk theorem in mind when they judge their fellow citizens. They expect others to be well-informed, and expect that government operates on the basis of judgments made among members of the public. Their disdain for others is not assisted by using this folk theorem as a standard. Trump supporters and Clinton supporters deem each other to be incompetent and unworthy of empathy. The folk theorem gives people justification for turning away from those they disagree with, and tuning out from paying close attention, and in the end enables those with the reins to continue to pass policy that does little to improve their lives.

One might say that it is not the folk theorem of democracy that is intervening, but instead white supremacy. If white supremacy is defined as an ideology in which whites, particularly upper-class white men, are regarded as superior to other members of society and are therefore presumed to be those who ought to hold political power (Crenshaw et al. 1995), then it is worthwhile to notice the similarity of effects from this ideology and this folk theorem. This theory of democracy holds up unattainable standards of civic competence and therefore makes it difficult for those excluded from power to achieve recognition as valid civic participants or worthy political allies in the pursuit of a more just society.

Appendix A: Description of Groups in Fieldwork³⁰

Group Number	Municipality Description	Group Type	Municipality Population (2015)	Median Household Income (2015)	2016 Republican Presidential Vote (%)	Dates of Site Visits (Month/Year) <i>Since 2016</i>
1	Central hamlet	Daily morning coffee klatch, local gas station (employed, unemployed, and retired men)	600	55,000	45	11/16
6	Northwestern village	Daily morning coffee klatch, local gas station (employed, unemployed, and retired men)	700	32,000	45	11/16, 7/17
8	Southwestern village	Daily morning coffee klatch, local gas station (employed, unemployed, and retired men)	1500	39,000	50	6/17
9	North-central village	Daily morning breakfast group, dinner (employed and retired, mixed gender)	2,000	53,000	55	6/17
11b	Central-west village	Daily morning coffee klatch, local gas station (employed, unemployed, and retired men)	2000	39,000	65	7/17
11c	Central-west village	Weekly lunch group of women at restaurant (employed and retired)	2000	39,000	65	1/17, 7/17

³⁰ Source for population and household income is US Census American Community Survey 5-year estimate. Numbers for these figures and vote outcomes have been rounded to protect identity of the communities.

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