Understanding the Politics of Resentment:

Rural Consciousness and Support for Small Government

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My sincere gratitude to the hundreds of people who allowed me to take part in their conversations for this study. I am also grateful to Dan Hopkins and Chris Ellis for very helpful feedback on earlier versions of this chapter. I also thank Tim Bagshaw, Emily Erwin-Frank, Dominic Desapio, Valerie Hennings, David Lassen, Ryan Miller, Tricia Olsen, and Kerry Ratigan for help with transcription and translation. Special thanks go to Ben Toff and Sarah Niebler for excellent research assistance. I am grateful to the Ira and Ineva Reilly Baldwin Wisconsin Idea Endowment Grant, the University of Wisconsin-Madison Department of Political Science, and the University of Wisconsin-Madison Graduate School for funding that made this research possible. Comments welcome ([kjcramer@wisc.edu](mailto:kjcramer@wisc.edu)).

Note: *This is a chapter from a book manuscript called* Understanding the Politics of Resentment*. In this book I start with a re-occurring question: Why is it, in this context of increasing economic inequality and lack of policy responsiveness to all but the most affluent, that many Americans continue to vote for politicians who do not represent their interests (Bartels 2008, 2013; Hacker and Pierson 2010)? I turn this question slightly to ask not, Why are people getting it wrong? But instead, How are they getting it? How do people perceive their economic interests and how do they connect these to policy and candidate preferences?*

*Between May 2007 and November 2012, I conducted extensive participant observation of conversations that took place among regularly-occurring groups of people sampled from across the state of Wisconsin (37 groups across 27 communities-- please see Appendix A for details). I visited each of these groups between 1 and 5 times, taking advantage of the onset of the Great Recession, and the intense political environment that erupted in Wisconsin with the election of Scott Walker as governor and his controversial legislation, particularly Act 10 which he proposed shortly after taking office in early 2011. This bill eliminated most collective bargaining for most public workers and required them to pay higher contributions to their pensions and health care benefits.*

*The book argues that when people in rural areas make sense of their economic interests, they often rely on social identities rooted in their identities as rural people and their perceptions of distributive justice. I call this rural consciousness, and it looks roughly like this: Many people in rural areas see themselves as rural people, who live in a place that is routinely ignored by decision makers and the distribution of resources. In addition, they often see themselves as fundamentally different from urbanites in terms of values and lifestyles (Walsh 2012). The result is an understanding of politics in which government (and public employees) are the product of anti-rural forces and should therefore be scaled back as much as possible.*

*The following chapter delves into the way people connect anti-government attitudes with preferences for small government. It first argues that the American public has not necessarily been supportive of small government in modern times, but suggests instead that anti-government attitudes have been mobilized into support for small government. I then use evidence from the conversations I observed to argue that place-based identities intertwined with notions of distributive injustice are fertile ground for small government arguments. The use of this perspective means that support for limited government can be fueled by resentments such as rural vs. urban, rather than adherence to ideological principles like libertarianism.*

In the previous chapter, we looked in close at resentment toward public employees through the lens of rural consciousness. In this chapter, I examine how resentments rooted in place- and class-based identities can power overarching political stances like support for cutting back government. By delving into the conversations I observed, particularly those that took place after Scott Walker proposed Act 10, I show how resentment, rather than major ideological principles like libertarianism, can be ignited into support for limited government.

Attitudes about limited government are front and center in contemporary political debates in the United States. The Great Recession, the rise of the Tea Party, debates over Obamacare, and the 2013 federal government shutdown are just a few of the events that have drawn attention to the enduring debate about the proper size and scope of government. Preferences for small government are central to support for the Republican Party and central to support for the Tea Party.[[1]](#footnote-1)

But what fuels this preference for small government? In this chapter, I investigate how people support smaller government through the lens of rural consciousness. I ask, How is it that people in rural places, who describe their communities as in great need economically, prefer small government? My starting premise is *not* that this is an illogical connection. Instead, I seek to know what this connection is.

Small government views are not necessarily more common in rural areas or among people who label themselves as living in a rural area.[[2]](#footnote-2) This chapter is not a claim that it is only rural people who conclude from a sense that they do not get their fair share of power or resources that the solution is to scale back government. Instead, I investigate how this works among rural folks, a population of people who see themselves as living in rural areas, which they view as places facing rough economic times. These are also people who are commonly described as getting it wrong (e.g. Frank 2004).

The conversations suggest that Wisconsinites, like the American public as a whole, are far more ambivalent about the size of government than many contemporary political arguments allege (Sears and Citrin 1982; Cook and Barrett 1992;Quadagno and Street 2005; Martin 2008). If you are someone who came of age during the Reagan era or after, it might seem fundamental to American political culture that the public in general is hostile to big government and universally opposed to tax increases. But it turns out that impression is not empirically supported, even in recent history.

Looking back a century or so, as the American state evolved and grew through the industrial revolution and into the 20th century, government stepped in to respond to its increasing complexity. Think of it this way. Perhaps you have been in a political science class in which you’ve been sorted into a group and then given the assignment of creating a government for the people in that group. If your group is made up of just 2 people, the government you need is less complex than if your group is made up of 50. Also, if every member has her own farm or means of production, the necessary institutions are different than if some group members work for others. Arguably, more regulation became necessary, as did the creation and expansion of the social welfare state. As the United States became an industrialized economy child labor laws became necessary, for example. And eventually it became clear that assuming that the poor, children, the elderly, and the disabled would be taken care of by families, communities, local government, and nonprofits was not tenable (e.g. Cook and Barrett 1992, p. 9). People fall through the cracks.

Consider also public education. One of the questions this vast democracy has had to deal with is, How do you create a government that ensures that future generations are capable of self-government and expanding the economy? The response has been in part public education. As the nation has grown, so too have the demands for spending on schools.

As the United States matured into the 20th century, more and more people looked to government for a wider variety of things, including social welfare programs. These demands intensified during the Great Depression and WW II. Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal waged Keynesian economics as the answer to the country’s ills, and government programs were created and expanded, from Social Security to the G.I. Bill. The public supported the expansion of government in the three decades following World War II while the economy also expanded (Cook and Barrett 1992; Martin 2008).

However, when the economic downturn of the 1970s occurred, criticism about government social programs intensified (Cook and Barrett 1992, 5). The economic crises of the 1970s were a stark contrast to the prosperity of the two preceding decades, and people felt it. Relatively suddenly, “the costs of public policy rose more rapidly than the private economy. Whatever fiscal dividend the government enjoyed now came from inflation’s pushing people into higher tax brackets rather than from real economic progress” (Sears and Citrin 1982, 225).

One of the ways the public protested was in rallying against property tax hikes at the local and state levels, as Sears and Citrin argue in *Tax Revolt* (1982). In 1978 voters in California passed Proposition 13 via referendum on a 2-to-1 margin. That proposition changed the state’s constitution such that property taxes dropped and instantly were limited in how much they could escalate in the future.

“Prop 13” was perhaps the first major example of a case in which political elites spun the passage of legislation as broad public support for small government, but it was not the last. The passage of Prop 13 was parlayed into a broader political strategy by national political elites who sought to downscale government. But contrary to the way the Prop 13 battle is often retold, its passage was not evidence that the public in general favored limited government.

First of all, the revolt against the property tax was not initially a backlash exclusively among conservatives.[[3]](#footnote-3) As Martin (2008) outlines, there were liberal arguments against property taxes as well. He argues that opposition to the property tax was not a product of preference for small government, or anti-statism (opposition to state intervention), nor about concerns about redistribution across school districts, nor based on a sense that taxes were just too high. Instead, Prop 13 won the public’s support because the property tax had been modernized in the 1960s and members of the public were steaming about the relatively sudden hike in their taxes. Within a short span of time, municipalities started to assess properties more frequently, such that now homeowners had to pay tax on the full market value of their homes, rather than on values assessed years or decades earlier. As local governments experienced an increasing demand for spending in the postwar era, especially on schools, more conflicts over property taxes arose and “these conflicts eventually wound up in court” (12). Common practice was to have “fractional assessment” or waging taxes based on old values of homes. But that practice was not written into law, so when these conflicts went to court, that “informal tax privilege” lost. “People whose taxes had been stable for years found that their tax bills- and their welfare—suddenly depended on the whims of the housing market” (13).

So while the tax revolt was generated in part by political disenchantment (Sears and Citrin 1982, chapter 2), it is incorrect to say it was driven largely by a desire for smaller government. Conservatives portrayed it as such, however, and used it as the impetus for similar legislation in a majority of other states by the 1990s (Martin 2008, 111). Small government proponents also used it to boost the limited government movement on the national level, including the election of Ronald Reagan into the presidency. Prop 13 was used as a clear sign that anti-government rhetoric was a winning strategy, because it had been passed by direct democracy in the most populous state, which was widely perceived as the “state that would decide the next presidential election”—and a liberal state nonetheless (Martin 2008, 100).

Sears and Citrin write that the conservative wing of the campaign for Prop 13 “portrayed itself as a movement of ‘the people’ against a punitive government” (1982, 15). When Prop 13 passed, officials of many leanings interpreted it “as a symbol of public hostility to government in general, rather than the property tax in particular” (Martin 2008, 15). Even Jimmy Carter said publicly in 1978, “I do believe that Proposition 13 is an accurate expression of, first of all, the distrust of government” (quoted in Martin 2008, 126).

Notice, though, that Carter said “distrust of government.” But distrust of government or anti-government sentiment is not the same as a preference for limited government. By anti-government sentiment, I mean criticism of the government, lack of trust in government, or perceptions of corruption or incompetence in government. By support for limited government, I mean anti-statism, or a belief in the less government the better. A person can be highly critical of the people currently in government or current government procedures while at the same time believing in principal that society ought to invest heavily in government, even beyond defense (e.g., public education, public assistance, or health care). At the same time, a person might believe strongly in limited government (e.g., most government programs ought to be privatized), while believing that current policymakers are doing a competent job.

Even though anti-government sentiment is not the same as support for limited government, the conservatives of the Reagan revolution succeeded in melding the two. Conservatives used the hostility to government they claimed laid behind animosity toward property taxes as justification for cutting taxes in general (Martin 2008, 15). In the midst of the shifting party coalitions in the post-war era, the parties were looking for a way to distinguish themselves. Republicans found such a strategy in anti-tax and anti-big government stances (127). Martin (2008) argues that Prop 13 changed American politics because it changed how much attention the parties paid to taxes. Until Prop 13, politicians did not talk about taxes in general, but about tax X for purpose Y. Taxes were for specific things. After Prop 13, though, politicians were forced to take a stand on taxes in general. Some politicians thought that passing these tax limitation laws would take the taxation issue off the table, but “These limits did not prevent politicians from raising taxes but merely required them to return to the voters for approval when they did so—thereby requiring the voters to rule regularly on tax increases, and making ‘Taxes: pro or con?’ into the perennial question at election time.” (128)

It was in that context that Reagan came into office. One of the main targets of his efforts to scale back government was welfare. But notice that despite these attempts, there were actually few cutbacks to the welfare state in the 1980s because the public, and their congressional representatives, actually expressed widespread support for social welfare programs (Cook and Barrett 1992). Cook and Barrett’s analyses of public opinion data show that public opinion in favor of welfare did not drop in the 1970s and early 1980s, despite conservative arguments to the contrary (25).[[4]](#footnote-4)

The health care debate of the first part of the Clinton administration is another example in which a political outcome that was interpreted as evidence of a widespread preference for less government may have been something else entirely. Theda Skocpol argued in *Boomerang* (1997) that the failure of the Clinton health reform did not result from the public bluntly rejecting an expansion of the government. Instead, the mobilization against government was created by political elites who found it strategically advantageous to defeat that bill.

When Clinton proposed his legislation, the public perceived the need for health care reform and was generally supportive (even though most people were satisfied with their own care) (Skocpol 1997, 4). However, when interest groups such as the Health Insurance Association of America started to critique the bill, the Clinton administration failed to explain it well to the public, and the Republican Party—at the insistence of Republican strategist Bill Kristol—decided that defeating the bill would turn the U.S. political tide in favor of the Republicans, and enable great gains in the 1994 midterm elections (Chapter 5). On the tails of defeating that bill, Republicans wrote their Contract With America, a pledge to cut welfare and taxes that unified Republican campaigns in the 1994 elections**.**

Skocpol argues that at its core, Clinton’s health care reform failed not because the public wanted less government, but because it ironically tried to *save* taxpayer money. That is, Clinton attempted to achieve the reforms he sought not through increasing taxes, but through increasing regulations. Skocpol argues that the public does not take kindly to regulation without observable payouts, such as the payouts people receive from social security. Therefore, she writes, Clinton’s attempts to enact health care reform in a cost-saving way made the bill vulnerable.

These examples of contestation over the expansion of government exemplify the fact that U.S. public opinion has rarely if ever been clearly in favor of limited government. However, history does gives us numerous examples of a population favoring significant expansion of government. Although American history is commonly retold as one in which a strong distrust of government prevails, “[a]n individualist ethos did not prevent the United States from developing a massive, universal public education system, deter passage of a comprehensive social security system, or block compulsory health insurance for the aged” (Quadagno and Street 2005, 56). Quadagno and Street argue that although anti-statism is often perceived as pervasive and as an important causal force in American politics, it is actually just one strain of our political culture that politicians at times successfully mobilize (2005, esp. 67).

We can see from Figure 1 how support for small government has wavered even in the past several decades. This figure plots responses from a nationally representative sample of eligible voters collected by the American National Election Studies conducted at the University of Michigan. Since 1990, the NES has asked 3 questions that tap into attitudes about limited government (see question wording in footnote 1). Several things are notable here. First support for limited government has wavered over time, from a relative high in 1996, then a low in 2008, then a rebound to the highest point in 2012 since the questions were included. Second, the responses seem to correspond to the partisanship of the president at the time. The X axis is dark in years in which the incumbent was a Democrat. Of course these responses alone can not tell us whether the partisanship of the president is a cause or effect of these small government attitudes. However, the rebound in small government views after the 2008 election of Barack Obama suggests that election provided fertile ground from which the Tea Party movement could nurture support for limited government.

The history I have recounted suggests that political entrepreneurs have been successful in parlaying anti-government views into support for small government. Have they? Has the linkage between anti-government views and support for small government grown over time?The American National Election Study has been measuring attitudes toward government since 1952. Figure 2 displays responses to 4 of these items, which tap anti-government sentiment. The first two tap external efficacy, or attitudes about the ability of people to influence the government. The third is more specifically about government responsiveness. And the fourth is an additional measure of external efficacy, added in 2008 and 2012. The graph shows that these attitudes have wavered over time but have in general increased. The exception is the third question. The relatively more “positive” attitudes expressed in this response to this item may be a function of the fact that this question has been asked in a different place in the survey, or perhaps people have increasingly interpreted “government paying attention to what the people think” as the idea that governing is increasingly poll driven.[[5]](#footnote-5)

If anti-government attitudes have increased, as has support for small government in recent years, is there evidence that the two have become more closely associated in individuals’ minds? Figure 3 displays graphically the correlation between the anti-government and the small-government measures. The plotted points represent the correlation size between an efficacy measure and a small-government measure. Each column contains results from a correlation with a particular small-government measure, and each row contains results from a different efficacy measure. The horizontal axis corresponds to change over time. Looking across all of these results, it does appear that something seems to have happened in recent years, particularly between 2008 and 2012. Those respondents who exhibit anti-government attitudes have become more likely to also prefer small government.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Is the cause the election of Barack Obama? The Great Recession? The Tea Party? Political arguments that meld the three? We can not say from these data alone. But the conversations I observed reveal how the politics of resentment can make support for smaller government seem reasonable and expected.

**Listening to support for small government**

The history of Prop 13 in particular shows how political actors attempting to mobilize public support for scaling back government have at times successfully done so by convincing people to transfer their negative sentiments about the government onto negative sentiments toward government programs. The conversations I observed suggest a similar politics of resentment seems to be taking place in Wisconsin. Part of the problem this time, is that the resentment is not just toward government, but toward the employees within it.

Throughout this book I have illustrated the resentment I observed toward government, not just among rural groups, but among urban and suburban groups as well.

In this next section, I examine how people connected anti-government views with support for smaller government. I look in particular at how people did this through the lens of rural consciousness. Many people resent the government; those who exhibit rural consciousness provide an extra foothold on which small government arguments can gain traction. I bring in rhetoric from Scott Walker’s gubernatorial campaign to demonstrate how contemporary politicians attempt to do this.

At the risk of being redundant, allow me clarify that my empirical purpose here is not to specify *how often* people link anti-government sentiment with support for small government, nor even to determine *whom* in the population makes these connections. Instead, I seek to examine *what these linkages look like when they do occur*, and from that evidence build our understanding of how small-government arguments work in the contemporary environment. My purpose in looking specifically at how people make these connections via rural consciousness is to better understand the the manner in which contemporary political arguments are mobilized on the backs of place- and class-based identities.

Thus the burden is on me to show convincingly that the connections between anti-government attitudes and support for reducing the size of government are not inevitable and to also provide insight on the form that they take that we can not readily obtain from polling data. In addition, the burden is on me to demonstrate the importance of rural consciousness. I have to show that using this lens results in a different understanding of limited government than people would have without using it.

When I waded into the conversation data to learn more about how people connect anti-government attitudes with small government attitudes, here is what I looked for. I looked for attitudes with respect to small government, as well as attitudes toward government in general, and instances in which people connected the two. I looked for these attitudes and connections in conversations in all types of places—rural, as well as urban and suburban—and examined the differences across type of place to understand the particular work of rural consciousness.

Across all types of places, most groups contained some disagreement with respect to attitudes toward small government.[[7]](#footnote-7) This was helpful—I wanted to observe people struggling with the idea of small government. I wanted to know about the competing considerations they brought to the conversation and the tools they used to reconcile these things. For a point of contrast, however, I will begin by examining the conversations about small government among groups that were consistently liberal or conservative, in a range of places.

Most groups displayed some disagreement about limited government, and some individual members also conveyed ambivalence within themselves. However, a few groups did display more homogenous and over-time consistent attitudes toward limited government. That is, the opinions offered up in these groups were consistently in favor of either more services at the expense of higher taxes, or lower taxes at the expense of fewer services. I turn to these groups first to serve as a baseline.

Let’s consider liberal groups first-- those groups that consistently favored services at the expense of higher taxes. Their talk is evidence that criticizing government does not necessarily lead to wanting to cut it back. Many of the people in these groups complained about being ignored by politicians—just as the people in conservative groups did. This was particularly the case among people earning very low incomes, and people of color. Specifically, this includes a white unemployed truck driver and a few other patrons in a northern city (Group 21b), a group of white and African-American residents in a low- income housing community in Madison (Group 22c), a group of middle-class residents on a Native American reservation in north east Wisconsin (Group 7), low-income Latino immigrants in Milwaukee (Group 23b), and a group of middle-class African-Americans in Milwaukee (Group 23a).

Here are some examples of their anti-government comments: One of the Latinos, waiting in line for pro-bono health services, explained to another that “politician” meant “those that talk a lot but don’t do much.” Also, in the first 10 seconds of my visit with the group of African-Americans, one man explained to me,

We live in a war zone, ok? I’m gonna be honest with you. We are at the mercy of urban terrorists you know in some cases, and it seems like that message is not getting through like it should. People don’t really have an idea of what really is going on in Milwaukee. They brush over it, politicians brush over it, there are times—to receive votes—and once they get into office, it’s like that’s going on the back burner, and it’s never going to be anything done about it.

Notice how this man wanted to see more government, even though he felt ignored by it.

Some liberal groups did not claim that they were ignored politically (Groups 19, 4aJune 2007, 15). Notably, these groups were composed of white professionals (Walsh 2011). Even though they felt some political power, they still found plenty of things about the government to gripe about, as we’ve seen in earlier chapters. For example, in one western city, a group of doctors and professors complained about government waste and the honesty and integrity of politicians (Group 19). True to form, however, despite their complaints people in this group said outright that they preferred to pay higher taxes so that they could have higher quality health care and public education, and protect the environment.

Consistently conservative groups saw things differently, obviously. They wanted lower taxes and fewer government programs. The most strident small government supporters in my sample were the members of a group of retirees in the Milwaukee suburban area that met every morning at a diner for breakfast and coffee (Group 18c). They introduced themselves to me as “conservatives” and time and again asserted that government programs—except for defense spending—should be as small as possible. They believed big time in bootstraps and lamented peoples’ apparent inability to use them. Besides spending on defense, they were also OK with funding for “programs like the WPA [Works Progress Administration] and the CCC [Civilian Conservation Corps] that rewarded hard work.”

We have seen this theme before. Notice how their support for government spending hinged on notions of deservingness. In their eyes, government programs are only legitimate if they support deserving Americans. And this group, like others in my sample, treated deservingness as a matter of whether or not the policy recipients are hard-working Americans like themselves (Soss and Schram 2007; Skocpol and Williamson 2012, ch. 4).

Hard work was a key consideration, not just for the consistently conservative groups, but arguably for the vast majority of the groups, including the groups who were ambivalent about small government. This is important. It suggests that support for limited government is not driven mainly by a principled belief in small government, but instead by attitudes about a particular program’s recipients (Nelson and Kinder 1996; Schneider and Ingram 1993).

In other words, even though we see a stronger connection in recent years between anti-government attitudes and preferences for small government, that connection is not as simple as such a correlation suggests. There is a complex set of understandings in play here. For many of the people I spent time with, support for small government policies or candidates seemed motivated by something other than abstract adherence to the idea that smaller government is better, and was not a simple result of disliking government or feeling ignored by it.

This is where the politics of resentment comes in. In the conversations, you can see how resentment toward target groups often served as the glue between anti-government and small government attitudes. This shows up in urban, suburban, and rural groups. In the rural groups, often the social group that serves as the target of opposition is urbanites.

I’ll start with the urban and suburban groups to illustrate. Their complaints against government took a variety of forms. Some people said government only cares about wealthy people and big business, not ordinary people (Groups 18b, 22b, 17). Others emphasized that people in government are not to be trusted, because they ignore and avoid important issues (Group 22b). Also, many people believed that politicians do not listen to constituents. For example, one group that met in a gas station in a central Wisconsin city complained that their local member of Congress never paid attention to their concerns—even though some of them had gone to school with him, and he occasionally walked right by their table when he came in to make a purchase (Group 17).

These complaints about government did not always translate into support for limited government. Sometimes they fed arguments in favor of *more* services, rather than less. For example, many people complained about the lack of regulation of the healthcare system and wanted to see government play a stronger role in it, especially before the debate over the Affordable Care Act (or “Obamacare”) heated up and people adopted partisan stances (Groups 18a, 18b, 22b, 17, 21b). Also, a group meeting for lunch in a Milwaukee suburb complained about lack of attention to local crime and wanted to see more money spent on crime prevention and law enforcement (Group 18b).

What made the difference? Why were they looking for government spending in some situations, but government cuts in others? One important difference seems to be the way they talked about the recipients of the programs. Take, for example, the group in the central Wisconsin city on the northern edge of the Milwaukee media market (Group 17). This group was composed of men who were retired unionized workers from a large local manufacturing plant. They were mostly Democrats; they regularly told me that only one of their members votes Republican (he had been a lawyer for the company for which most of them had worked). Although that former attorney was consistently opposed to government spending, the other members were more ambivalent. They supported some things—public education and protection of workers’ rights—while asserting that government often messes things up and runs inefficiently. Also, some of them regularly remarked that government intervention was necessary to change the increasing divide between haves and have-nots.

Most of these men considered themselves have-nots and they used that identity to justify their support for government-supported health care and increased spending on education. But sometimes their attitudes toward certain groups worked to support their arguments *against* government spending. They were adamant that immigrants should speak English in this country, and they argued several times to me that government support should only serve certain types of people: those that work hard, and those that speak English.

## Small government through the lens of rural consciousness

In rural areas, attitudes toward social groups also played an important role in conversations about government spending and connections to the government. However, there was an important difference. In rural areas, the identity with rural people intertwined with a sense of distributive injustice toward people in such places provided a perspective with which small government arguments resonated well. Rural consciousness did not necessarily lead to support for small government, nor was it the only perspective through which people made small government arguments. But it served as a justification for small government that encompassed many important aspects of peoples’ sense of self and their sense of their place in society.

In other words, when people in rural areas claimed that government did not represent their interests, many of their claims were rooted in identities as rural people. In addition, when they tried to make sense of the proper role of government, the concept of deservingness mattered just as it did in more urban areas. However, their understanding of *who* is deserving was often rooted in contrasts between themselves as rural people and nonrural people who did not face the same challenges, and did not share the same work ethic or values.

When I asked a group meeting at a service station in a hamlet in central Wisconsin (Group 1) whether state government represents the concerns of rural Wisconsin, one man replied:

Yeah, I think that um, I think that is an issue. That seems, bothers a lot of people in this neighborhood, is that people in Madison are just simply not listening to what the people have to say. You can tell your representative and they go down there and vote whatever the party tells ‘em to vote, not what you said.

The awareness of their status as rural residents often entered into considerations of the appropriate size of government, and the related notions of need and deservingness. For example, in a small north-central tourist community (Group 9), a group of people meeting every morning at a diner for breakfast complained about high taxes, as did the vast majority of the groups in this study. But at the same time, they strongly supported some forms of government programs, including state-run health care and public education. One man in his 20s said outright, “Everyone should have a right to go to college.” And another complained about the costs of the Iraq War and said that he wished all of that money could be spent on education, the homeless, and the elderly instead.

But ambivalence entered into this conversation as soon as people raised concerns about who would actually benefit. This rural group complained that illegal immigrants take advantage of government largesse by getting health care via emergency room visits, even though they have no insurance to pay for such visits; urban and suburban groups made this complaint too. However, the rural folks in this group also accused wealthy urban folks of abusing the system and playing by different rules. They talked about how one doctor, a “millionaire” from a city who lived on one of the local lakes part of the year was on BadgerCare, a state health insurance plan intended for people earning low incomes. In other words, part of their opposition to government-sponsored health care came from their sense that such programs mainly served people in the cities.

Discussions about education in this group and several other rural groups also displayed the work of rural consciousness. Many people openly said they were willing to spend money on public education, but they complained that the tax dollars that they paid to support it were unfairly allocated to urban areas. Thus their disgust with the cost of public education was not aimed at spending on education in general. Instead, it was a resentment that public education spending systematically disadvantaged rural areas.

Take for example the conversations about education that took place in a rural group that leaned liberal, but contained vocal conservatives as well. In a far northwest tourist and artistic community, a group of older and retired women met every Tuesday morning for coffee in the back of a restaurant, on the edge of town beyond the tourist-prone places (Group 2). Some of the women were big Obama supporters. A clear signal of their leftiness came when one woman bellowed, “Rush Limbaugh should be hung.” Another member stated outright that she moved to Wisconsin because of its reputation for great public education, she knew that quality education required higher taxes, and she was more than willing to pay them.

However, some of them were not so liberal. Many of them lamented high local property taxes. They believed that wealthy, urbanite, second-home owners pushed up the taxes. Their view was that urbanites bought or built expensive homes, made it hard for the locals to keep their homes, and changed the character of their town. Even the more vocally liberal members of the group nodded in agreement with these sentiments. Like many of the other rural groups, the members of this group were willing to pay for public services, but perceived that in comparison to urban areas, they were not getting their fair share of public dollars.

As noted in Chapter 3, one woman, Carol, kept a notebook of all of the names of locals who had to leave town because of what they saw as skyrocketing property taxes driven by the price of urbanites’ summer homes. When others expressed surprise at the length of the list she had accumulated in just 9 years (60 names), she said (in June 2007):

Carol: This *is* a phenomenal thing. My notebook with all the pages of people that have left or are thinking about leaving. The majority for tax reasons.

Laura: And did they move like to…nearby areas? But just out of [this town]?

Carol: Out of [this town]

Laura: But still in the same county

Carol: Mostly

Rose: And one of the things, too, almost everybody has got a view of the lake. Almost everybody. And you pay for having a view and that just doesn’t seem right.

Laura: Conversely, because of the high cost of living, people, especially families, aren’t moving in because there is not a job to support them to be able to live here. So the school enrollment doesn’t increase and we still have to pay the burden of the school as part of the taxes.

Sue: And I think with shared revenues in the state of Wisconsin it is always going to be that way. The money is collected here, it is sent to Madison and it is dispersed to Milwaukee and Madison primarily and so our return on what we spend is very little, you know? And we struggle with our school system here for the same reasons.

This was a general pattern for ambivalent rural groups. They were not necessarily opposed to government spending in principal, but instead perceived that the government spending that did take place was unfair to people like them—rural folks. Also, some of the people in these groups were clearly not opposed to government involvement in their lives. For example, although the group at the diner in the northern tourist town (Group 9) resented, with a passion, regulations on hunting and fishing, they also supported stricter drunk driving laws. In other words, the opposition to “big government” was more commonly rooted in a perception that government was not functioning on behalf of people like themselves, than in a belief that government in general should do less (Williamson, Skocpol and Coggin 2011, 34).

The blow-up over Governor Scott Walker’s budget measures shortly after he took office in early 2011 illustrates these sentiments. On February 11, 2011, Walker proposed a budget repair bill that called for an end to collective bargaining rights, except with respect to wages, for all public employees except police and fire employees. It also required all public employees to increase their payroll contributions for health and pension benefits. Over the following weekend, union leaders organized protests at the Capitol. By Tuesday, February 15th, over 10,000 protestors gathered on the Capitol Square, and thousands more packed the inside of the Capitol. Two days later, the 14 Democrats in the state senate fled to Illinois, in an effort to block passage of the bill. The protests continued for weeks, peaking on Saturday, March 12th, when approximately 100,000 protestors packed the Capitol Square. Earlier that week, the legislature passed the collective bargaining provisions by removing fiscal components from it and thereby achieving quorum in the senate (despite the 14 missing Democrats). By mid-March, efforts to recall state senators (of both parties) and the governor were underway. These recall efforts continued, and culminated in the recall election of the governor himself, on June 5, 2012. Walker won the recall, defeating the opponent he had faced in the initial gubernatorial election in 2010.

I revisited 8 rural groups after the protests had erupted in Madison (6 visits to these groups in spring and summer of 2011, and 5 visits in summer 2012, and 1 in fall 2012). Each of these groups was supportive of Walker’s proposal to require public workers to pay more into their health and pension benefits. As we saw in the previous chapter, they perceived that these benefits came directly from their own pockets and that as rural residents they worked much harder than the desk workers in state government. In addition, they perceived that the public workers in their own communities (especially school teachers) made salaries that were much higher than their own. They said that as rural residents they struggled to make ends meet more than people in urban areas did. In their eyes, salaries seemed higher and jobs more plentiful in the cities. In such a view, Walker’s proposals were not necessarily a victory for smaller government. They were a victory for small-town Wisconsinites like themselves.

When the ambivalence over government spending played out across people, it revealed a tension between a desire to spend what was necessary to keep a small town running versus a belief that reducing the size of government would help their locally-owned businesses. One example comes from a group of working and retired men who called themselves the “Downtown Athletic Club.” They met every morning at a service station in a hamlet in central Wisconsin (Group 1). The group contained several men who had been public school teachers in the local district, and they were often supportive of government spending. But the group also contained several small business owners (including the station owner), and they often squabbled with those public workers about politics.

When I first spent time with the members of this group in May 2008, they complained about the state school funding formula and said it disadvantaged small towns in Wisconsin. The retired teachers offered a remedy: raise taxes on agricultural land, of which there was an abundance in their county.

But the teachers and the small business owners in the group did not necessarily agree on this, nor did they agree on other aspects of government spending. When I returned in April 2011 after the protests in Madison, the small business owners in the group complained that public workers had received too much money, at great taxpayer expense. One man said simply, “Too many people get too much for nothing.” The conversation that day was largely in favor of Walker’s proposals. Those who spoke up conveyed a view that in these tough economic times, in a small community that was “drying up and blowing away,” taxpayers simply could not afford to support public workers the way they had in the past.

Fred: We’re just tryin’ to figure out where the money tree is so we can find it. A private business or whatever, you’ve got a pool of money here and when it runs out there’s no other coffer to keep diggin’ into. The state and government can seem to have that pile where they can just keep grabbin’ and seem to come up with it.

Ben: All I know is what our fathers gave us is way better than what we’re givin’ our kids. Our kids are gonna pay for this the rest of their life, they aren’t gonna have the life we had. No way. With the taxes. I mean, look what our fathers did, they built all these roads. They built all these schools and all that. Now they can’t even fix ‘em. Where’s all that tax money goin’?....And our insurance, my union insurance just went up 800 bucks yesterday. Just for that reason. So I mean, uh, we as a workin’ person can’t keep this up, there is no more money. There is no more money. Taxes are goin’ up next year again on property taxes where’s that all gonna add up? There’s no more money.

Ronny: Where’d the money go in the first place? [*laughs*] Where’d it go? [*laughs*]

Ben: I know it got out of hand. Government got out of hand. They’re twice as big, they could cut that right in half. All government agencies, counties, everything, cut that right in half. And they’d be just fine. Forest County especially. Counties are getting bigger, I was in road construction for 50 years and the county’s doing half of what I used to do. The counties got bigger. Buying road machinery and everything. Put us all out of business.

KJC: Yeah?

Ben: Can’t stop ‘em.

Ronny: Government’s runnin’ private sector out of business.

Ben: Yep.

Ronny: They’re doin’ it themselves.

Ben: Government wants it all, that’s why they want health care. They want to handle that too….All the government does is pass laws, pass laws and every time they pass laws all that does is take jobs. Takes jobs…. I don’t care if its drunk drivin’ or whatever it is. I just talked to a guy roofing, he’s got 200 more rules this year than he had last year from OSHA. Roofing contractors. You know what Mike’s gonna do? He knows her too, he’s gonna sell off quick. He says “I can’t have it no more, I can’t pass it on anymore.” He’s sellin’ his business.

As they talked, Ben revealed his support for smaller government. But notice how his arguments were not based on libertarian beliefs. Instead, they reflected a place-based view, a view that big government made it difficult for small businesses in communities like theirs to compete with government.

When I returned to this group early on a May 2012 morning, I found that the service station had closed, and the owner had taped the following sign to the window:

FIRST I WANT TO SAY I’M SORRY TO ALL

MY CUSTOMERS FOR ABRUPTLY CLOSING

THE SHOP. AN OPPORTUNITY CAME

ALONG FOR ME TO WORK LESS HOURS

DOING WHAT I ENJOY WHILE ACTUALLY

GETTING A REAL PAYCHECK AGAIN. NOT

THAT I DIDN’T ENJOY WORKING, FOR THE

MOST PART, WITH ALL OF YOU. IT HAS

BEEN A STRUGGLE FOR THE PAST FEW

YEARS KEEPING THIS SHOP OPEN WITH

THE POOR ECONOMY AND A SMALL TOWN

WHERE EVERYONE DRIVES 25 MILES TO

WORK, SHOP AND ULTIMATELY GET WORK

DONE ON THEIR VEHICLES. I DID NOT

REGRET MY DECISION BACK IN 1993 TO

COME TO WORK HERE BUT AS TIME WENT

ON, OUR LITTLE VILLAGE KEPT GETTING

SMALLER AND SO DID THE PROFIT MARGIN

IN THE SHOP.

TO ALL THE MEMBERS OF THE

“DOWNTOWN ATHLETIC CLUB”, I HOPE WE

CAN FIND A NEW HOME TO CONTINUE TO

MEET. MAYBE WE CAN MOVE TO [ONE OF THE MEMBERS’

BUSINESSES]. I WILL DONATE EVERYTHING I HAVE LEFT TO

KEEP THE COFFEE GOING IF A NEW

MEETING PLACE IS FOUND.

THANK YOU EVERYONE FOR THE 19 YEARS

I WAS ABLE TO PROVIDE YOU SERVICE.

The sign was a reminder that this group, like many others I came across in rural areas, thought of themselves as people facing special challenges because of where they live.

**Tapping into These Understandings**

We have a politics of resentment when political actors mobilize support for cutting back government by tapping into resentment toward certain groups in society rather than appealing to broad principles. I have laid out in some detail how a place- and class-based identity like rural consciousness provides fertile ground for resentment-based arguments to flourish. But what does such mobilization look like?

It looks, at times, like a train. A high-speed train, to be exact. Under Democratic Governor Jim Doyle, Walker’s predecessor, Wisconsin had successfully applied for federal stimulus money to build a high-speed rail system between Madison and Milwaukee. On a good day, this is a 90-minute,boring drive on Interstate 94, and it is uncharacteristically un-picturesque for Wisconsin. It is a busy route, and undoubtedly some of the people who make the drive would have used this rail system. But these users would have been predominantly “city people” in the Madison and Milwaukee metro areas.

Walker took on the train as a major symbolic element of his 2010 gubernatorial campaign. He portrayed it as a $810 million “boondoggle”[[8]](#footnote-8) that would create only 55 permanent jobs. “That's more than $14 and a half million dollars per job."[[9]](#footnote-9) He argued that it was an excessive government program that taxpayers couldn’t really afford. He accused proponents of treating it as if it were free, but reminded people that no government is free, but is instead paid for by hard-working taxpayers.

He gave Republicans plenty of reasons to support his decision to give back the $810million to the federal government as he refused to let the construction on the rail system go forward. But he gave those with a rural consciousness even more. He talked about the train as an expensive mode of transportation that most Wisconsinites would not ride.[[10]](#footnote-10) He asserted that spending money on this project would directly take money away from other parts of the state. Here is an example statement, which he made during the first debate in the gubernatorial primary:

If you look at what Jim Doyle and Tom Barrett [Walker’s Democratic opponent] have put on the table, in spending $810 million on a high speed train line between Milwaukee and Madison with no assurance that it will go to Eau Claire or La Crosse or anywhere else -- it's just about those two areas -- and it's about taking that money, money that will cost... the citizens of Wisconsin up to $10 million per year -- according to their numbers, I think it will actually be much more -- that's $10 million that doesn't go to fix the road that goes up from West Salem through the cut out up to Black River Falls, it doesn't fix streets in La Crosse... that's money that's taken away from our local roads and our bridges and our other transportation needs today.

He made a similar claim in the first debate of the general election[[11]](#footnote-11):

This is a classic example of runaway government spending. I mean it's not only the $810 million of taxpayer's money -- it's not free money, it's our money, it's the taxpayer's money -- but on top of that the federal government, not my numbers, not the Republican Party's numbers, but the federal government numbers point out it will cost us at a minimum $7 and a half million dollars or more per year, particularly with the cost overruns you alluded to, but $7 and a half million, presuming there are none, each year out of the state transportation fund -- money we all paid as state taxpayers. That's money that comes out of important highway and bridge projects all across the state of Wisconsin.

The rail system was not the only way Walker mobilized rural consciousness in support of small government. An anti-city rhetoric showed up in other ways, too. Walker had been county executive of Milwaukee County itself. But he was running against the Mayor of Milwaukee, and so used his experience not as evidence that he identified with the people of Milwaukee, but as evidence that he could successfully take on the city and its demons. He said that he was taking on “the political machine *down* in Madison”[[12]](#footnote-12) (emphasis added here, because he was in Milwaukee when he said this, which is not north of Madison.) But he also said he was taking on the political machine in Milwaukee:

Eight years ago I took on the political machine here in Milwaukee county... In the end, I needed to fix a problem, not just for myself but for my two sons Matt and Alex and for future generations. We've taken on those challenges and proved that we could take on the political machine in Milwaukee county. I'm proud of that. And I think that's one of those things, when I tell that story across the state of Wisconsin -- tell what we inherited: the big pension scandal, the out of control spending, the taxes that had gone up under my predecessor and really the total lack of confidence in government -- they see many of the same challenges we face today all across this state.[[13]](#footnote-13)

Opposing the Madison-Milwaukee train was an obvious attack on the “M & Ms.”[[14]](#footnote-14) But Walker invoked animosity toward the cities, especially Madison, in more subtle ways as well. Take, for example, these remarks about his tenure as County Executive, made during a question and answer session at the American Enterprise Institute, a conservative think tank, on January 6, 2012:

We were able to rein-in abuses of things like overtime and other excesses out there by no longer having opportunities where, in our case, some of our state employees could literally call in sick on their shift and then come back to work the next shift on overtime. *Or bus drivers in places like Madison that made $150,000 or more because of overtime.*

Those things have all changed. And now the power is back in the hands of local officials and ultimately the taxpayers of our state. And so that's ultimately what we did. It seems pretty reasonable when you hear us talk about it.

I added the emphasis here to highlight the way he equates overpaid public employees with employees in “places like Madison.”

Not only did Walker portray himself as “taking on” Madison and Milwaukee. He identified with small town Wisconsin. He campaigned on a Brown Bag theme, in which he claimed that he packs himself a brown bag lunch every day in order to cut back, just as governments have to learn to do. In an appearance on the television show *Fox and Friends*, he said "I grew up in a small town” and asserted that such a background gave him “a little bit of that brown-bag common sense."[[15]](#footnote-15)

A Wisconsinite did not need to look at the world through the lens of rural consciousness for these arguments to resonate. They could hear Walker pledge to take on the political machines in Madison and Milwaukee and cheer that someone was finally going to get government to listen to hard-working taxpayers like themselves. But for people who had an identity with places beyond the orbit of resources and power called Madison and Milwaukee, calling into question the high salaries of bus drivers *down* in Madison, and reminding people of the good values of small town Wisconsinites likely had an extra appeal.[[16]](#footnote-16)

**Racism**

It is important to pause a moment and consider once again the work of racism here. I have been arguing that politicians mobilize opposition to government spending by tapping into resentment toward urbanites. Isn’t that really just the work of racism?

I would like to suggest that the answer is not a simple yes. There is ample evidence to suggest that racism underlies much of the opposition to welfare (Gilens 1999; Kinder and Sanders 1996), although some scholars disagree whether such opposition is based in racism or in the principal of individualism (see the outlines of the debate in Huddy and Feldman 2009). It is a common stereotype that rural residents oppose government programs because they are racist (see also Jarosz and Lawson 2002; Creed and Ching 1997), but what I observed is a much more complicated story. I observed little overt racism in rural Wisconsin. But I heard ample amounts of it in urban and suburban areas.[[17]](#footnote-17) I searched my fieldnotes for a conversation in a rural community in which at least one person made a comment that directly linked urban residents with being lazy welfare recipients, for example. I found exactly zero such exchanges in rural communities, but several in urban and suburban locations. My fieldwork data are not well suited to describing the occurrence of certain sentiments. Just because blatantly racist statements did not appear in the conversations I observed in rural areas does not mean that racism does not exist in those places.[[18]](#footnote-18) But the lack of overt racism should be an initial caution against explaining away opposition to government programs as simply racism.

When rural residents complained about urban people sucking tax dollars away, they were talking about their perception that urban residents paid fewer tax dollars than rural residents and received more government services such as better schools and better roads and infrastructure (e.g., Group 8). When I heard rural residents talk about “those people on welfare,” they were talking about their white neighbors, not people of color in the cities (e.g., Group 8). Also, when they talked about lazy urbanites, they were talking about government employees, or wealthier people who did not have to work as hard as themselves. The lazy and undeserving were also often young people (cf. Skocpol and Williamson 2012, ch. 4; e.g., Group 3). In this way, the perception that government programs benefited urbanites and not rural residents was not simple racism, in the sense of white opposition to people of color.

Perhaps the lesson here is that there is no such thing as simple racism. The opposition to government programs that I heard was very much intertwined with notions of deservingness. These notions of deservingness were not voiced as outright resentment toward people of color but instead as a more complex resentment toward urbanites. But race is not something that we can siphon off from place and class in the contemporary United States. Patterns of discrimination over centuries means that race colors our impressions of what kind of people are where and our willingness to share resources with them.

Unfortunately, this context, particularly in a time of economic recession, makes it possible for public officials to use racism to mobilize support for small government. If one wishes to mobilize opposition to a government program, one powerful way of doing so is to suggest that the recipients of that program are predominantly people of color, precisely because support for policy hinges so strongly on notions of deservingness which are rooted in notions of who in the population works hard. The persistence of racial stereotypes that contain beliefs that some racial groups are lazier than others makes it likely that those arguments activate racial resentment among many people, and therefore even stronger opposition to government spending (e.g., Burghart and Zeskind 2010; Parker and Barreto 2013).[[19]](#footnote-19)

Notice all of the ways we know that activating race influences support for policy. When race is salient in a context—either through the presence of images of people of color (Valentino 1999; Mendelberg 2001; Valentino, Hutchings and White 2002), the race of the president proposing the policy (Tesler 2012), the demographics of a policy context (Soss et al. 2011), or the use of words like “inner city” (Hurwitz and Peffley 2005) or “welfare” that have become near-synonymous with people of color (Gilens 1999)—racial stereotypes play a role in whether or not people support a given candidate or policy choice (see also White 2007). It may not even be necessary for these racial stereotypes to be activated implicitly in order for racial attitudes to affect policy preferences (Huber and Lapinski 2006, 2008).

In the contemporary era, many people in the population feel that the government is not responsive to their concerns, as we have already seen. To whom, then, do they perceive that the government is responding? Among all of the groups in my sample, people mentioned two main objects of attention: 1) The wealthy, “big money,” or “big business,” and 2) the undeserving poor.

If politicians were to focus on the first, the wealthy, then reducing the size of government is not necessarily the appropriate reaction. Instead, the response might be to increase taxation of the rich and big business, or perhaps reform campaign spending laws. But if the focus is placed on the second, the undeserving poor, the logical solution is to eliminate or reduce programs that provide a safety net for the undeserving, thereby shrinking government spending. To be blunt: encouraging people to focus on the undeserving is a way to achieve the goal of limited government without harming the interests of the wealthy.

# Conclusion

The public is ambivalent about small government. This chapter has shown how using a rural consciousness lens provides a framework through which people can more easily comprehend such amorphous issues. We see it resulting in a favorable view of limited government when conversations might have otherwise resulted in support for government spending.

In these conversations, we see people across urban, suburban and rural areas relying on notions of deservingness when talking about whether or not they support government programs. Their arguments against government spending often involved claims that government did not represent their concerns, but was instead operating to benefit other, less deserving, people. Sometimes these “others” were the wealthy, but more often they were people who did not work hard enough for the government benefits they enjoyed. In that framework, the idea that such programs ought to be eliminated or scaled back was regarded as both inevitable and common sense.

For rural residents, the undeserving other was often urbanites. People regardless of type of place would consid “what does this policy mean for me?” and “What does this policy mean for people like me?” Rural residents would often talk about “What does this policy mean for people in this place, or people in places like this one?” That is, in rural areas, many people understood policy through the lens of people who lived in a type of place that was relatively poor and systematically underrepresented and on the short end of the stick in terms of resource allocation. Many perceived that their tax dollars were being usurped by urbanites and spent on urbanites. In their conversations, rural life was tougher and more unjust than city life.

The place- and class-based identities at work here are part of a broader politics in the contemporary United States. I call this the politics of resentment. In this kind of politics, politicians pitch appeals in terms of social group battle lines, not ideological principles. Everyday interaction among ordinary people, in which people teach notions of justice and deservingness to each other, provide the footholds for such arguments. Knowing the perspectives that people are using to interpret public affairs reveals the potential for certain arguments and rhetoric to sway the public. Ironically, it is from looking closely at opinion from the bottom-up that we can better understand the elite-driven (Zaller 1992) or top-down nature of opinion.

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| **Appendix A:**  **Descriptions of Groups Observed and Municipalities In Which They Met** |

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | | | | | | |
| **Group No.** | **Municipality Description** | **Group Type** | **Municipality Population (2000)** | **Median Household Income (1999)** | **2010 Republican Gubernatorial**  **Vote** | **Dates of Site Visits** |
| 1 | Central hamlet | Daily morning coffee klatch, local gas station (employed, unemployed and retired men) | 500 | 38000 | 55% | May’08, April’11, Nov’12 |
| 2 | Northern western village | Weekly morning breakfast group, restaurant (women, primarily retired) | 500 | 32,000 | 25% | June’07, Jan’08, April’08, April’09, May’11, May’12 |
| 3 | North western hamlet | Weekly morning coffee klatch, church (mixed gender, primarily retirees) | 500 | 35,000 | 50% | June’07, Jan’08 |
| 4a\_1, 4a\_2 | North central village | Group of library volunteers at library (mixed gender, retirees) | 500 | 34,000 | 70% | June’07, May’12 |
| 4b | North central village | Daily coffee klatch of male local leaders meeting in the municipal building | 500 | 34,000 | 70% | Jan’08, June’08 |
| 5 | North eastern resort village | Group of congregants after a Saturday evening service at a Lutheran church (mixed gender) | 1,000 | 41,000 | 45% | June’07 |
| 6 | North western village | Daily morning coffee klatch, gas station (employed, unemployed and retired men) | 1,000 | 32,000 | 35% | June’07, Jan’08, April’08, April’09, May’11 |
| 7 | Northern American Indian reservation | Group of family members, during a Friday fish fry at a gas station/restaurant (employed and retired, mixed gender) | 1,000 | 35,000 | 50% | June’07 |
| 8 | South central village | Daily morning coffee klatch, gas station (mixed gender, employed and retired) | 1,500 | 31,000 | 50% | June’07, Jan’08, April’08, April’11 |
| 9 | North central village | Daily morning breakfast group, diner (employed and retired, mixed gender) | 2,000 | 38,000 | 65% | June’07, Jan’08, April’08, Feb’09, June’11, May’12 |
| 10a | South central village | Women’s weekly morning coffee klatch at diner | 3,000 | 43,000 | 40% | June’07 |
| 10b | South central village | Daily morning coffee klatch of male professionals, construction workers, retirees | 3,000 | $43,000 | 40% | Feb’08, July’08 |
| 11a | Central west village | Daily morning coffee klatch of men at gas station (employed and retired) | 3,000 | $30,000 | 60% | May’07, Jan’08, April’08 |
| 11b | Central west village | Daily morning coffee klatch of men at diner (employed and retired) | 3,000 | $30,000 | 60% | May’07, Jan’08, April’08, April’11, June’12 |
| 11c | Central west village | Weekly lunch group of women at restaurant (employed and retired) | 3,000 | $30,000 | 60% | June’12 |
| 12a | Central east village | Kiwanis meeting (mixed gender, primarily retirees) | 3,000 | $45,000 | 55% | June’07 |
| 12b | Central east village | Daily morning coffee klatch of male retirees at fast food restaurant | 3,000 | $45,000 | 55% | May’08 |
| 13 | Suburb of Minneapolis/St. Paul, Minnesota | Daily morning coffee klatch of male local business owners, lawyers, retirees at diner | 9,000 | $51,000 | 55% | June’07, Jan’08, April’08 |
| 14 | Milwaukee northern suburb | Dailey morning coffee klatch of male retirees and construction workers | 10,000 | $54,000 | 70% | June’07, Jan’08, May’08 |
| 15 | South central city | Middle-aged man and woman taking a mid-morning break at café | 10,000 | $36,000 | 50% | June’07 |
| 16a | Central city | Daily morning coffee klatch of middle-aged professionals and a few retirees, mixed gender, at café | 38,000 | $37,000 | 50% | June’07, Jan’08, April’08, Feb’09, May’09, July’12 |
| 16b | Central city | Gathering of women who attend church together, in a café | 38,000 | $37,000 | 50% | July’12 |
| 17 | East central city | Daily morning coffee klatch, gas station (retired men) | 42,000 | $41,000 | 60% | June’07, Jan’08, April’08, Jan’09 |
| 18a | Milwaukee suburb (western edge) | Group of teachers and administrators at high school (mixed gender) | 47,000 | $55,000 | 50% | June’07, June’12 |
| 18b | Milwaukee suburb (western edge) | Daily lunch group of employed and unemployed middle-aged men | 47,000 | $55,000 | 50% | April’08, Jan’09 (twice), Feb’09 |

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| 18c | Milwaukee suburb (western edge) | Daily morning breakfast group of male and female small business owners and retirees | 47,000 | $55,000 | 50% | Jan’09, Feb’09(twice) |
| 19 | Western city | Daily morning coffee klatch, café (middle-aged professionals and retirees, mixed gender) | 52,000 | $31,000 | 40% | June’07, Jan’08, April’08 |
| 20 | South eastern city | Weekly morning breakfast group, diner (mixed gender, retirees and employed) | 82,000 | $37,000 | 40% | July’08 |
| 21a | North eastern city | Daily morning breakfast group, diner (employed and retired men) | 100,000 | $39,000 | 50% | June’07 |
| 21b | North eastern city | Daily morning breakfast group, diner counter (employed and unemployed, mixed gender) | 100,000 | $39,000 | 50% | May’08 |
| 22a | Madison | Middle-aged, female professionals’ book club | 200,000 | $42,000 | 20% | July’07 |
| 22b | Madison | Daily morning coffee klatch of male and female retirees at bakery | 200,000 | $42,000 | 20% | Feb’07, March’07, Feb’08, July’08, Feb’11 |
| 22c | Madison | Female resident volunteers in food pantry in low income neighborhood (employed and unemployed) | 200,000 | $42,000 | 20% | Multiple visits, Fall’06 |
| 23a | Milwaukee, northern neighborhood | Activist group meeting after services in a Baptist church (mixed age and gender, employed) | 600,000 | $32,000 | 25% | July’07 |
| 23b | Milwaukee, southern neighborhood | Mexican immigrants waiting at a pro bono health clinic (mixed age and gender, employed and unemployed) | 600,000 | 32,000 | 25% | June’07 |
| 24 | Southwestern village | 4H group (mixed gender) | 4,000 | $42,000 | 45% | Feb’10 |
| 25 | Central village | 4H group (mixed gender) | 10,000 | $33,000 | 50% | March’10 |
| 26 | South eastern city | 4H group (mixed gender) | 28,000 | $48,000 | 70% | April’10 |
| 27 | Central east village | 4H group (mixed gender) | 4,000 | $38,000 | 60% | April’10 |

Note: Population and income figures have been rounded to preserve confidentiality of groups observed. Vote figures are rounded to nearest 5%.

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**Figure 1**

users:Kwalsh:CURRENT PROJECTS:baldwin project:Book Manuscript:chapt 7 pol implications_TEA and Small_anti govt:survey results:SGVs plot3.pdf

Source: American National Election Studies 1990-2012. Darkened portions of the X axis correspond to time periods with a Democratic president.

**Figure 2**

users:Kwalsh:CURRENT PROJECTS:baldwin project:Book Manuscript:chapt 7 pol implications_TEA and Small_anti govt:survey results:Ext Eff plot3.pdf

Source: American National Election Studies, 1952-2012. Darkened portions on the X-axis correspond to time periods with a Democratic president.

**Figure 3**

users:Kwalsh:CURRENT PROJECTS:baldwin project:Book Manuscript:chapt 7 pol implications_TEA and Small_anti govt:survey results:cor_overtime2.pdf

Source: American National Election Study, 1996-2012.

1. Using 2012 ANES data, small government views are strong and significant predictors of partisan identification and also support for the Tea Party, even when controlling for age, race, gender and income, where small government views are measured with the following questions, in which respondents are asked to indicate which of two statements comes closer to their view: 1) “ONE, the main reason government has become bigger over the years is because it has gotten involved in things that people should do for themselves; or TWO, government has become bigger because the problems we face have become bigger.” 2) “ONE, we need a strong government to handle today's complex economic problems; or TWO, the free market can handle these problems without government being involved.” 3) “ONE, the less government, the better; or TWO, there are more things that government should be doing?” Small government views appear to be a stronger predictor of partisan identification and Tea Party support than the controls. In the 2008 ANES, small government views are significant predictors of partisan identification, but in that year, race was a stronger predictor. Results available upon request. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. With respect to the nation as a whole, survey respondents who called themselves rural (rural farm or rural town) are if anything only marginally more likely to express small government views. The following are the percentages of rural and nonrural respondents expressing small government view in response to the three relevant items in the 2008 ANES (2012 respondents were not asked to label themselves as rural, urban or suburban). Percent saying government involved in things people should do for themselves: rural 46%, nonrural 43%. Percent saying the free market is better at solving problems: rural 34%, nonrural 31%. Percent saying the less government the better: rural 44%, nonrural 40%. When controlling for income, age, race, gender, and partisan identity, the differences in responses to these items across rural and nonrural respondents is statistically insignificant. In Wisconsin (using statewide Badger Poll data from June 2010), self-reported rural respondents are less conservative with respect to small government views than are self-reported suburban respondents (where small government views are measured with the following three items: “Please tell me which of the following two statements come closer to your thoughts. 1) The main reason government has become bigger over the years is because it has gotten involved in things that people should do for themselves; OR the government has become bigger because the problems we face have become bigger. 2) We need a strong government to handle today's complex economic problems; OR the free market can handle these problems without government being involved. 3) The less government, the better; OR there are more things that government should be doing?” [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Martin argues that some of the biggest proponents of the tax revolt were prominent welfare rights organizers (2008, 16). These activists argued that the property tax system was regressive because it required poor communities to have especially high tax rates in order to pay for the amenities that wealthier communities could fund with lower tax rates. They argued that in order to devise a more progressive system, the property tax had to be abolished altogether (75-79). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. What accounts for the discrepancy? One reason is technical—the overreliance on a particular question fielded in the General Social Survey by the National Opinion Research Center that asked about support for “welfare.” The question read, “Do you think we spend too much money on welfare, too little money, or about the right amount on welfare?” (Cook and Barrett 1992, 25). Since “welfare” is such a stigmatized term, the question may not accurately gauge how willing people are to support programs that provide for people in poverty. Cook and Barrett report findings from Smith (1987) that when a 1984 NORC survey asked about welfare in different ways, in terms of “assistance to the poor” or “caring for the poor,” public support at the same point in time was about 44% and 39% higher, respectively (Cook and Barrett 1992, 27). Another problem with using responses to support for “welfare” is that there is (and there was) no such program as “welfare.” When asked about specific programs (AFDC, Social Security, and Medicaid), a majority of the public is supportive of these programs (Cook and Barrett 1992, 61-60). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Interestingly, the public does not seem to mind a great deal that public officials use polls to determine what the public thinks. In as survey fielded December 21, 2000 to March 30, 2001, of 1206 English-speaking adults 18 and over, the Kaiser Family Foundation asked, “There are different ways elected and government officials could try to learn what the majority of people in our country think about important issues. Is conducting a public opinion poll a very good, somewhat good, not too good or not at all good way to learn what the majority of people in our country think?” 28% said “very good,” and 56% said “somewhat good.” (3% didn’t know, 10% said “not too good,” and 3% said “not good at all.”) However, the study also surveyed policy makers and journalists and found the public to be more skeptical than those two groups that polls accurately reflected their thoughts. http://kff.org/other/poll-finding/national-surveys-of-the-role-of-polls/ [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. This relationship between anti-government and small government views exists in the contemporary Wisconsin electorate, too. A Badger Poll of Wisconsin residents 18 and over conducted June 9 to July 10, 2010, asked questions very similar to those asked in the ANES. For anti-government views, the following questions were used: 1) “Please tell me if you strongly disagree, somewhat disagree, neither agree nor disagree, somewhat agree, or strongly agree with the following statements….People like me don't have any say about what the government does.” 2) “Please tell me if you strongly disagree, somewhat disagree, neither agree nor disagree, somewhat agree, or strongly agree with the following statements….Public officials don’t care much what people like me think.” 3) “How much attention do you feel the government pays to what the people think when it decides what to do; a good deal, some, or not much?” For small-government views, the following were used: 1) “Please tell me which of the following two statements come closer to your thoughts: The main reason government has become bigger over the years is because it has gotten involved in things that people should do for themselves; OR the government has become bigger because the problems we face have become bigger.” 2) “We need a strong government to handle today's complex economic problems; OR the free market can handle these problems without government being involved.” 3) “The less government, the better; OR there are more things that government should be doing?” An index of the three anti-government items (Cronbach alpha=.70) and the small government items (alpha=.80) shows a correlation of .30 (p<.001). Correlations between the individual items range from .14 to .33, all significant at p<.001, with the strongest correlations between the anti-government items and the “Government doesn’t pay attention to the people” item (N=468). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. However, in 3 of the 27 communities, the members of the groups I spent time with did not know each other and were more likely to openly disagree with one another than in the places where the members of the groups I studied spent time with each other regularly. In these three communities, the group members did not know each other because I had not been able to find a regularly occurring group, so I had instead asked a community member to gather together acquaintances to talk with me. One of the most disagreeable groups was composed of frequent patrons to a local library, recruited for the purposes of my visit by the head librarian (Group 4a, May2012). Another disagreeable group was composed of churchgoers whom their pastor encouraged to talk with me over refreshments after a Saturday evening service (Group 5). When I visited them in June 2007 their congregation was composed of summer residents and year-round residents. Group numbers are references to Appendix A, which provides details on the groups in this study. For the purposes of the present analyses, I set those more disagreeable groups of strangers aside and focus on the conversations among people who regularly tried to make sense of the world together. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Walker’s “Yes We Can” ad, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HcQ7hwRhKIs&>. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Statement made during first debate of general election: [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Yes We Can ad, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HcQ7hwRhKIs&>. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. He also claimed in that debate that constructing the train would give jobs to Spain and take them away from Sheboygan, a Wisconsin city: "As I said to the folks in Sheboygan about a year and a half ago when Jim Doyle was over working on getting that train from Spain, instead of focusing on Thomas Industries [a vacuum pump and air compressor manufacturer in Sheboygan that closed in 2009]-- there will never be a time in this state when any worker, not just employer, will have to look their governor in the face and say he didn't do everything in his power to keep my job in the state of Wisconsin." [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. During the first general election debate he said, "There's no doubt we can take on the political machine down in Madison and win for all the taxpayers in this state,” and "Together, we can take on the political machine down the way in Madison and win for all the taxpayers" in this campaign ad: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bDhOrxhftE0>. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. First 2010 gubernatorial general election debate. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. M &Ms refers to Madison and Milwaukee. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aZZSnhsGJyE> [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Walker’s success in rural areas of the state in the 2010 election suggests he was able to tap into anti-Madison sentiment in particular (see Fanlund 2010) as well as anti-Milwaukee sentiment (Fanlund 2011). In the 2006 gubernatorial election, the Democratic incumbent Jim Doyle won 40 of the 64 counties outside the Milwaukee Combined Statistical Area or the Madison Metropolitan Statistical Area. In 2010 the Democratic candidate for governor lost all but 8 of the non-metro counties to Walker. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. I did indeed observe conversations in which people openly displayed racial resentment as part of their justification for small government, but these always took place in urban and suburban areas. Numerous examples come from the consistently conservative group in suburban Milwaukee (Group 18c). One member was a former teacher in the Milwaukee public school district, and she complained about students in the district taking the free lunch program as a given, when hard-working people like herself have to pay for that program via their tax dollars. She did not state outright that the students she was talking about were racial minorities, but approximately 84% of the students in the MPS district are racial minorities (National Center for Education Statistics, Characteristics of the 100 Largest Public Elementary and Secondary School Districts in the United States: 2007-08, Table A9, http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2010/100largest/tables/table\_a09.asp). She also complained that a double standard was applied to white staff at the school versus employees of color. Other comments in that group conveyed that in their eyes, racial minorities were getting more than their fair share. These comments convey a belief that scaling back government is desirable because currently government gives benefits to the wrong people, not necessarily because limited government is preferable in general.

    In other groups, people supported small government with less overt mention of racial groups. Among consistently conservative groups in particular, arguments for less government sometimes hinged on perceptions of government inefficiency (Groups 13 and 12b), the failure of government officials to understand rural wants and needs (Groups 3 and 16a), or a desire for organizations, especially churches, to provide a social safety net rather than government (Groups 12b and 25). [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Badger Poll data do suggest that self-identified rural residents are more likely to think that minorities have too much influence than are self-identified urban or suburban residents. (In response to “Do minorities have too much influence, just about the right amount of influence, or not enough influence?” 21% of rural residents said “too much” while just 13% of nonrural residents said so. χ2=9.32, p=0.009, Badger Poll #32, June 17-July 10, 2011, N=516). [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. The ubiquity of subconscious racial prejudice, even among people who consciously express racial tolerance (Devine 1989), underscores this possibility. Many scholars argue that in the contemporary context, racism is often “symbolic racism” or racial prejudice rooted in moral values rather than perceived threat to one’s self interest. One of the main measures of such racism since it was conceptualized in the early 1970s has been agreement with the idea that Black Americans do not work hard enough to make ends meet (see Sears and Henry 2005). [↑](#footnote-ref-19)