

What makes the politics of resentment popular in rural America? An ethnographic case study of  
Bemidji, Minnesota

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## **Table of contents**

Chapter 1: Abstract

Chapter 2: My life in Bemidji

Chapter 3: There is a storm coming

Chapter 4: The four factors of resentment

Chapter 5: What is the Politics of Resentment?

Chapter 6: Why Bemidji? Resentment, opioids, and poverty

Chapter 7: Introducing an ethnographic approach and its fruits

Chapter 8: The Study

Chapter 9: What are the biggest problems facing Bemidjians today?

Chapter 10: Is there a feeling that people in Bemidji are being neglected?

Chapter 11: Why did so many Bemidjians attend former President Trump's rally?

Chapter 12: How are the culture wars playing out in Bemidji?

Chapter 13: Policy Solutions

Chapter 14: Conclusion

## Chapter 1: Abstract

What makes the politics of resentment popular in rural America? This masters research paper documents an ethnographic case study designed to provide deeper insight into public opinion in Bemidji, Minnesota, a rural town in the north of the state with about 15,434 people.<sup>1</sup>

I immersed myself in a political conversation with seven citizens in Bemidji to better understand how citizens in the area think about politics. By using a method of listening, I learned that rural Minnesotans, like many Americans, are divided and feel frustrated in new ways. This masters research paper looks to contribute to the emerging literature that argues for a wider adaptation of ethnographic methods within political science – particularly as we grapple with anti-intellectualism and democratic erosions in the post-truth era.<sup>2</sup> I hope to fill gaps in our knowledge of the politics of resentment by further operationalizing the multifaceted nature of the concept. This masters research paper argues that the politics of resentment is made up of four distinct resentments that can be seen in Bemidji and across rural America.

The four types of resentment are geographic, economic, racial, and cultural. These resentments are layered. They melt into each other and strongly nourish an anti-establishment politics that is animated by a sense of anger, alienation, displacement, and helplessness. Those who practice the politics of resentment feel like strangers in their own land – as new geographic, economic, demographic, and cultural shifts have become too much to bear. Our seven participants give us a glimpse of the resentment and political polarization that is happening in Bemidji and across the country while also offering us some optimism and hope about the future.

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<sup>1</sup> Bureau, US Census. "City and Town Population Totals: 2010-2019." Census.gov, October 8, 2021.  
<https://www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/demo/popest/2010s-total-cities-and-towns.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Banack, Clark. "Ethnography and Political Opinion: Identity, Alienation and Anti-establishmentarianism in Rural Alberta." *Canadian Journal of Political Science/Revue canadienne de science politique* 54, no. 1 (2021): 1-22.

## **Chapter 2: My life in Bemidji**

I lived in Bemidji for about four years from 2011 up until 2015, a year before Donald Trump took office. My dad started his career as an Oncologist in Sydney, Nova Scotia – but then decided to start looking for gigs in the U.S, and the Bemidji Sanford clinic decided to give my dad a call.

On my first day of middle school in Bemidji, a kid came up to me with a confused look on his face and asked: what are you doing here? I didn't know the answer to that myself. Basel felt left out and didn't make any friends. My mom would go to the supermarket and would be asked by the cashier: "when well you go back to your warm country?"

Bemidji is no stranger to the politics of resentment, and that became increasingly apparent as I got to high school. Some kids started becoming self-proclaimed rednecks that boasted about chewing tobacco, hunting deer, and getting into disputes with native kids. "Why can't we go fishing on their land?" a pupil asked in class. One pupil even kicked a native boy with a steel toe boot once.

There were a handful of so called "people of color" at Bemidji High. We would even sit at the lunch table together. Two of my friends were African American, and they would be called "the welfare boys". My other two friends were native, and they were called "the Casino boys". The best was left for last, and I was deemed "the terrorist/Obama's cousin". The only person who had it worse than us was our transgender English teacher. "Goddammit is this what America goanna look like with these weirdos" a student screamed in the hallway before class.

Despite how it may seem on the surface, most Bemidjians are very warm, and they don't all think the same. Bemidjians pull your car out of a ditch during a snowstorm. They seem to value family more than city folks and they take care of each other.

When you look at the economy in Bemidji and much of rural America, it is apparent that Bemidji is behind. The money is elsewhere. Big tech jobs and tenure appointments are in the Twin Cities. Bemidji is left with close to nothing.

After several years, I had moved around so much and met many new people. I forgot about Bemidji. But then I saw former President Donald Trump hold a rally in town in September 2020. Watching the rally on the news, I realized I had never seen Bemidji so vibrant and excited. Food trucks sold items such as “patriots poutine” and “build that wall tacos”.

A year later while doing a master’s in political science at the University of Toronto, I came across a book titled *The Politics of Resentment* by Katherine J. Kramer. I became excited and wanted to take the ethnographic approach to Bemidji. I messaged my dad’s old boss to have a chat. I told him to find me a random sample of Bemidjians willing to have a conversation. And he did. All seven of us gathered at the dinner table and chatted.

The divisions and competing priorities of different people in Bemidji was quickly apparent – but they all wanted the same things. They all wanted food on the table, the ability to buy a home – and to be treated with dignity and respect. Let’s take care of each other and not look down on one another.

### Chapter 3: There is a storm coming

I have a story I would like to share with you. I was at Minneapolis St-Paul International Airport on January 4<sup>th</sup>, 2022, just two days shy of the one-year anniversary of the January 6 insurrection – which has been deemed the gravest assault on American democracy since the civil war.<sup>3</sup> After the incident, many are now identifying the U.S as a backsliding democracy.<sup>4</sup>

I was waiting for my flight back to Toronto, where I go to graduate school. While waiting for my flight, a man sat in the seat across from me. He was tall and buff. He had messy blonde hair and an unkept beard. If I had to speculate, he was in his mid 40s. He was wearing a camouflage sweater, steel toe work boots and a pair of Wrangler men's jeans. He walked like he owned the place, stomping and clenching his teeth around the gate. He had his face covering to his chin.

When he sat down at his gate, someone called him on his cellphone. From what I could gather from the call, the man at the gate was a construction worker from Hibbing, Minnesota, a small town up north. He supposedly had a gig in Naperville, Illinois. This seems to have been confirmed when I saw that he had dried up, bruised hands and black residue beneath his fingernails.

On the phone call, he started railing against schools delaying in person learning in the U.S due to the Omicron variant of the coronavirus. "It's some fucking dumb shit, these democRAT teacher's unions are about to play this out while they can," he said with anger in his voice and a brief chuckle. He then quickly moved on to other topics, "Hell, you can make more

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<sup>3</sup> "The Legacy of January 6." FSI, January 5, 2022. <https://fsi.stanford.edu/news/legacies-january-6>

<sup>4</sup> "Global Report: IDEA Global State of Democracy Report." Global Report | IDEA Global State of Democracy Report. Accessed January 26, 2022. <https://www.idea.int/gsod/global-report#chapter-2-democracy-health-check:-an-overview-of-global-tre.>

money on unemployment than you can working, Danny could get his ass on a plane to Ohio, and he can file for unemployment and get money again,” he said with a little giggle.

When he finished his phone call, he started looking around the airport terminal with a confused look on his face. Many of the people in the airport terminal were of Somali descent – as Minnesota has the largest concentration of Somalis in America.<sup>5</sup> Almost everyone in the terminal had a face covering on. Flights were being delayed or cancelled left and right because of staffing shortages due to the Omicron variant. After he took a quick glimpse around, he murmured to himself “this place fucking sucks”.

I bet many Americans felt his frustration. Many Americans were feeling the blunt of a supply chain crisis.<sup>6</sup> Labor shortages had begun causing profound problems across a wide range of industries. Restaurants started having trouble finding servers, factories struggled to find people for the assembly line – and hospitals struggled to find nurses.<sup>7</sup> The U.S inflation rate had hit a 39-year high of 7%.<sup>8</sup> America’s billionaires had grown \$2.1 trillion richer during the pandemic – their collective fortune skyrocketing by 70 percent — from just short of \$3 trillion at the start of the COVID crisis on March 18, 2020, to over \$5 trillion on October 15, 2021.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> “Data by Topic - Immigration & Language.” MN State Demographic Center, March 18, 2020. <https://mn.gov/admin/demography/data-by-topic/immigration-language/>.

<sup>6</sup> Gamio, Lazaro, and Peter S. Goodman. “How the Supply Chain Crisis Unfolded.” The New York Times, December 6, 2021. <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2021/12/05/business/economy/supply-chain.html>

<sup>7</sup> Fowers, Alyssa, and Andrew Van Dam. “The Most Unusual Job Market in Modern American History, Explained.” The Washington Post, December 29, 2021. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2021/12/29/job-market-2021/>.

<sup>8</sup> Reade Pickert “U.S. Inflation Hits 39-Year High of 7%, Sets Stage for Fed Hike” Bloomberg. Accessed January 25, 2022. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-01-12/inflation-in-u-s-registers-biggest-annual-gain-since-1982>

<sup>9</sup> Collins, Chuck, Helen Flannery, and Sarah Anderson. “Updates: Billionaire Wealth, U.S. Job Losses and Pandemic Profiteers.” Inequality.org, October 20, 2021. <https://inequality.org/great-divide/updates-billionaire-pandemic/>.

These were ideal conditions for anger, frustration, and resentment to flourish. In 2021, public trust in government was at all time lows, with only about one-quarter of Americans saying they can trust the government in Washington to do what is right “just about always” (2%) or “most of the time” (22%).<sup>10</sup> Meanwhile, 1 in 3 Americans say violence against government can be justified.<sup>11</sup> This is coming a year after the Jan. 6 attack on the Capitol – and it marks the largest share of Americans to hold that view since the question was first asked more than two decades ago.

Political sectarianism has become a growing threat to American democracy. The country has increasingly split into camps that don’t just disagree on policy and politics – but see the other party as alien, immoral or a threat.<sup>12</sup> In the wake of the January 6 insurrection, 4 in 10 Republicans say political violence may be necessary.<sup>13</sup>

Surveys show that partisan differences on the 2020 election and on legal and political accountability for former President Trump are enormous.<sup>14</sup> Democrats generally trusted election results, supported disqualifying Trump from holding office and favored criminal prosecution. Republicans generally distrusted the election results and disfavored consequences for Trump.

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<sup>10</sup> “Public Trust in Government: 1958-2021.” Pew Research Center - U.S. Politics & Policy. Pew Research Center, May 28, 2021. <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2021/05/17/public-trust-in-government-1958-2021/>.

<sup>11</sup> Kornfield, Meryl, and Mariana Alfaro. “1 In 3 Americans Say Violence against Government Can Be Justified, Citing Fears of Political Schism, Pandemic.” The Washington Post, January 2, 2022. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2022/01/01/1-3-americans-say-violence-against-government-can-be-justified-citing-fears-political-schism-pandemic/>.

<sup>12</sup> Cohn, Nate. “Why Political Sectarianism Is a Growing Threat to American Democracy.” The New York Times, April 19, 2021. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/19/us/democracy-gop-democrats-sectarianism.html>.

<sup>13</sup> Gjelten, Tom. “A ‘Scary’ Survey Finding: 4 in 10 Republicans Say Political Violence May Be Necessary.” NPR, February 11, 2021. <https://www.npr.org/2021/02/11/966498544/a-scary-survey-finding-4-in-10-republicans-say-political-violence-may-be-necessa>

<sup>14</sup> “American Democracy at the Start of the Biden Presidency Bright Line Watch January-February 2021 Surveys.” Bright Line Watch, Accessed January 27, 2022. <http://brightlinewatch.org/american-democracy-at-the-start-of-the-biden-presidency/>.



There was always a storm coming. A growing body of empirical research illustrates to us that the political parties in congress are growing more homogenous in their policy positions, while the differences between the two parties on major public policy preferences are expanding.<sup>15</sup> The relevant literature shows us that the increase in party differences on cultural, racial, and social welfare issues is due substantially to individuals changing their policy preferences based on their party ties.<sup>16</sup>

Conflict extension in the electorate – which refers to the growing polarization of Democratic and Republican identifiers on distinct social welfare, racial, and cultural policy agendas – is a result of individuals changing their policy attitudes based on their party loyalties in response to elite-level party polarization.

These partisan and ideological divisions in Congress have grown significantly during the past three decades – and have fundamentally altered legislators’ incentives to negotiate – leading to stalemate in congressional institutions.<sup>17</sup> These are ideal conditions for resentment, anger, and cynicism to flourish. These polarizations often translate into urban-rural divides. In Minnesota, the state’s urban-rural divide is stronger than ever.<sup>18</sup> Recent polling found that rural and urban voters in Minnesota split sharply on everything from their views of Gov. Tim Walz to the states response to COVID-19 to the results of the 2020 election. America is mad and broken. Let’s find out why the country is so polarized and resentful.

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<sup>15</sup> Layman, Geoffrey C., Thomas M. Carsey, and Juliana Menasce Horowitz. "Party polarization in American politics: Characteristics, causes, and consequences." *Annu. Rev. Polit. Sci.* 9 (2006): 83-110.

<sup>16</sup> Carsey, Thomas M., and Geoffrey C. Layman. "Changing sides or changing minds? Party identification and policy preferences in the American electorate." *American Journal of Political Science* 50, no. 2 (2006): 464-477.

<sup>17</sup> Barber, Michael, Nolan McCarty, Jane Mansbridge, and Cathie Jo Martin. "Causes and consequences of polarization." *Political negotiation: A handbook* 37 (2015): 39-43.

<sup>18</sup> Orenstein, Walker. "When It Comes to Politics, Minnesota's Urban-Rural Divide Is Alive and Well." *MinnPost*, September 14, 2021. <https://www.minnpost.com/greater-minnesota/2021/09/when-it-comes-to-politics-minnesotas-urban-rural-divide-is-alive-and-well/>

## Chapter 4: The four factors of resentment

I predict that resentment in the United States is not a linear process and that it encompasses several factors explaining why American citizens would gain such a feeling. To narrow down our theory, I developed four main factors of resentment that I predict to find:

1. **Geographic resentment** – The feeling that one's area is ignored by policy makers and that members of one's local community are misunderstood and disrespected by inhabitants of other areas.<sup>19</sup> Throughout American history and as recently as the early 1990s, each of the major political parties included both rural and some urban constituencies, but since then the nation has become deeply divided geographically.<sup>20</sup> Rural areas have become increasingly dominated by the Republican party and urban places by the Democratic Party. This growing rural-urban divide is fostering polarization and democratic decay. We can also define geographic resentment as hostility toward place-based outgroups perceived as enjoying undeserved benefits beyond those enjoyed by one's place based ingroup.<sup>21</sup> Regression results indicate that males, rural folks, younger Americans, those high in place identity, and those high in racial resentment are more likely to harbor higher levels of place resentment.
2. **Economic resentment** – Let us define economic resentment as when a community of people, say rural folks, are affected by poverty and structural changes in the U.S

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<sup>19</sup> Huijsmans, Twan. "Place resentment in 'the places that don't matter': explaining the geographic divide in populist and anti-immigration attitudes." *Acta Politica* (2022): 1-21.

<sup>20</sup> Mettler, Suzanne, and Trevor Brown. "The growing rural-urban political divide and democratic vulnerability." *The American Academy of Political and Social Science* 699, no. 1 (2022): 130-142.

<sup>21</sup> Munis, B. Kal. "Us over here versus them over there... literally: Measuring place resentment in American politics." *Political Behavior* (2020): 1-22.

economy and come to blame big government.<sup>22</sup> Economic grievances and the experience of economic hardship are particularly experienced by modest income, working-class whites living in rural areas dependent on agriculture or employed in blue-collar manufacturing industries. Economic deprivation produces conditions of fear, anger, and hopelessness. The relevant literature shows that those who have economic grievances often blame their situation on big government and/or minorities.

3. **Racial resentment** – Racial resentment can be defined as the conjunction of white's feelings of resentment towards African American's and other minorities such as Native Americans.<sup>23</sup> Today's politics of racial resentment has less to do with the belief of the innate inferiority of African Americans and other groups. It has more to do with the sense that these minority groups fail to live up to traditional conceptions of American values (such as hard work or adherence to Protestant morality). The relevant literature shows that white people with a strong racial identity became more likely to support Trump if they were told that members of nonwhite groups will outnumber white people in the United States by 2042.<sup>24</sup> It was also found that Trump supporters randomly exposed to a black (versus a white man) in the context of soliciting their support for a housing-assistance policy were more opposed to the policy, angrier about the policy, and more

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<sup>22</sup> Piazza, James A. "The determinants of domestic right-wing terrorism in the USA: Economic grievance, societal change and political resentment." *Conflict management and peace science* 34, no. 1 (2017): 52-80.

<sup>23</sup> Kinder, Donald R., Lynn M. Sanders, and Lynn M. Sanders. *Divided by color: Racial politics and democratic ideals*. University of Chicago Press, 1996.

<sup>24</sup> Major, Brenda, Alison Blodorn, and Gregory Major Blascovich. "The threat of increasing diversity: Why many White Americans support Trump in the 2016 presidential election." *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations* 21, no. 6 (2018): 931-940.

likely to blame beneficiaries for their situation.<sup>25</sup> Data from the American National Election Study shows us that Trump's unusually explicit appeals to racial and ethnic resentment attracted strong support from white working-class voters while alienating many college-educated whites.<sup>26</sup>

4. **Cultural resentment** – This kind of resentment involves intense anger against the cultural aesthetics of a perceived elite.<sup>27</sup> The dominant cultural elites that are at the center of cultural resentment include: Hollywood folks, the mainstream media, university professors, and those who enjoy urban life. Those who practice the politics of cultural resentment resent these groups as being “un-American” individuals and institutions. They regard these groups and institutions as looking down on them – the people who, in their view, think they know better than they do and want to tell them how to run their lives. Both Tea Party voters and Trump voters have been acutely aware of the attitude in the liberal world that regards them as the backward, almost postmodern, fraction of society. The politics of cultural resentment is about more than just the political positions that liberals stand for. It is continuous with resentment on how these actors think and live their lives. In French social theorists Pierre Bourdieu's terms, the object of resentment is liberals “cultural capital”, and it is often expressed by attacking or ridiculing liberals' “symbolic goods.” In a politics of cultural resentment, lifestyle and politics becomes one, and those who practice the politics of resentment despise liberal culture.

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<sup>25</sup> Luttig, Matthew D., Christopher M. Federico, and Howard Lavine. “Supporters and Opponents of Donald Trump Respond Differently to Racial Cues: An Experimental Analysis.” *Research & Politics*, (October 2017). <https://doi.org/10.1177/2053168017737411>.

<sup>26</sup> Abramowitz, Alan, and Jennifer McCoy. “United States: Racial Resentment, Negative Partisanship, and Polarization in Trump's America.” *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 681, no. 1 (January 2019): 137–56. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716218811309>.

<sup>27</sup> Rosenthal, Lawrence. *Empire of resentment: Populism's toxic embrace of nationalism*. The New Press, 2020.

## 1. Geographic Resentment: Us Vs Them

- The rural voters who supported Republican governor Scott Walker in Wisconsin explained that the elites in the capital, Madison, and in big cities outside the state simply did not understand them or pay attention to their problems.

## 2. Economic Resentment: Feeling left behind

- Rising inequality and technological changes nourish economic resentment. In the U.S – the wages of college graduates relative to the wages of high school graduates increased by over 25% between 1979 and 1995 – and overall earnings inequality also increased sharply.<sup>28</sup>
- A growing body of literature attributes income and wage inequality to skill-biased technological change – and the information-technological revolution is the culprit.<sup>29</sup>
- This feeling of economic displacement nourishes the politics of resentment – and those who feel these economic changes firsthand blame the “other”, which could be those residing in economically vibrant city centers – or a minority group who is perceived to be taking limited recourses.

## 3. Racial Resentment: Where are the days of glory?

- Former U.S President Donald Trump and his supporters are an example of a faction that practice the politics of racial resentment. Trump’s rhetoric seeks to stir up a potent mix of racial resentment, intolerance of multiculturalism, nationalistic isolationism, and nostalgia for past glories.<sup>30</sup>
- Trump’s campaign exploited divisions that have been growing within the electorate for decades because of demographic and cultural shifts in American society.<sup>31</sup> This is at the core of the politics of resentment. The discourse of racial resentment has explicitly propelled the conservative agenda – and a seemingly powerless and oppressed white middle class is looking to regain its once unquestioned privilege by advocating ‘color blind’ hiring and acceptance policies (in opposition to affirmative action).<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Acemoglu, Daron. "Technical change, inequality, and the labor market." *Journal of economic literature* 40, no. 1 (2002): 7-72.

<sup>29</sup> Caselli, Francesco. "Technological revolutions." *American economic review* 89, no. 1 (1999): 78-102.

<sup>30</sup> Inglehart, Ronald F., and Pippa Norris. "Trump, Brexit, and the rise of populism: Economic have-nots and cultural backlash." (2016).

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> McCarthy, Cameron, and Greg Dimitriadis. "Governmentality and the sociology of education: Media, educational policy and the politics of resentment." *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 21, no. 2 (2000): 169-185.

- Economic resentments stem from this idea that welfare is not going to hardworking people – and this economic resentment may be conflated with the racial resentment of the **welfare queen** – which is a racialized construct that presumes that a lazy woman, presumably Black, continues to have children to increase the size of her welfare check.<sup>33</sup>

#### 4. Cultural Resentment: Put your nose down

- Cultural resentment is when a group feels that their culture – which is expressed in a set of beliefs, symbols, and rituals, is under attack by an outgroup – be it elites in Washington D.C or minorities.
- Backlash against political correctness is at the heart of cultural resentment. Political correctness manifests in cultural and theoretical performances that involve avoiding sensitive or offensive expressions.<sup>34</sup>
- At the heart of Trump's political ethos lays an assertion that the pursuit of political correctness by Washington elites has generated policies and discourse that have threatened the life, liberty, and material well-being of the populace – and this fundamentally produces an existential crisis for the nation.<sup>35</sup>
- Cultural resentments in the United States have been forming for decades now. In the period following World War II, new visions of American society have developed during the struggles of people of color to overcome their historical exclusion from the American cultural identity – and this has yielded a feeling of cultural displacement for many.<sup>36</sup>
- Multiculturalism and political correctness are new and morally assertive views of American society – and they revolve around the efforts of previously excluded groups to construct new identities.
- Those who practice the politics of resentment assume that these new views of American society are at odds with the interests and cultural expectations of white folks.

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<sup>33</sup> Pruitt, Lisa R. "Welfare queens and white trash." *S. Cal. Interdisc. LJ* 25 (2016): 289.

<sup>34</sup> Reinelt, Janelle. "The performance of political correctness." *Theatre Research International* 36, no. 2 (2011): 134-147.

<sup>35</sup> Hickel, Flavio R., and Andrew R. Murphy. "Making America Exceptional Again: Donald Trump's Traditionalist Jeremiad, Civil Religion, and the Politics of Resentment." *Politics and Religion* (2021): 1-23.

<sup>36</sup> Spencer, Martin E. "Multiculturalism, "political correctness," and the politics of identity." In *Sociological Forum*, vol. 9, no. 4, pp. 547-567. Kluwer Academic Publishers-Plenum Publishers, 1994.

## Chapter 5: What is the Politics of Resentment?

The politics of resentment assumes form when a charismatic political leader has mobilized followers around the perception that the group's dignity has been affronted, disparaged, degraded, or otherwise disregarded.<sup>37</sup> This resentment engenders demands for public recognition of the dignity of the group in question. At the center of a politics of resentment is a rural voter who feels that urban bicoastal elites and their media allies are looking down on and ignoring them. The politics of resentment goes beyond simple disagreements about basic political principles – and is instead rooted in something even more fundamental: ideas about who gets what, who has power, what people are like and who is to blame.<sup>38</sup>

Understanding the dangers and risks of the politics of resentment in consolidated democracies require analysis of the forms of pluralism and status anxieties that emerge in civil and economic society.<sup>39</sup> When societies become deeply divided, and segmental pluralism maps onto affective party-political polarization, generalized social solidarity quickly becomes imperiled – and commitments to democratic norms, social justice and liberal democratic constitutionalism quickly erodes. Populist political entrepreneurs like Donald Trump excel in fomenting social antagonism by framing shifts in the forms of social pluralism in ways that foster deep political polarization, generalized distrust and a politics of resentment against “elites”, “the establishment”, “the oligarchs” and the “outsiders”. Populists often energize those who feel that they are disenfranchised. They energize those who feel despair because they feel they lack control over place, economic, racial, and cultural shifts.

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<sup>37</sup> Fukuyama, Francis. *Identity: The demand for dignity and the politics of resentment*. Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2018.

<sup>38</sup> Cramer, Katherine J. *The politics of resentment: Rural consciousness in Wisconsin and the rise of Scott Walker*. University of Chicago Press, 2016.

<sup>39</sup> Cohen, Jean L. "Populism and the Politics of Resentment." *Jus Cogens* 1, no. 1 (2019): 5-39.

A politics of resentment arises when social identities, the emotion of resentment, and economic insecurity interact and nourish each other. Resentment toward fellow citizens is front and center – and people who practice this politics understand their circumstances as the fault of guilty and less deserving social groups – not as the product of broader social, economic, and political forces.

In a politics of resentment, people intertwine economic considerations with social and cultural considerations in the interpretations of the world they make with one another. Politicians who practice the politics of resentment meticulously formulate social antagonisms by framing shifts in the forms of social pluralism in ways that yield deep political polarization, generalized distrust against “elites,” “the establishment,” “the oligarchy,” and “outsiders.”<sup>40</sup>

A politics of resentment assumes form when political actors mobilize support for cutting back government by tapping into resentment toward certain groups in society rather than appealing to broad principles.<sup>41</sup> Resentment rooted in place and class-based identities can power overarching political stances like support for cutting back government. Attitudes about limited government are front and center in contemporary political debates in the United States. Preferences for small government are central to support for the Republican Party and central to support for the tea party. Scott Walker, the 45<sup>th</sup> Governor of Wisconsin, mobilized rural consciousness in support of small government. He used anti city rhetoric and talked about “the political machine down in Madison”. Politicians like Walker often mobilize opposition to government spending by tapping into resentment towards urbanities. This is an example of a politician appealing to social group battle lines, not ideological principles.

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Cramer, Katherine J. "Understanding the Politics of Resentment: Rural Consciousness and Support for Small Government." (2012).



## The History and Conditions for Resentment

The politics of resentment is not a new phenomenon. In the 1920s, the Klu Klux Klan capitalized on the anger and frustration of the middle-class when significant changes in American society undermined their economic power, political influence, and social status.<sup>42</sup> Just like today, immigration added fuels to the fire of resentment. In the early 1900s, millions of immigrants arrived on American shores, mostly Catholics and Jews from central and southern Europe. They provided the labor that fed the factories. They nourished rising political constituencies and carried cultures, practices and beliefs that set them apart from the native-born white Protestants that mostly made America. To recruit members, the Klan used race, religion, and nativity to bring together a new constituency of those seeking redress for their lost power. Who else could they scapegoat other than the new immigrants that disrupted their peace? A silent majority can't stay silent forever.

A century after the Klan, Trump appealed to the resentments of a new segment of mostly white Americans, primarily those in towns forgotten by the new world order that globalization bequeathed. While this changing economy offered new and lucrative opportunities to the better educated who resided in vibrant urban centers – the jobs that paid well had virtually disappeared from the towns that didn't have a highly educated workforce. Some jobs in rural America moved overseas where labor was cheaper.

Mechanization displaced the rural American proletariat from the fruits of his labor. Like work on an assembly line, specialized labor often involves repetitive tasks that can be performed

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<sup>42</sup> McVeigh, Rory, and Kevin Estep. *The Politics of Losing: Trump, the Klan, and the Mainstreaming of Resentment*. Columbia University Press, 2019. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7312/mcve19006>.

by machines.<sup>43</sup> This meant routine jobs like sowing seeds, harvesting crops, milking cows, and feeding and slaughtering animals could be mechanized – thus reducing (and in some cases eliminating) the need for human labor. Between 1900 and 2000, the share of the U.S. workforce involved in agriculture declined from 41% to 2%. Further progressive replacement of manual labor by mechanized one's influences positively the basic indices of traumatism in the timber industry.<sup>44</sup> These developments make rural Americans feel spat on and traumatized.

There are winners and losers in every economic transformation. Much of rural America feels left behind because the kinds of manufacturing jobs that once yielded prosperous and stable incomes and benefits have decreased substantially, and those left behind are in no rush to “retrain” or “learn to code”. When manufacturing jobs decreased, many in rural America lost a sense of identity, meaning and purpose. Gone are the days of the post-World War II boom. Men without college degrees have lost big time.

We live in a dual economy.<sup>45</sup> The primary sector is composed of jobs that require skills and offer attractive compensation and opportunities for advancement. The second labor market is characterized by low-skilled jobs, unstable employment, and low wages. The second labor market shapes much of rural America. The rise of the second labor economy mirrors the growth of Trump's constituency.<sup>46</sup> In the early 1970s, the jobs that required college degrees, often in high technology or the government, exploded. Traditional manufacturing jobs moved out of city centers, and those without the education they needed to prosper in the new economy were put out

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<sup>43</sup> Dimitri C, Effland A, Conklin N. The 20th Century Transformation of U.S. Agriculture and Farm Policy. USDA ERS. 2006.

<sup>44</sup> Bozilevskaya, Z. V., and A. G. Krotov. "Effect of mechanized work on the indicators of traumatism among lumberjacks." *Vestnik Khirurgii Imeni II Grekova* 116, no. 6 (1976): 65-68.

<sup>45</sup> Piore, Michael J. "The dual labor market: theory and implications." In *Social stratification*, pp. 629-640. Routledge, 2018.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

of work entirely or took work in the growing service sector – like the fast-food industry, with its low wages, fringe benefits, and irregular hours. The jobs that required skills and college degrees stayed concentrated in cities, where there were highly educated workers to fill them. Without enough work to go around, rural towns were suffering.<sup>47</sup>

In 1970, Peter Binzen, presented an account of the life and assorted attitudes of lower-middle class white people, predominantly Irish, Italian, and Polish in ethnic background and Catholic in religious affiliation, residing in Kensington, a blue-collar neighborhood of Philadelphia.<sup>48</sup> He found that the residents are predominantly conservative in their social and political attitudes, and decidedly reject and fear the changes taking place in American society at the time. This fear is central to the politics of resentment.

Conservatism was revealed in their public policy preferences. For instance, Kensington residents opposed busing proposals and had an unfavorable view of open housing proposals. Kensington residents perceived themselves as a forgotten segment in the American political system. This form of political alienation is a central feature of the politics of resentment. Indeed, it is found that 57% of Kensington residents felt that their neighborhood was being neglected by the city administration at the time.

The 1960s and 1970s set off a series of social movements that added fire to the flames of resentment.<sup>49</sup> These social movements disrupted American society – and this yielded a simmering fire of resentment which exploded years later as the Tea Party. During this era, the historically marginalized and disadvantaged came forward to talk about their mistreatment.

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<sup>47</sup> “Thiede and Slack, “The Old versus the New Economies.”

<sup>48</sup> Bellush, Jewel, and Nelson W. Wikstrom. "Urban Problems. Whitetown, USA: A First-hand study of how the “silent majority” lives, learns, works, and thinks. By Peter Binzen.

<sup>49</sup> Hochschild, Arlie Russell. Strangers in their own land: Anger and mourning on the American right. The New Press, 2018.

Blacks who had fled the Jim Crow South, underpaid Latino field workers, Japanese internment camp victims, ill-treated Native Americans and immigrants from all over came together to disrupt the status quo and demand more from the state.

At the same time, women renewed their claim on the American Dream. Then gays and lesbians roared against their oppression and voiced their discontent with the state. In the 1970s, these social movements became laser focused on personal identity. These social movements left one group behind: the older, white male, especially if such a man worked in a field that didn't particularly help the planet. He slowly became a stranger in his own land.

Things didn't get much better for the stranger, especially in rural lands. Sociologists found that in 2012 almost a quarter of the rural population was underemployed, working part time when they could not find fulltime work – and culture has only gotten more progressive and inclusive. Pew research taken four months before the 2016 election found that seven in ten white rural residents said jobs in their communities were scarce and white men seemed particularly bleak about their families' futures and the threats posed by immigration labor.<sup>50</sup> Figures released by the U.S Census Bureau also underscored rural hardship: nonmetropolitan incomes in 2015 rose by only 3%, while metropolitan incomes grew by 6 percent.<sup>51</sup> The bulk of communities in rural America are in systematic, steady decline.<sup>52</sup> The traditional occupational bases, agriculture and light manufacturing, are rapidly disappearing or drying up. There is no national plan, program, or policy for rural America. The politics of resentment will likely flourish in the future.

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<sup>50</sup> "Rich Morin, "Behind Trump's Win in Rural White America," Pew Research Center, November 17, 2016, [www.pewresearch.org](http://www.pewresearch.org)."

<sup>51</sup> "Quoctrung Bui, "Actually, Income in Rural America Is Growing, Too," New York Times, September 16, 2016, [www.nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com)."

<sup>52</sup> Coates, Joseph F. "Rural America: A future of decline and decay unless...." *Technological Forecasting and Social Change* 43, no. 2 (1993): 205-208.

## The Tea Party

The tea party is an example of a political faction that is practicing the politics of resentment.<sup>53</sup> The tea party is mainly composed of disgruntled white middle-class conservatives whose concerns exist within the context of anxieties about racial, ethnic, and generational changes in American society. The tea party came to prominence after the victory of the first African American President, Barack Obama in 2008. Members of the tea party are not monolithically hostile toward government. Instead, they distinguish between programs perceived as going to hard-working contributors to US society like themselves and “handouts” perceived as going to unworthy or freeloading people.

The tea party is a relatively new incarceration of long-standing strands in US conservatism. The anger of grassroots Tea Partiers about new federal social programs such as the Affordable Care Act coexists with an acceptance and warmth for long-standing federal social programs like Social Security and Medicare. Tea Partiers feel entitled to such programs. Although Tea Partiers benefit from government programs – they simultaneously hold a vehement opposition towards perceived federal “handouts” to “undeserving” groups – the definition of which seems heavily influenced by racial and ethnic stereotypes. Tea party concerns exist within the context of anxieties about racial, ethnic, and generational changes in American society.

The Tea Party dichotomy of the “freeloader” versus the “hardworking taxpayer” has racial undertones that distinguish it from the simple American narrative that hard work is central to the American dream. Racial resentment nourishes Tea Party fears about generational societal change – and this has accelerated the Tea Party’s strong opposition to President Obama.

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<sup>53</sup> Skocpol, Theda, and Vanessa Williamson. *The Tea Party and the remaking of Republican conservatism*. Oxford University Press, 2016.

The relevant literature has found that “support for the Tea Party remains a valid predictor of racial resentment,” even after accounting for ideology and partisanship. Although many opponents of the social safety net tend to espouse negative views of racial minorities in general – Tea Partiers espouse views much more extreme than mainstream Republicans. For instance, Tea Partiers are more likely than other conservatives to agree with statements such as “if blacks would only try harder, they could be just as well off as whites,” and are much more likely to disagree with statements like “generations of slavery and discrimination have created conditions that make it difficult for blacks to work their way out of the lower classes”.

Rather than conscious, deliberate, and publicly expressed racism, racial resentments in the tea party form part of a fear of societal change. These fears are crystalized in Tea Party opposition to President Obama. Many tea parties are deeply concerned that the country they live in is not the country of their youth – and that they themselves are being neglected by the U.S government. These fears are central to a politics of resentment.

The relevant literature finds support for the contention that the Tea Party is mostly white, male, conservative, and strongly opposed to tax increases.<sup>54</sup> This literature also shows us that despite appeals to freedom and liberty common in Tea Party rhetoric, a strong authoritarian impulse exists among its most vehement supporters. A separate study draws on national survey data to examine the extent to which racial attitudes and conservative ideology are associated with self-declared membership in the tea party.<sup>55</sup> Key findings in the study revealed that aside from conservative political ideology, racial resentment is indeed among the strongest predictors of tea party membership.

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<sup>54</sup> Arceneaux, Kevin, and Stephen P. Nicholson. "Who wants to have a tea party? The who, what, and why of the tea party movement." *PS: Political Science & Politics* 45, no. 4 (2012): 700-710.

<sup>55</sup> Tope, Daniel, Justin T. Pickett, and Ted Chiricos. "Anti-minority attitudes and Tea Party Movement membership." *Social Science Research* 51 (2015): 322-337.

## **Chapter 6: Why Bemidji? Who gets what? Resentment, opioids, and poverty**

Bemidji is a town of 15,434 people in Northern Minnesota. It is situated in Beltrami County. Bemidji is approximately 225 miles northwest of Minneapolis and 150 miles west of Duluth, Minnesota.<sup>56</sup> Grand Forks, North Dakota is about 110 miles to the west. It is the largest commercial center between Grand Forks and Duluth.

Bemidji has a rich and unique history. Prior to the 1880s, a band of 50 Leech Lake Native Americans, and their elder Shaynowishkung, also known as chief Bemidji, lived along the shore of a shoe shaped lake in northern Minnesota.<sup>57</sup> At the time, the shore of the lake was called Bemidjigumaug, meaning 'river or route flowing crosswise'. This 'river or route flowing crosswise' later became the Mississippi River. Overtime, the original inhabitants met the white settlers who were either lumber company cruisers or homesteaders.

After the inhabitancy of the white settlers, Beltrami County was created. A trading post was established, and a sawmill was built. The application for a Post Office was submitted with an error listing the town as Bermidji. In the 1900s, it was a boomtown with over 10,000 lumberjacks within a 20-mile radius. Back then, Bemidji was known as a town built on lumber and the first city on the Mississippi.

Bemidji really is a unique town. It is home to the first Paul Bunyan statue, a giant lumberjack and folk hero. Bemidjians are so proud of their lumberjack heritage that the high school football team are called the Bemidji Lumberjacks. For 20 years, lumber was the driving force in Bemidji, but the Great Depression started early once all the prime timberlands were

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<sup>56</sup> Weis, Billy D. "The historical geography of rail and highway transport at Bemidji, Minnesota." (1967).

<sup>57</sup> La Venture, Kelly, and Wooyang Kim. "A Case Study of Destination Promotion: The Perceived Value of Stakeholders toward Bemidji, Minnesota, USA." In International Conference on Tourism Research, pp. 94-IX. Academic Conferences International Limited, 2018.

harvested.<sup>58</sup> Bemidji survived due to several businesses that had started prior to the bust and continued afterwards – a bottling company, milling operation, woolen mill, creamery, boat company, and later the Bemidji Normal School.

Many Bemidjians love using their hands. After almost 90 years in business, Bemidji Woolen Mills continues to manufacture woolen apparel for the outdoor industry – and they boast a large sewing and manufacturing facility.<sup>59</sup> Many Bemidjians love hunting and ice fishing, and this local business has been providing residents with items geared toward outdoor living in the north.

Bemidji is the perfect place to study the politics of resentment because its past and present are animated by tensions and resentments. Indigenous treaty tensions run deep in Northern Minnesota – as the Ojibwe people are often at odds with white settlers and the state on land and fishing rights.<sup>60</sup> Central to the politics of resentment are these disputes of who gets what. White settlers often assign stereotypes to native Americans as greedy and at the casino all day.<sup>61</sup> In the white settler's view, this can make native Americans undeserving of government assistance.

The Line 3 oil pipeline project, which is an oil pipeline running southeast of Canada's oil sands region to Lake Superior's western tip near the Minnesota-Wisconsin border is at the center

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> "Welcome to Bemidji Woolen Mills." Bemidji Woolen Mills. Accessed March 2, 2022. <https://www.bemidjiwoolenmills.com/>

<sup>60</sup> Gunderson, Dan. "History, Language Blur Minnesota Indian Treaty Disputes." MPR News. MPR News, July 14, 2019. <https://www.mprnews.org/story/2016/02/01/history-language-mn-native-american-treaty-disputes>.

<sup>61</sup> McLaurin, Virginia A. "Stereotypes of contemporary Native American Indian characters in recent popular media." (2012).



of tensions between white settlers and the Ojibwe bands.<sup>62</sup> Opponents of the project say that the pipeline could lead to oil spills and is an infringement on Native American rights to hunt, fish and gather wild rice on land outside reservation borders.

Supporters of the pipeline argue that the project would create about 4,200 construction jobs in Minnesota over the two-year construction period. They also say that the Line 3 project would inject millions of dollars into local economies through the payment of property taxes, the purchase of local materials and workers staying in hotels and eating at restaurants.

Indigenous rights and environmental concerns are often at odds with economic development in rural Minnesota. In a politics of resentment, economic development, and the virtues of working with your hands are often viewed as more important than ecological concerns and the rights of indigenous people.

In a silent film depicting the town of Bemidji in the 1930s, we see that it was a vibrant and prosperous town.<sup>63</sup> We see parades, smiling faces, a vibrant city center, marching bands and kids playing hockey with their families cheering. Almost everyone in the film looks to be Caucasian. Bemidji's citizens in the film looked to be dressed in luxurious attire. Today, downtown Bemidji is almost desolate. It is creepy and quiet with only a few small businesses keeping the town afloat. In 2020, opioid deaths were higher than ever.<sup>64</sup> Bemidji seems to be a sick town – and many citizens may want to find someone to blame for the town's downfall.

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<sup>62</sup> Staff, MPR News. "The Line 3 Project: What You Need to Know." MPR News. MPR News, October 1, 2021. <https://www.mprnews.org/story/2021/07/16/the-line-3-oil-pipeline-project-what-you-need-to-know>

<sup>63</sup> "Bemidji between the Wars": Local Documentary Depicts Area History." Bemidji Pioneer. Bemidji Pioneer, March 14, 2017. <https://www.bemidjipioneer.com/lifestyle/arts-and-entertainment/bemidji-between-the-wars-local-documentary-depicts-area-history>

<sup>64</sup> Liedke, Matthew J. "Opioid Crisis: Opioid Epidemic Claims 50 Lives in Beltrami County." Bemidji Pioneer. Bemidji Pioneer, January 4, 2022. <https://www.bemidjipioneer.com/newsmd/opioid-crisis-opioid-epidemic-claims-50-lives-in-beltrami-county>.

In the first two weeks of 2021, there have been more opioid overdose deaths than in all of 2019.<sup>65</sup> Bemidji is one of the poorest cities in Minnesota – with a medium household income of just \$32,193.<sup>66</sup> Bemidji is also one of the most dangerous cities in Minnesota – with crime rates 238% higher than the national average.<sup>67</sup> In Bemidji, you have a 1 in 13 chance of being a victim of crime.

Drastic differences between the counties with the highest poverty rates and lowest poverty rates are omnipresent in Minnesota.<sup>68</sup> In all years reported, the county with the lowest poverty rate was the economically vibrant and diverse Twin Cities metro area – and Beltrami County, which includes Bemidji, consistently ranks among the counties with the highest poverty rates.

Nostalgia nourishes the politics of resentment in Bemidji. Skyrocketing inequality and social dislocation have fractured the identity of many Bemidjians. They feel forgotten and are waiting for someone to restore their past glories. That call seems to have been answered. Former President Trump held a jam-packed rally in Bemidji on September 18, 2020, the night Supreme court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsberg died. As Bemidji resident Phyllis Ryan said about the rally: “It was just like, ‘What? He’s coming here. Little old Bemidji?’”<sup>69</sup> It seems like this Bemidji resident finally feels noticed.

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<sup>65</sup> Larissa Donovan. “Sharp Increase in Opioid Deaths in Bemidji Area.” Bemidji Now, January 12, 2021. <https://bemidjinow.com/sharp-increase-in-opioid-deaths-in-bemidji-area/>.

<sup>66</sup> “U.S. Census Bureau Quick facts: Bemidji City, Minnesota.” Accessed February 26, 2022. <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/bemidjicityminnesota>.

<sup>67</sup> “Crime in the U.S. 2019.” FBI, July 20, 2020. <https://ucr.fbi.gov/crime-in-the-u.s/2019/crime-in-the-u.s.-2019>.

<sup>68</sup> Legg, Tom, and Ngoc Nguyen. “Widening Inequality in Minnesota: A County-By-County Analysis.” Accessed February 26, 2022. <https://growthandjustice.org/publication/WideningInequalityMN.pdf>

<sup>69</sup> Schuman, David. “He’s Coming Here?’: Bemidji Set to Host US President for First Time Ever.” WCCO | CBS Minnesota. WCCO | CBS Minnesota, September 17, 2020. <https://minnesota.cbslocal.com/2020/09/17/hes-coming-here-bemidji-set-to-host-us-president-for-first-time-ever/>.

During his opening remarks at the rally, the former President called the nearly all white group “hard working American patriots”.<sup>70</sup> Trump said that Minnesota was pioneered by men and women who were tough, strong, and braved the wilderness and winters to build a better life. “You have good genes, you know that, right?” Trump said. “You have good genes. A lot of it is about the genes, isn’t it, don’t you believe? The racehorse theory. You think we’re so different? You have good genes in Minnesota.”

Bemidji has an unusual large share of public sector employment.<sup>71</sup> This might influence overall earnings in the city. The relevant literature shows us that people often cope with economic crises by assigning blame to ingroups and outgroups.<sup>72</sup> The private sector, such as corporations or financial institutions are often exonerated – and blame is instead put on government, unions, and public employees. The relevant literature shows us that public employees are often perceived as lazy and inefficient bureaucrats who get lavish benefits paid at the expense of the average hard-working taxpayer. In rural areas, many people believe that public employees are in bed with urban decision makers. This makes Bemidji a prime location to study the politics of resentment. At the core of the politics of resentment is the feeling of alienation and displacement. Some Bemidjians seem to be embarrassed. The town of glorious hardworking lumberjacks is now one of the poorest and most dangerous places to live in Minnesota and the nation. Many Bemidjians seem to be looking for someone to listen to them.

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<sup>70</sup> Rao, Maya. “Trump's 'Good Genes' Comment at Bemidji Rally Draws Condemnation.” Star Tribune. Star Tribune, September 22, 2020. <https://www.startribune.com/trump-s-good-genes-comment-at-bemidji-rally-draws-condemnation/572486371/>.

<sup>71</sup> Ley, Robert D., and William A. Wines. "A Study of Wage Contour Determinants for Northern Minnesota." *Journal of the Minnesota Academy of Science* 51, no. 2 (1985): 17-22.

<sup>72</sup> Walsh, Katherine Cramer. "Political Understanding of Economic Crises: The Shape of Resentment toward Public Employees." In *conference on Popular Reactions to the Economic Crisis*, Oxford University, pp. 24-26. 2011.

## **Chapter 7: The Ethnographic Approach and its fruits**

Ethnography is the art and science used to describe a group or culture.<sup>73</sup> Ethnographers search for predictable patterns in lived human experiences by carefully observing and participating in the lives of those under study. The process is inductive, holistic and requires a long-term commitment. Ethnography is a method with unique features:

1. It is conducted on-site or in a natural setting.
2. It is personalized. The researcher is both the observer and the participant in the lives of people.
3. Ethnography collects data in multiple ways for triangulation over an extended period.
4. Ethnography is dialogic since conclusions formed through it can be given feedback by participants.

There are three modes of data collection in ethnography: observation, interviewing and archival research:

1. Observation: This involves participant observation. Observation is unique because it combines the researcher's participation in the lives of the people under study while simultaneously maintaining a professional distance.<sup>74</sup> Observation is the act of perceiving the activities and interrelationships of people in the field setting.
2. Interviewing: Interviewing is the process of directing a conversation to collect information.
3. Archival Research: This is the analysis of existing materials stored for research, service, or other purposes officially and unofficially.

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<sup>73</sup> Sangasubana, Nisaratana. "How to conduct ethnographic research." *Qualitative Report* 16, no. 2 (2011): 567-573

<sup>74</sup> Fetterman, D. M. (1998). *Ethnography: Step by step* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

I have another story I would like to share with you. In May, I was at the most recent Munk debate on the Russia-Ukraine war with some friends. Upon sitting down, an older couple introduced themselves and asked me what I study. When I answered that I was doing a master's in political science, the man became thrilled. He then asked me, what is your masters research paper on? I told him that I want to study the politics of resentment in Bemidji by using ethnography.

The man quickly became disappointed. "Well, that's not very rigorous is it", he said seemingly annoyed for some reason. "You should use survey's instead". This is in line with much of what I have heard regarding the ethnographic method at the University of Toronto. "We are not investigative journalists" and "you won't actually find anything", some said with absolute certainty. Since I am skeptical of political scientists who are under the grand illusion that they are actually "finding anything", I decided to explore the fruits and poisons of the ethnographic method myself.

I have concluded that the emotion of resentment can be best captured using ethnographic methods. The beauty of the ethnographic methods is that it helps political scientists study the subject and the surrounding political culture. By using the ethnographic method, political scientists can immerse themselves in a political culture and truly understand: what grievances did revolutionaries in Tahrir Square have and how did this ultimately yield a revolution? How do citizens in the south side of Chicago perceive government? Why do so many Chinese people love and trust the CCP? How do Chinese citizens view the CCP's ability to provide basic services? How do workers in China react to automation? The ethnographic method can help us get to the bottom all these questions. May ethnography save us from the dullness at annual

meetings of the American Political Science Association and the laissez-faire mediocrity unfolding at the irrelevant American Political Science Review.

I always wonder why many political scientists take themselves so seriously. Why this constant obsession about methodology in the first place? Are we finding the cure to cancer? Even some political theorists have become obsessed with nonexistent methodologies. It's unfortunate that those who are not obsessed with methodologies are having irrelevant conversations amongst themselves about decolonizing (we don't even know what they are decolonizing exactly). This is how my fascination with ethnography came about. It's a way to speak to the people we are studying directly, understanding how they view the world without the snobbery and academic jargon from the empiricists and the post colonialists. These two groups of political scientists would motivate anyone to practice the politics of resentment.

I always thought of political science as more of an art. Political science can be compared to architecture.<sup>75</sup> Political scientists have a common purpose, which is to conceive of institutional structures that allow humans to coexist together in societies – just as the purpose of architecture is to conceive of physical structures in which humans can live together. What better way to understand how humans can live together and interact with institutions then to talk to them about their anxieties, needs and desires? Ethnography puts the political animal at the center of all activity. This way, we can understand how political animals interact and view political institutions. This immersive method of research gives the researchers a rich portrait of the lives and culture of those under study.<sup>76</sup> Quantitative research simply cannot provide as rich a portrait.

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<sup>75</sup> Lindvall, Johannes. "Political science as architecture." *European Political Science* (2022): 1-14.

<sup>76</sup> Angrosino, M. (2007). *Doing ethnographic and observational research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Ethnographic methods are among the tools in the methodological toolbox – and these methods shed crucial light on central issues about political life.

Ethnographic research involves employing a method of listening. This will help me trace the sources of resentment among rural citizens. This will give me the space to put myself in the psych of the subject and analyze both the said and unsaid. Using an ethnographic approach will underline the tensions and contradictions of everyday life.<sup>77</sup> As an ethnographer, I will be clarifying concepts that tell us how those who practice the politics of resentment think about and construct their worlds. Ethnography can help us tear down empathy walls. Empathy walls are obstacles that circumvent deep understanding of the other person. This make us feel indifferent or even hostile to those who hold different beliefs or whose childhood is rooted in different circumstances.

Mainstream political scientists largely prefer broad-based modeling, inter country comparisons and quantitative analysis of politics instead of close analysis of messy political conjunctures.<sup>78</sup> Even when political scientists examine political events at the level of the village or urban neighborhood, they tend to compare many different settlements using a survey approach. However, appreciation of the micro aspects of politics, including people's own understandings of the political is crucial and is crystalized with an ethnographic approach. On the ground, close-up, real-time and long-term observation of people and institutions can offer special insights for the study of politics. The ethnographic gaze can challenge many assumptions of traditional political studies and may bring about a significant re-theorization. Ethnographic studies open a window into the micro aspects of politics that will help us understand the world.

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<sup>77</sup> Wedeen, Lisa. "Reflections on ethnographic work in political science." *Annual Review of Political Science* (2010): 255-272.

<sup>78</sup> Kumar, Satendra. "The promise of ethnography for the study of politics." *Studies in Indian Politics* 2, no. 2 (2014): 237-242.

## Chapter 8: The Study

This is an ethnographic study. I will have a group conversation with seven people in Bemidji. Names will be kept anonymous, but I will include information on race, age, occupation, gender and how long the participant has lived in the area. I will inform all the participants of my research purposes beforehand. I will ask for consent before recording the conversation so it can be transcribed. I will only listen and ask questions and will not take a position when conducting this research. To participate in the study, there are two criteria: you must be over 18 and you must be a Bemidji resident. There is no compensation for participating in this study.

Mr. \*\*\*\*\*, a resident of Bemidji and my dad's old friend helped me recruit and coordinate the group conversations with the seven Bemidjians. My main research purpose is to conduct an ethnographic survey on public opinion in Bemidji. I am interested in the politics of resentment. My concerns are: is there resentment between those who reside in Bemidji and those who in Minneapolis? Does income inequality fuel a politics of resentment that shapes how Bemidjian's view the world? How do issues such as immigration come into the mix? What racial resentments exist in the area? Where do culture war issues come into the mix? How do geographic, economic, racial, and cultural forces intertwine to create a politics of resentment?

Me and the seven participants sat at Mr. \*\*\*\*\*'s dinner table and had a wonderful evening talking politics. The participants had diverse backgrounds and occupations. They gave me a taste of the challenges the Bemidji community faces. I learned about how the politics of resentment lingers in Bemidji – but with resentment comes hope that we can rebuild a fragmented body politic. The resentments brewing in Bemidji reflect the national mood in America – where citizens don't seem to have a shared understanding of history or reality and are full of resentment towards each other and their political leaders. Time to ask some questions!



## Chapter 9: What are the biggest problems facing Bemidjian's today?

Participant 1

Age: 41

Gender: Male

Race: White

Birthplace and residence: Born and resides in Bemidji

Occupation: Locksmith

*Participant 1: We (Locksmiths) do a lot of work at apartment buildings that are getting completely beat up and destroyed. The low-income housing is not good in Bemidji. It's from both sides. They are not being taken care of and there is a disrespect of the properties by the people that live there – not all, but a mixture. It's a problem that is difficult to handle. At one point there seems that there is no accountability for either side and I don't know how that gets resolved. We see that in our line of work a lot when we must go into these different houses and apartment buildings. It's not a good, it's no place to live if you know what I mean. It's not good. I don't where that specifically stems from but it's something that we see very often in our line of work.*

This passage illustrates to us the economic resentments that are growing in the Bemidji community. The median income in rural communities is frequently significantly below the median income in urban communities.<sup>79</sup> Rural areas have less economic activity and a harder time attracting outside capital.

They have low population density, meaning that it is harder for rural communities to achieve economies of scale. Smaller populations mean that rural communities have a reduced tax base to provide basic updates to necessary infrastructure. A reduced tax base may bequeath resentment. There are 25 million occupied homes in rural Americas. 1.5 million are considered either moderately or severely substandard.

Substandard housing means that a home lack complete plumbing facilities, has inadequate or no heat, has no or inconsistent electricity, has exposed wiring, and/or has ongoing maintenance and upkeep issues. Substandard housing is a problem for low-income families in rural America.

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<sup>79</sup> Johnston, Audrey. "Rural housing in modern America." J. Affordable Hous. & Cmty. Dev. L. 26 (2017): 281.

Participant 2

Age: 69

Gender: Female

Race: White

Birthplace and residence: Born in Bemidji, left for a while and came back

Occupation: Health care administration

*Participant 2: There are several problems in Bemidji. The first is poverty. The second is racism. And the third is a lack of compassion. I am very passionate about homeless. The homeless population. I work with \*\*\*\*\* at the nameless coalition. Having worked all those years at the clinic, I saw lots of sad situations. When I think hard about how everything fits together, I think the poverty, the lack of industry and the lack of good jobs and education – all that plays into our inability to do what we need to do for each other.*

We will categorize this passage as a reflection of economic resentment in Bemidji. This account shows us that poverty, a lack of industry, the lack of good jobs and poor education is a cause of frustration for Bemidjians. The relevant literature shows us that many rural communities lack stable employment, opportunities for mobility, investment in the community, and diversity in the economy and other social institutions.<sup>80</sup> Rapid industrial decline, severe job loss and persistent poverty are par the course in much of rural America.

Previous literature has used data from sixty-eight interviews conducted with men and woman raised in rural countries in Pennsylvania. The interviews asked how growing up in rural settings shapes people's aspirations regarding work over three periods.<sup>81</sup> During the transition to adulthood and again during an unemployment period, searching for work in rural areas with a shrinking economic base became increasingly difficult, and participants adjusted their early aspirations accordingly.

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<sup>80</sup> Tickamyer, Ann R., and Cynthia M. Duncan. "Poverty and opportunity structure in rural America." Annual review of sociology (1990): 67-86.

<sup>81</sup> Niccolai, Ashley R., Sarah Damaske, and Jason Park. "We Won't Be Able to Find Jobs Here: How Growing Up in Rural America Shapes Decisions About Work." RSF: The Russell Sage Foundation Journal of the Social Sciences 8, no. 4 (2022): 87-104.

Participant 3

Age: 62

Gender: Female

Race: Native

Birthplace and residence: Born and in Red Lake (reservation near Bemidji, about a 37-minute drive). Lives in Bemidji since 1996.

Occupation: High School Teacher in Red Lake

*Participant 3: I would say that there is just such a lack of understanding between peoples. Between socioeconomic groups. All the issues that we deal with have to do with poverty and not necessarily racism. It gets confused. They will think that the poverty issues are race issues. And it's not always the case. I think if you have a better understanding of what poverty is, if you understood poverty a lot better, you would understand it's not always racism. I will give you just an example. I remember when I was in training to be an administrator. I said to the principle I was under, look in that EBD classroom, the behavior classroom, look it's all Indians in that classroom. She said no you are looking at the wrong thing. She said what you have in there is a class of kids who come from poverty who don't have the same recourses. Poverty looks like racism sometimes. I think we have a big misunderstanding.*

*Also, because we are in Bemidji, we are in the center of three major reservations. All the reservations are different. So, in Red Lake we know that we are better than Leech Lake.*

**Everyone in the room laughs**

*We are better looking than Sioux.*

**Everyone in the room laughs**

*Anyways, we have many relatives in Red Lake who the only time that they really leave the reservation is to come shopping or maybe see a movie or entertainment or come out to eat. When we come in, we do that all-in-one trip. When we come into town, we are automatically on defense. Automatically our guard is up because we don't know what we are going to run in to. We don't know if we walk into a store if we are going to be welcome. We don't know how people are going to treat us. When we are on defense, it looks like we are unfriendly, but we are just on defense. There is a lot of misunderstanding that way.*

*Bemidji is not as nice as Minnesota nice. The community is made up mostly of Republicans and Trump supporters. That is the way that works here. It doesn't always feel like it is always a welcoming place.*

*And then what happens is the homeless. Like you are talking about the homeless. There is so many stereotypes about the homeless. I was going to a church in town before we had the housing that we have for homeless. During the winter months, the churches would open their doors at night because it was so cold for the homeless outside. The*

*churches would rotate duties and the homeless would have to figure out what churches were open at what night and where they could go. There was a church I had been going to that found a book that the couple of the leaders of the Church found. The author of this book was saying that if you enable the homeless, they can't stand on their own. Do not enable the homeless, the book said. The church said, here is a book. Here is the answer to all our problems. Now, we don't have to help them, because if we help them, they will never be able to stand on their own. Of course, I stopped going to that church. And then of course, being native, I was going well who are the homeless? It is the natives. It is not homeless. It's the natives. It is not as Minnesota nice.*

*Racism was in the community when we had the immigration. People wanted to come in and the county commissioners voted against bringing refugees to Beltrami County. I had worked for one of the county commissioners. He used to be a principle. He was just the kindest Christian. He had a good heart and a good soul. And he voted against bringing refugees to Beltrami County. And I was just like: what, what, what? How could you be these things and vote against that? You know? And now that we have the war in Ukraine, they say, yea are doors are open. Why do you get to pick and choose?*

*When you come into town, native people are so used to being treated badly that they don't expect any other behavior. Right? And the people in town are so used to treating natives that way that these new generations believe that is just how it is.*

*I will just give you one more story. It was summertime so we were out berry picking and it was a hot sunny day. Then we went to a gas station with a side entrance. So, I had come into the side entrance, and it was like an L shaped counter. There was two people on the side and a person ahead of me.*

*The woman that was working behind the counter was just helping this person and just kind and laughing and joking and then came over and helped this person and she was kind and joking and laughing and she got to me, and she wouldn't even look at me. Just no happiness at all, she just started ringing up my stuff.*

*So, I said to her, excuse me, did you know those people? And she said no. I said I was just wondering why you would be so courteous to them and not to me. You know, you just must call it out. She had no idea that she had switched. She just had no idea because that is how you treat natives. You don't look at them, you don't talk to them. You know, and natives come into town and expect to be treated that way, they don't expect anything different. I had to call it out.*

*I will bet you, just because I called her out, she will think about it. The point is that she had no idea. She really had no idea that her whole persona changed when she got to me. Native people are so used to being treated that way that there is just no opposition to it. This is how the two communities operate here.*

*I can go on all day*

These passages show us how racial resentments function in Bemidji. Previous studies done in the area show us that American Indian residents in Bemidji are much more likely than White participants to view relations between peoples as “poor”.<sup>82</sup> The relevant literature shows us that the belief in “the casino Indian” stereotype and the perception that Native American interests’ conflict with the interests of Whites is found to be somewhat popular amongst White Americans.<sup>83</sup> Studies have shown that racial and ethnic resentments still influence U.S politics.<sup>84</sup> In the post-civil rights era, findings have suggested that expansions in murder rates produced decreased support for liberal policies. Statements by Republican campaign officials show us how they deliberately used mass resentments against minorities to gain normally Democratic votes. These statements provide evidence about the intervening connections between the threat to white dominance posed by larger minority populations and reduced support for liberal legislation.

The bit about how the homeless are perceived by many in Bemidji from participant 2 and 3 illustrates how poverty is perceived in much of rural America. Many in rural America uphold a “pull yourself up by your bootstraps” mentality, where being homeless is seen as lazy.<sup>85</sup> Former President Trump has spoken plenty of times about the ills of homeless. A case study from the small town of Golden Valley, CA, can help us better understand how this mentality functions.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Bemidji Area Studies on Race Relations: An exploration of current race relations between American Indian and White residents. [https://www.wilder.org/sites/default/files/imports/BemidjiAreaRacism\\_2-09.pdf](https://www.wilder.org/sites/default/files/imports/BemidjiAreaRacism_2-09.pdf)

<sup>83</sup> Davis-Delano, Laurel R., Renee V. Galliher, Kirsten Matoy Carlson, Arianne E. Eason, and Stephanie A. Fryberg. "White opposition to Native nation sovereignty: The role of “the casino Indian” stereotype and presence of Native nation gaming." *Du Bois Review: Social Science Research on Race* 17, no. 1 (2020): 55-80.

<sup>84</sup> Jacobs, David, and Daniel Tope. "The politics of resentment in the post–civil rights era: Minority threat, homicide, and ideological voting in Congress." *American Journal of Sociology* 112, no. 5 (2007): 1458-1494.

<sup>85</sup> Downey, Laura Hall. "Rural populations and health: determinants, disparities, and solutions." *Preventing Chronic Disease* 10 (2013).

<sup>86</sup> Sherman, Jennifer. "Coping with rural poverty: Economic survival and moral capital in rural America." *Social Forces* 85, no. 2 (2006): 891-913.

Liza Wright and Tommy Patterson are a cohabiting couple in Golden Valley in their late 20s. They have a 3-year-old son together. According to Tommy, the trick to survival in Golden Valley is a strong work ethic and taking whatever (men's jobs) are available. "Somebody always needs their driveway shoveled or some firewood, somethin' like that. You just gotta do it". The same set of beliefs that leads Tommy to take any job he can find also makes him wary of accepting government aid of any kind: "It makes me feel better that we're buying insurance. I'm not real into handouts. If my family need 'em, I'll take 'em. But I would rather not. I'd rather work an extra job or work a couple extra days or somethin' and take care of 'em myself. But that's just the upbringing I have."

Participant 3 briefly refers to Beltrami County becoming the first state to reject refugee resettlement.<sup>87</sup> Research based in another town in rural Minnesota with 20,000 residents located about sixty miles from the Twin Cities finds that focus group participants frequently faulted government for their hardships – with white working-class resident suggesting that government institutions favor immigrants at the expense of local, white residents.<sup>88</sup> People in the town said: "there could be a ninety-year-old couple moving to town, they go down to social service they wouldn't get to em'. By golly, a truckload (immigrants) come in, they give em' what they want, food stamps, and everything else. It's not fair." This is in line with why Bemidji resident Mike Rasch opposed bringing residents to Beltrami County: "We're on a cliff. We can't even support the people we have."<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Collins, Jon, and John Enger. "Beltrami Co. Becomes First in State to Reject Refugee Resettlement." MPR News, January 8, 2020.

<sup>88</sup> Leitner, Helga. "Spaces of encounters: Immigration, race, class, and the politics of belonging in small-town America." *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 102, no. 4 (2012): 828-846.

<sup>89</sup> Enger, John. "Conservative County in Minnesota Votes to Bar Refugees." NPR. January 10, 2020. <https://www.npr.org/2020/01/10/795161021/conservative-county-in-minnesota-votes-to-bar-refugees>.

Participant 4

Age: 27

Gender: Male

Race: Native

Birthplace and residence: Born and bred in Bemidji. He is the son of participant 3

*What she said.*

### **Everyone in the room laughs**

*Participant 4: Honestly though, right around the same lines that you are saying. Bemidji has a lot of trouble understanding. There is a lot of misunderstand between people, I think. It is a great place to live. There are all kinds of good stuff you can say about it. It's beautiful in the summer, it's great for tourists, dalalala.*

*But there are deeper levels of weird tension and like living here and growing up here as a person of color and as a native person, it was interesting. As I grew up, I learned a lot about race and myself. I realized when I was young that I had to kind of swerve and navigate through a lot of these weird sort of emotions about who I am and what's the town that I am in. I used to play music a lot when I was younger like when I was in High School and stuff and kind of coming out of it. I remember when I hit that shift from being that cool, cute native kid that played music to like that Indian man, like hold your purse a little closer. Hold it on the other side of your body. I remember when that shift happened, I was like what the heck is that all about?*

*So, you know, Bemidji is weird, and I am still learning on how to navigate these things but, there is just layers of misunderstanding I think between people. I worked in the restaurant industry in Bemidji for a long time and I see a lot of weird stuff in that same sort of area. You know, you walk up to a table, I was one of the only people of color at a restaurant downtown. You would walk up to a table, and you can see people whole demeanor would just change. They go ahh man, we got this kid. There are not going to say, ow shoot the brown kid is here. No one would say that But it's like these undertones of like, you know why the people are upset that you are serving them. You know, it's just that weird, uncomfortable feeling. Much like she was saying, there is like the defense. There is this misunderstanding that you are this, I don't know, just misunderstanding.*

*You know, the vote on the immigration stuff that happened was a real bummer I think for a lot of people. That was like this big picture thing that big news organization picked up. It put Bemidji on the map for a while. For a lot of us that live here, that exists here but that's not what should have put us on the map. You know that's not who we are as a community. I remember everyone feeling embarrassed about that. The people who lived here their whole lives and really know Bemidji. It's getting better. There are attempts at making some relations between peoples and building bridges.*

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Participant 5

Age: 69

Gender: Female

Race: White

Birthplace and residence: Born and raised in Bemidji

*Participant 5: A part of that shows how gullible our area has become. A part of that vote said there were going to be 7,000 Syrians coming over. Like for god sake, give me a break. There not coming here. They don't need to come here. So yea, I just see a shift, I don't know if conservative is the world we have always been pretty conservative around here. I think the word is uncaring. We are sort of aloof. Like this is my territory. This is my country. You can't come to it. We don't want anybody else in here. It's a tough one.*

A Washington Post-Kaiser Family Foundation survey found that President Trump's contentious, anti-immigrant rhetoric touched on many of the frustrations felt most acutely by rural Americans.<sup>90</sup> Rural residents are nearly three times as likely (42%) as people in cities (16%) to say that immigrants are a burden to the country. Larry E. Redding, a retired canning factory employee in Arendtsville, Pa says of immigrants: "They're not paying taxes like Americans are. They're getting stuff handed to them,". "Free rent, and they're driving better vehicles than I'm driving and everything else."

This is in line with the accounts from the town with 20,000 residents located about sixty miles from the Twin Cities.<sup>91</sup> "Well, I think the government's going overboard with 'em. I mean, they should treat 'em all the same, whether they're Mexican or whatever, wherever they come from. They should all be treated the same. You know whether they get kicked out of their own country, whether they wanna come over here. You know, but they shouldn't be treated better than we are. We're the ones that are paying for what they gettin. If they gonna run around acting like they're better than we are, we aint gonna, appreciate that at all."

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<sup>90</sup> "New Poll of Rural Americans Shows Deep Cultural Divide with Urban Residents." The Washington Post. WP Company. Accessed August 18, 2022. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2017/national/rural-america/>.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.



Participant 6

Age: 31

Gender: Female

Race: White

Birthplace and residence: Born in Hibbing, MN. Lived in Bemidji for 12 years. Participant 6 is married to Participant 4

Occupation: Journalist at Bemidji Pioneer

*Participant 6: Bemidji is known as a hub for the area. It's a hub for shopping for shopping, medical, everything. I agree with what everyone said, it is a poverty issue. It is exacerbated by the racism. It is a lack of compassion and understanding. The social safety net here is not wide enough. It is not big enough to catch a lot of folks. There is not enough opportunities. I have seen that quite a bit working at the newspaper. We cover a lot of aspects of things, but it is interesting to see how it is.*

*I mean, just with participant 4 as a white lady I don't get stares. But seeing it from his perspective. Without participant 4 in my life, I wouldn't really see it as well. An example is when we go to a store together, people leave us alone and don't ask us if we need help every five seconds. They don't follow us around every corner. But when participant 4 goes into a store they follow him around every corner. It's more of a feeling than overt racism. It's a lack of understanding.*

Participant 1

Age: 41

Gender: Male

Race: White

Birthplace and residence: Born and resides in Bemidji

Occupation: Locksmith

*Participant 1: Do you feel like a lot of the problems that we have? You know we have a terrible amount of crime in our community. But it doesn't make the news. It doesn't get talked about. It's like we don't talk about these things. It doesn't make the newspaper. It's kinda like "come to Bemidji, its beautiful". Everything and everyone are nice and all this. But nobody talks about the bad things that happen. Maybe I stopped reading the newspaper or whatever. You know, it just feels like the issues don't make it into the discourse.*

Participant 2

Age: 69

Gender: Female

Race: White

Birthplace and residence: Born in Bemidji, left for a while and came back

Occupation: Health care administration

*Participant 2: My take on that is that there is no daily paper anymore. Me and my husband don't get nearly the amount of news without a daily paper.*

Participant 1

Age: 41

Gender: Male

Race: White

Birthplace and residence: Born and resides in Bemidji

Occupation: Locksmith

*Participant 1: And peoples information comes from the sources that they have picked based on what they already think. So, you can't get a broader view, I mean that's a problem across all of America. Obviously but we are no different in that regard. So that's how you don't get different perspectives and points of view.*

Participant 7

Age: 73

Gender: Male

Race: White

Birthplace and residence: Born in Lawrence, KS and has lived in Bemidji for 43 years.

Occupation: Retired

*Participant 7: Bemidji is a beautiful place. I moved here in 79 and once or twice thought about some other opportunities. I didn't think about them very long. And I was able to raise my children here and they all had a really good experience although they all left, maybe that speaks differently. But they come back and visit all out.*

*But I have lived in a lot of places. I have lived in South Dakota for 6 or 7 years in Sioux Falls and then in rural Mississippi. In my life, one of the more formative experiences I had was I worked at a reservation for a couple of weeks between my freshman and sophomore year of college. Those years were transformative. The kids had much less recourses than mine do now.*

*When I came to Bemidji, I found that it has much less bigotry than South Dakota and rural Mississippi. However, nobody ever checks my bag when I leave Walmart. You learn to watch what goes on. It's disturbing how native Americans are treated in our area. You should call it out calmly. There are problems. But when my kids went through school, they became friends with native Americans. We have an opportunity.*

Participant 1

Age: 41

Gender: Male

Race: White

Birthplace and residence: Born and resides in Bemidji

Occupation: Locksmith

*Participant 1: Poverty is a huge problem in Bemidji. But if you flip it on its head, ridiculous wealth is a problem in our area. It used to be, my grandparents ran a tiny resort, and they would by today's standards, but they lived a rich life doing what they want to do. There used to be that there were hundreds of resorts and people didn't have money, but they would come up and spend a week at a resort and that was their big things.*

*And now all that is million-dollar house, next to million-dollar house, next to million-dollar house, and that is more stratification. That is more divide. And that happens a lot in our area. Yes, it good to have that money come here, but its divisive. I don't know the answer to that. It's just an observation.*

*But I noticed that since I was a kid. That has dramatically changed. Everyone could live on the lake and take part in a good life. But now you must be very wealthy and probably not from around here to buy property in desirable areas. That's a big issue we have. I don't know how to solve it.*

*And now all that is million-dollar house, next to million-dollar house, next to million-dollar house, and that is more stratification. That is more divide. And that happens a lot in our area. Yes, it good to have that money come here, but its divisive. I don't know the answer to that. It's just an observation.*

*But I noticed that since I was a kid. That has dramatically changed. Everyone could live on the lake and take part in a good life. But now you must be very wealthy and probably not from around here to buy property in desirable areas. That's a big issue we have. I don't know how to solve it.*

*The good part about that is can that money be used better. It is also a giant influx of money. An example is that I have a friend who has family ties with someone who lives in a very small school district with very few people in there because it is just the locals who live there but it's a center of enormous wealth.*

*The kids who grow up in that school district get everything. They have so much. They could be from very normal, even low-income families, and they have everything the most expensive school district that there is. What a great advantage. So, how do we leverage those opportunities here? How do we use it as an advantage? There is some opportunity here. I think it is how that money can be used. That's the debate. There is opportunity.*

Participant 2

Age: 69

Gender: Female

Race: White

Birthplace and residence: Born in Bemidji, left for a while and came back

Occupation: Health care administration

*Participant 2: That's an interesting way to view our area because you are right. All the mom and pops, everything is going. Our lakeshore is coming with mansions. The wealth that we all see from our area that we used to be able to participate in with the lakes, the woods, and the parks. Some of that is going away. We are not able to enjoy these things on an intimate basis. A daily basis.*

## Chapter 10: Is there a feeling that people in Bemidji are being neglected?

Participant 5

Age: 69

Gender: Female

Race: White

Birthplace and residence: Born and raised in Bemidji

*Participant 5: I don't feel neglect, I am not anti-government. I worked in city government in Bemidji before. I don't look at government as the bad people. I am okay with being taxed and that kind of stuff. I do think that some of the folks down at the legislature in St. Paul who have never lived in a small town in their life probably don't know what's going on here and how the reality is.*

Participant 3

Age: 62

Gender: Female

Race: Native

Birthplace and residence: Born and in Red Lake (reservation near Bemidji, about a 37-minute drive). Lives in Bemidji since 1996.

Occupation: High School Teacher in Red Lake

*Participant 3: I think there is a lot of truth in that. That legislatures don't always understand the difference between urban and rural. I was just down lobbying in St. Paul for education. It is interesting, there is a gentleman from the House of Representatives that is from the metro area. He really didn't have any idea about what goes on in rural Minnesota. One of the things that was interesting was that he has this idea that the problem with what's going in Minnesota is that we don't have typical families. We have single family households.*

*In the school that I work in, we provide three meals a day. Breakfast, lunch, and dinner. He is totally against that. He just says that we should not be providing third meals because that takes away the opportunity for fathers to be fathers and provide for their families.*

*But there is a lot of misunderstanding from our legislatures who have so much say so but don't have a real understanding of what goes on in rural Minnesota and our issues. Even in school transportation, we are always looking for what they call spare city dollars to transport a student. Bemidji has like a 200-mile radius to transport their students. The cost to transporting students in Bemidji is huge. We might have to go 30 miles to pick up a student. In the metro, they don't understand what we must deal with up here. There is a real difference between metro and rural.*

These passages are a geographic resentment. Our participants are noting that they feel that urban lawmakers don't have a firm grasp of the issues and culture that effect Bemidji.

Participant 1

Age: 41

Gender: Male

Race: White

Birthplace and residence: Born and resides in Bemidji

Occupation: Locksmith

*Participant 1: My dad was looking at the redistricting for the Minnesota State Senate. Every couple of years they redistrict. And I said to him, does it seem weird that many times you will have multiple reservations all with the same representative, even though they are different communities with different issues. That does not seem equitable. In the metro Twin Cities, you can have multiple representatives, even though they are the same community. Up here, the iron range, Bemidji and the Northern part of Brainerd are all three completely different.*

*How do they have the same representatives for things?*

Participant 5

Age: 69

Gender: Female

Race: White

Birthplace and residence: Born and raised in Bemidji

*Participant 5: Isn't it based on population though?*

Participant 1

Age: 41

Gender: Male

Race: White

Birthplace and residence: Born and resides in Bemidji

Occupation: Locksmith

*Participant 1: It is but, I understand but, I feel like it makes more sense if these lines are drawn more based on similarities in communities or needs. I don't know how that would go or look.*

*We were having an interesting conversation about that. My dad is a conservative. He was a state senator at one point. He is like yea that makes sense. Different reservations should have a representative. In the House of Representatives, it makes more sense to hear these issues instead of one person or two that are speaking against a hundred others who don't understand it.*

*It is that equity of your voice being heard. Its everywhere. Its farmers. They are saying that their voices aren't heard. It's across the board. When the population is dispersed so much, the metrics of deciding based on population how problems get solved, I don't know that seems outdated. You know, especially in the world that we can get anything at any time in our pockets. Why are we still using that to govern us?*

Participant 7

Age: 73

Gender: Male

Race: White

Birthplace and residence: Born in Lawrence, KS and has lived in Bemidji for 43 years.

Occupation: Retired

*Participant 7: You know when I was younger, because I grew up in Minneapolis, I went through fourth grade through my junior year of high school. But they used to have the legislatures from the cities do tours out in the state. And they would be brought up north. Legislatures from the cities used to get to know the community. I don't see that anymore. What happens is the population base keeps concentrating more and more in the greater metro area. So, you don't have to worry as much about the rural areas.*

*I don't know what the answer is. The us vs them. It is the killer for me right now. I never grew up with that. I guess I didn't realize the 60s ended 50 years ago. I was hoping it would continue longer.*

Participant 3

Age: 62

Gender: Female

Race: Native

Birthplace and residence: Born and in Red Lake (reservation near Bemidji, about a 37-minute drive). Lives in Bemidji since 1996.

Occupation: High School Teacher in Red Lake

*Participant 3: I guess I am thinking the biggest issue with lawmakers is creating an understanding between us. I don't know if there is a desire for those in the metro area to come out and understand things. Right? That is key.*

Participant 6

Age: 31

Gender: Female

Race: White

Birthplace and residence: Born in Hibbing, MN. Lived in Bemidji for 12 years. Participant 6 is married to Participant 4

Occupation: Journalist at Bemidji Pioneer

*Participant 6: In the next redistricting, our representative would be based out of Duluth. I think we are in district 8 now.*

Participant 2

Age: 69

Gender: Female

Race: White

Birthplace and residence: Born in Bemidji, left for a while and came back

Occupation: Health care administration

*Participant 2: Wow we are now district 8? That would go down to almost to center city or even further down than that. We are on the very edge.*

Participant 7

Age: 73

Gender: Male

Race: White

Birthplace and residence: Born in Lawrence, KS and has lived in Bemidji for 43 years.

Occupation: Retired

*Participant 7: In some ways that helps us out. Instead of splitting the vote into two sections, at least we can have a chance to be heard.*

Participant 3

Age: 62

Gender: Female

Race: Native

Birthplace and residence: Born and in Red Lake (reservation near Bemidji, about a 37-minute drive). Lives in Bemidji since 1996.

Occupation: High School Teacher in Red Lake

*Participant 3: And if you are wondering about the impact of redistricting, look how it impacts our school district. How it redistricts its schools. The impact it has on Bemidji is just huge you know. If you draw the line between Northern Elementary and Lincoln Elementary, it changes everything in Bemidji. Suddenly, you are going to want to live in this area. You know, just the impact of the small redistricting.*

Participant 6

Age: 31

Gender: Female

Race: White

Birthplace and residence: Born in Hibbing, MN. Lived in Bemidji for 12 years. Participant 6 is married to Participant 4

Occupation: Journalist at Bemidji Pioneer

*Participant 6: I don't think we have had anyone from that level, from Bemidji, representing us. We do have people running now, but the people representing us have never been at that level anyway. They have never been here. Rarely do they visit. I think this is where the resentment comes in. I don't feel super represented by them.*



Participant 2

Age: 69

Gender: Female

Race: White

Birthplace and residence: Born in Bemidji, left for a while and came back

Occupation: Health care administration

*Participant 2: Our governor, who is a Democrat, made a terrible comment about rural Minnesota when he talked about all that is up there are rocks and cows. I really had a hard time wrapping my head around that because that really was unfortunate.*

*If you want a reason to resent him, boy he gave us one. If you are already mad about things, that would make you real angry.*

## **Chapter 11: Why did so many Bemidjians attend former President Trump's rally?**

Participant 4

Age: 27

Gender: Male

Race: Native

Birthplace and residence: Born and bred in Bemidji. He is the son of participant 3

*Participant 4: I think the infamous day that Trump came into town, for some people it was great. It was exciting. For me it was a weird rough day. I was working downtown at a restaurant. I asked not to work but I was.*

*The reason Trump came here was because of that vote we were talking about. The refugee vote. The New York times had a piece about that. It put us on the map. So, his people must have told him, look how Bemidjians vote on this hot bottom issue that you are so adamantly against. So, I think that was the main reason.*

*That's why he came to little old Bemidji. There were people that were excited about it. But I think it was because of that vote that we were even on his team's radar.*

Participant 1

Age: 41

Gender: Male

Race: White

Birthplace and residence: Born and resides in Bemidji

Occupation: Locksmith

*Participant 1: There were people that traveled a long way just to come to Bemidji because it is a regional center. As small of a town as it might seem across the United States, for our area it is a very large town and there were people that travelled for many miles to come here.*

*I feel like Bemidji the town is a little more progressive than some of the surrounding communities, so it makes it a spot where you can grab all these people out the sticks and come and support Trump. It's got to be one of the smallest regional centers in the United States. Once you get out of town, it gets more conservative.*

Participant 3

Age: 62

Gender: Female

Race: Native

Birthplace and residence: Born and in Red Lake (reservation near Bemidji, about a 37-minute drive). Lives in Bemidji since 1996.

Occupation: High School Teacher in Red Lake

*Participant 3: I will tell you what it was like that day for my family. My husband and I knew we would stay home. Whatever we needed we got beforehand. I had a son who was asked not to move because we didn't know how town would look.*

*I had another son with children. He didn't want his children to leave the house. They couldn't go to a friend's house they couldn't do any of that. I have a daughter who took her two children and left town until it was over. There is a whole divide there. For some of us it was a very scary day. We knew what was coming to town. Some of us stayed some of us left town.*

Participant 4

Age: 27

Gender: Male

Race: Native

Birthplace and residence: Born and bred in Bemidji. He is the son of participant 3

*Participant 4: Someone told me that day at the restaurant: why are you wearing a mask, are you trying to hide your race?*

Participant 3

Age: 62

Gender: Female

Race: Native

Birthplace and residence: Born and in Red Lake (reservation near Bemidji, about a 37-minute drive). Lives in Bemidji since 1996.

Occupation: High School Teacher in Red Lake

*Participant 3: For some of us it was a very scary day. We literally went into hiding. We did not go to town. We did not let our children go to town. That's what that day was like for us.*

Participant 6

Age: 31

Gender: Female

Race: White

Birthplace and residence: Born in Hibbing, MN. Lived in Bemidji for 12 years. Participant 6 is married to Participant 4

Occupation: Journalist at Bemidji Pioneer

*Participant 6: Working for the newspaper before he came in, we talked to a lot of people around town about what they expected from the rally. Many expected that he would talk about local stuff around here.*

Participant 5

Age: 69

Gender: Female

Race: White

Birthplace and residence: Born and raised in Bemidji

*Participant 5: He didn't even know he was in Bemidji.*

*Everyone laughs.*

Participant 6

Age: 31

Gender: Female

Race: White

Birthplace and residence: Born in Hibbing, MN. Lived in Bemidji for 12 years. Participant 6 is married to Participant 4

Occupation: Journalist at Bemidji Pioneer

*Participant 6: He didn't say the word Bemidji once. He talked more about mining jobs. Bemidji is not about mining even though the district is. It showed me the cult following for that.*

*It was like a Comedian got on stage, did his show, and left. All he knew about Minnesota was Ilhan Omar, he got up there and said some anti-immigrant, anti-Somali stuff and was on his way.*

Participant 3

Age: 62

Gender: Female

Race: Native

Birthplace and residence: Born and in Red Lake (reservation near Bemidji, about a 37-minute drive). Lives in Bemidji since 1996.

Occupation: High School Teacher in Red Lake

*Participant 3: He said you got good genes up here.*

Participant 1

Age: 41

Gender: Male

Race: White

Birthplace and residence: Born and resides in Bemidji

Occupation: Locksmith

*Participant 1: We had a lot of customers in the store that day that were very nervous of an anti-Trump rally. A lot of us felt like we were caught in the middle of something.*

Participant 3

Age: 62

Gender: Female

Race: Native

Birthplace and residence: Born and in Red Lake (reservation near Bemidji, about a 37-minute drive). Lives in Bemidji since 1996.

Occupation: High School Teacher in Red Lake

*Participant 3: It's a true example of division.*

Participant 1

Age: 41

Gender: Male

Race: White

Birthplace and residence: Born and resides in Bemidji

Occupation: Locksmith

*Participant 1: It goes back to you talking about why come here? We are polarized. He plays off the polarization. Our community and the surrounding area have become more and more polarized.*

*We are an area that maybe because we feel neglected by the big city, feeling neglected by this idea that it's just the hicks up north or whatever, you know more people feel disenfranchised and its weird. That flipped.*

*It used to be that if you were disenfranchised years ago, back in the 60s and 70s, you would lean left. Now the disenfranchised lean right. So, he is feeding off that. I think this was a great area to do that.*

Participant 7

Age: 73

Gender: Male

Race: White

Birthplace and residence: Born in Lawrence, KS and has lived in Bemidji for 43 years.

Occupation: Retired

*Participant 7: I remember hearing he could win Minnesota. He thought the votes that would get him the victory were out in rural areas. He has a lot of supporters out here.*

Participant 1

Age: 41

Gender: Male

Race: White

Birthplace and residence: Born and resides in Bemidji

Occupation: Locksmith

*Participant 1: It's really a shame that we don't live in a town where the President coming to Bemidji was not a cool thing.*

## Chapter 12: How are the culture wars playing out in Bemidji?

Participant 6

Age: 31

Gender: Female

Race: White

Birthplace and residence: Born in Hibbing, MN. Lived in Bemidji for 12 years. Participant 6 is married to Participant 4

Occupation: Journalist at Bemidji Pioneer

*Participant 6: I have gone to a few schoolboard meetings before for the newspaper. We knew it was going to be heated. You know, it seems like there are people in town who follow that national problem and they try to bring it here locally.*

*At that meeting they were talking about the children having to wear masks when they get back to school. And a man in the audience was mumbling about critical race theory the whole time. And he said when are they going to talk about it? When are they going to bring that up? They weren't talking about it that day.*

*It was just a weird room to be in. Lots of people follow national school board trends and bring them here. Even the anti-trans stuff that goes on. Some people try to bring that here and blow that up. I feel bad for the school board members.*

Participant 1

Age: 41

Gender: Male

Race: White

Birthplace and residence: Born and resides in Bemidji

Occupation: Locksmith

*Participant 1: It feels like people are bring national issues and forcing them down people's throats when they are not really issues here.*

Participant 3

Age: 62

Gender: Female

Race: Native

Birthplace and residence: Born and in Red Lake (reservation near Bemidji, about a 37-minute drive). Lives in Bemidji since 1996.

Occupation: High School Teacher in Red Lake

*Participant 3: There is an example to of some cultural differences. With critical race theory and the mask mandate, in the native community, it's a tribal community, the thought process is to take care of each other. Nobody complained about wearing masks. They did it to protect each other, our elders. When you come into Bemidji, only natives wear masks. I saw a long line of elders getting vaccine when they first came in. Critical race theory is not an issue in the native community. We all love each other.*

Participant 5

Age: 69

Gender: Female

Race: White

Birthplace and residence: Born and raised in Bemidji

*Participant 5: First, race is not a theory. Where it came from, I have no idea.*

Participant 3

Age: 62

Gender: Female

Race: Native

Birthplace and residence: Born and in Red Lake (reservation near Bemidji, about a 37-minute drive). Lives in Bemidji since 1996.

Occupation: High School Teacher in Red Lake

*Participant 3: It's just history it's just telling the truth.*

Participant 6

Age: 31

Gender: Female

Race: White

Birthplace and residence: Born in Hibbing, MN. Lived in Bemidji for 12 years. Participant 6 is married to Participant 4

Occupation: Journalist at Bemidji Pioneer

*Participant 6: One woman kept contacting us about a teacher who had a trans daughter in the twin cities. She kept wanting to bring that to Bemidji.*

Participant 1

Age: 41

Gender: Male

Race: White

Birthplace and residence: Born and resides in Bemidji

Occupation: Locksmith

*Participant 1: I think there are issues that are polarizing though in education. Right? Different schools had giant problems with masks. Many schools had problems with remote learning. Around COVID there was a lot of polarization.*

Participant 5

Age: 69

Gender: Female

Race: White

Birthplace and residence: Born and raised in Bemidji

*Participant 5: Maybe we need some tribalism. So many people around here, I am thinking about my dad for instance. He was a stand-alone, lumberjack guy with a pull yourself up by your bootstrap's mentality.*

### Chapter 13: Policy Solutions

How can policy makers help quell the politics of resentment? Place-based economic policies can serve as an effective response to populism.<sup>92</sup> Economic stress has contributed to rising rates of drug addiction and falling life expectancy. It is crucial to address these economic challenges to quell populist fervor. Declining places can become poverty traps. A shrinking tax base means a deterioration in local services. Low and falling housing costs disproportionately attract people on fixed government incomes, like pensioners, who tend to take more in government services than they add to the local economy. One way to remedy resentment is to jump start local economies. Governments have a long record of experimentation with “place-based” policies. The Massive infrastructure investments of the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) are an example of this.

Trade, offshoring, and automation have steadily reduced the number of available jobs and the wages of industrial workers since at least 1970.<sup>93</sup> The decline in manufacturing employment initiated the deterioration of social and economic conditions in affected communities, exacerbating inequalities between depressed rural areas and small cities and towns, on the one hand, and thriving cities, on the other. The global financial crisis of 2008 catalyzed these divisions, as communities already in decline suffered deeper and longer economic downturns than metropolitan areas, where superstar knowledge, technology, and service-oriented firms flourish. A rejuvenation of distressed communities and a reduction of stark regional inequalities will help restore some semblance of social cohesion.

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<sup>92</sup> “Place-Based Economic Policies as a Response to Populism.” The Economist. The Economist Newspaper. Accessed August 18, 2022. <https://www.economist.com/finance-and-economics/2016/12/15/place-based-economic-policies-as-a-response-to-populism>.

<sup>93</sup> Broz, J. Lawrence, Jeffry Frieden, and Stephen Weymouth. “Populism in place: the economic geography of the globalization backlash.” *International Organization* 75, no. 2 (2021): 464-494.



Collaboration and coordination across sectors and levels of government, a focus on identity and regional assets – the connection of social, economic, and environmental considerations; the bridging of urban and rural; and continuous learning and innovation are important regional solutions to the politics of resentment.<sup>94</sup> Intermediaries, specifically local government regional development organizations and nonprofit regional and community economic development organizations can play a critical role in catalyzing and managing rural-urban interactions to create harmony and cohesion. Let's stop judging and start listening.

In general, rural communities have less broadband Internet use than metro communities, with differing degrees of broadband availability across rural communities.<sup>95</sup> Rural communities that had greater broadband Internet access had greater economic growth, which conforms to supplemental research on the benefits that rural businesses, consumers, and communities ascribe to broadband internet use. Ensuring rural communities have broadband will drive economic growth, connect places and spaces and quell resentment and misunderstanding between people.

Many in rural America seem left behind by the local economy, and descriptive statistics prove to us that they have a point. When designing public policy, sustainable economic development can be how rural areas can successfully participate in the global economy.<sup>96</sup> In a recent study, Sociologist Rosabeth Kanter rightfully concluded: "To succeed in the global economy, places must nurture the core capability that gives them international distinction, but they must also invest in other skills (education and fresh talent) to support their core strengths."

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<sup>94</sup> Dabson, Brian. "Regional Solutions for Rural and Urban Challenges." *State and Local Government Review* 51, no. 4 (December 2019): 283–91. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0160323X20925132>.

<sup>95</sup> Stenberg, Peter L., Mitchell J. Morehart, Stephen J. Vogel, John Cromartie, Vincent E. Breneman, and Dennis M. Brown. *Broadband Internet's value for rural America*. No. 1477-2016-121092. 2009.

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## Chapter 14: Conclusion

In this master's research paper, we conducted an ethnographic study of seven Bemidjians. As I predicted, resentment does exist in the town based on geographic, economic, cultural, and racial lines, and that these resentments would often intertwine. It is important to note that not all Bemidjians think the same. **From my interviews, I found the following:**

- Geographic resentment exists. Some Bemidjians felt disrespected by Governor Tim Walz remarks about rural Minnesota being just rocks and cows. Some said rural areas aren't represented in democratic processes and lawmakers in cities often misunderstand rurality.
- Economic resentment exists. The town lacks industry and many have a pull yourself up by your bootstrap mentality.
- Racial resentments exist. The interviews conducted show the tensions between whites and natives as well as whites fearing immigration to the town. As our participants put it: there is a fundamental misunderstanding between peoples in Bemidji.
- Cultural resentments. The interviews show us that many Bemidjians are opposed to COVID-19 measures, critical race theory, LGBTQ+ and the press more broadly.

I have proposed the following public policy remedies to quell the politics of resentment:

- Place based economic policies that will kick start local economies.
- Create sustainable growth by connecting places and investing in education and people.
- Stop looking down on folks in rural areas, listen to them, and make them feel part of the democratic process.

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