

Examining the politics of resentment in rural Wisconsin and Alberta

Abstract

Rural Americans and Canadians are feeling politically alienated and angry in ways that go beyond ideological preference, age, or income level.¹ This anger and discontent yields a politics of resentment. This paper argues that ethnographic case studies can provide scholars with deep insights into the politics of resentment in rural areas. Employing a method of listening in rural Wisconsin and Alberta will help us understand the sources of discontent and frustration in rural communities.

Literature Review

The politics of resentment can be conceptualized as when citizens intertwine economic considerations with social and cultural considerations in the interpretations – they make with one another.² The politics of resentment goes beyond disagreements about basic political principles – and instead encompasses more fundamental disagreements that are rooted in intense resentment rural citizens have against urban ones. The essence of ethnography involves the immersion of the researcher into the world of the subjects, with the explicit goal of seeking a deeper grasp of not just what they think but how they come to think these things.

Using ethnographic methods helps political scientists grapple with shifting public opinion in an age of widespread political disaffection in rural areas. Employing a method of listening helps political scientists trace the sources of resentment among rural citizens. This gives the researcher space to put themselves in the psych of the subject and analyze both the said and unsaid. In the case of rural Wisconsin and Alberta – the use of ethnographic methods has helped political scientists better understand the following question: What makes the politics of resentment flourish?

¹ Banack, Clark. "Ethnography and Political Opinion: Identity, Alienation and Anti-Establishmentarianism in Rural Alberta." *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 54, no. 1 (2021): 1–22. doi:10.1017/S0008423920000694.

² Cramer, Katherine J. *The politics of resentment: Rural consciousness in Wisconsin and the rise of Scott Walker*. University of Chicago Press, 2016.

The Politics of Resentment in Rural Wisconsin

Cramer's conversations with citizens in rural Wisconsin yields nuanced themes that can help political scientists better understand the politics of resentment. This method of listening helps the reader understand how rural folks in Wisconsin look at political issues such as health care and education through a rural lens.

For instance, Cramer's conversations show us that funding for education is an issue for folks in rural Wisconsin because they see themselves as getting robbed by urbanites. The Wisconsin "funding formula" means that revenues are shared across school districts, but wealthier communities can spend more than the state allocation by using revenues gathered through local property taxes.

As the population in rural areas dwindles, the possibility of school consolidation increases, and the identity of a town and its schools begins to decay. The ethnographic approach Cramer is using helps us understand how community identity and schools are closely intertwined – and how their decay can be attributed to urbanites.

Viewing political issues through a rural lens nourishes the politics of resentment. For instance, Lou, one of Cramer's subjects from a small town in central Wisconsin, mentions that "you know people in that environment (Madison) make the laws and they don't necessarily – not necessarily what people need or want in other parts of the state." Cramer's interview with Lou illustrates to us that ethnography can help us understand the strong rural identity that animates the way folks in rural Wisconsin think about politics. These folks see urban politicians as not giving rural communities their fair share – and their rural identity is central to this belief.

The Politics of Resentment in Rural Alberta

Banack replicates Cramer's ethnographic approach and finds similar patterns of thinking in rural Alberta. Banack finds that rural Albertans feel a precise form of alienation related to their own sense of rural identity – and this often corresponds with a belief in the idea that rural communities and citizens in

Alberta are often unfairly treated, overlooked, and even looked down upon.

The connection between folks in rural Wisconsin and rural Alberta illustrates to us the importance of ethnographic methods – as they help researchers uncover the aesthetics, language and ways of thinking and perceiving the world that rural folks share.

The ethnographic methods Cramer and Banack use reveal that forms of alienation are not always experienced as distinct irritations and are instead layered. It is difficult to make sense of the political views of rural Albertans without grasping the way this layered sense of alienation is connected to their social identity as Albertans.

Banack's conversations with rural Albertans reveal various alienations that were not the product of individuals struggling personally but rather strongly related to the notion that the groups the individual felt strongly connected with were being treated unfairly. For instance, in group 13, Speaker 1 (female over 45) says: "The liberal is incapable of governing for the entire country. It's always the Eastern interests over ours. Always. All I want is fairness."

This idea that politicians are not serving the interest of rural communities is central to the politics of resentment. In Cramer's research, participants noted that lawmakers in Madison were not serving the interests of the people. The same pattern of thinking has showed up in rural Alberta. The beauty of using a method of listening is that it shows us these common patterns of thinking among populations – and this helps us understand a complex phenomenon like the politics of resentment.

Conclusion

Rural Americans and Canadians are practicing a politics of resentment. These folks see urban politicians and citizens as not giving rural communities their fair share. The politics of resentment often stems from citizens using a rural lens to look at issues. Using immersive ethnographic research that prioritizes citizens ability to explain their thinking in their own words holds great potential to bolster our understanding of the politics of resentment.

Sources

Banack, Clark. "Ethnography and Political Opinion: Identity, Alienation and Anti-Establishmentarianism in Rural Alberta." *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 54, no. 1 (2021): 1–22.

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