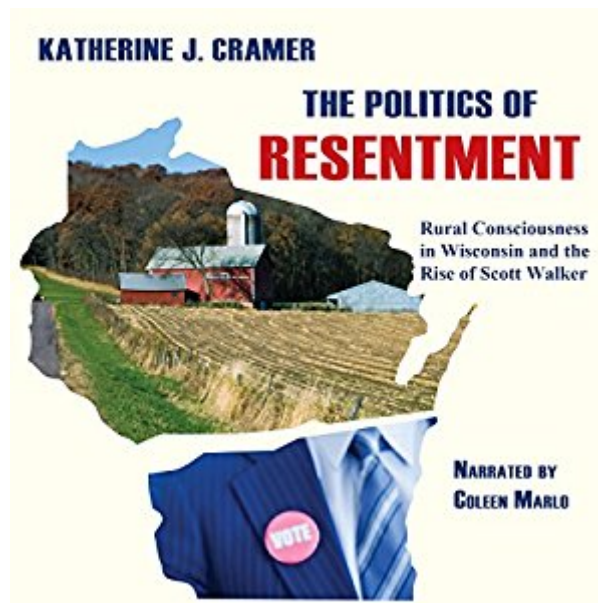


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# The Politics Of Resentment: Rural Consciousness In Wisconsin And The Rise Of Scott Walker



## Synopsis

Since the election of Scott Walker, Wisconsin has been seen as ground zero for debates about the appropriate role of government in the wake of the Great Recession. In a time of rising inequality, Walker not only survived a bitterly contested recall that brought thousands of protesters to Capitol Square, he was subsequently reelected. How could this happen? How is it that the very people who stand to benefit from strong government services not only vote against the candidates who support those services but are vehemently against the very idea of big government? With *The Politics of Resentment*, Katherine J. Cramer uncovers an oft-overlooked piece of the puzzle: rural political consciousness and the resentment of the "liberal elite". Rural voters are distrustful that politicians will respect the distinct values of their communities and allocate a fair share of resources. What can look like disagreements about basic political principles are therefore actually rooted in something even more fundamental: who we are as people and how closely a candidate's social identity matches our own. Using Scott Walker and Wisconsin's prominent and protracted debate about the appropriate role of government, Cramer illuminates the contours of rural consciousness, showing how place-based identities profoundly influence how people understand politics, regardless of whether urban politicians and their supporters really do shortchange or look down on those living in the country. *The Politics of Resentment* shows that rural resentment - no less than partisanship, race, or class - plays a major role in dividing America against itself.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

The Politics of Resentment Book Review Ms. Kramer, a University of Wisconsin-Madison Political Science Professor, explored a recent political paradox, "We live in a time of increasing economic inequality, and yet voters continue to elect politicians whose policies respond very disproportionately to the preferences of affluent people." She examined the origins of this paradox in her home state of Wisconsin, for which rural voters recently tipped the balance from a blue to a red state, seemingly against their own interests. To better understand the opinions of these voters as reported by the usual technique of polling, she personally and repeatedly participated in multiple informal discussions of thirty-nine groups scattered throughout Wisconsin for six years. The study identified a very rural identity with "us versus them" characteristics leading to resentment of urban and political elites, public employees, and diverse urban populations. A "rural consciousness" was identified that included three major components: a perception that rural areas do not receive their fair share of decision-making power, that they are distinct from urban (and suburban) areas in their culture and lifestyle (and these differences are not respected), and that rural areas do not receive their fair share of public resources. In addition, they believed they worked much harder for lower wages than less deserving urbanites, public employees, and recipients of public assistance and that their culture and communities were dying as a result of these discrepancies. Reports are reviewed for previous examinations of these perceived discrepancies by the usual political science statistical techniques. At a superficial level, those reports show that rural residents are right about receiving considerably lower wages but wrong about not getting their fair share of public funds. In 2011, per capita median income was in excess of \$70,000 for the richest suburbs, about \$55,000 for urban counties (without considering the urban poor), and about \$40,000 for completely rural counties. Per capita combined state and federal tax revenues were greater than \$10,000 for the richest suburbs, over \$6,000 for urban counties, and about \$4,000 for rural counties. Per capita percentage returned from taxes paid was about 65% state and 150% federal for urban counties and about 100% state and over 400% federal for rural counties (both state and federal graphs skewed by outliers). However, Ms. Kramer found that the answers from this political science approach didn't really match the concerns of rural citizens on several important points. The revenues returned to rural regions were often in the form of programs imposed upon them by urban and political elites and staffed by public employees who lived among them. Rural citizens perceived the politicians to be tone deaf to their real needs and the programs to be contrary to their real interests. They perceived the local public employees to be outsiders (them rather than us) with much easier work, better salaries, and enormously better benefits than they had. They perceived their hard-earned tax dollars to be wasted on these

programs, public employees, and transfers to what they saw as undeserving urban minorities. This perspective suggests that voters' preference for limited government was not rooted in libertarian political principles or identification as Republicans but in a strong rural identity with the perception that services were not benefiting deserving, hard-working people like themselves. Politicians, such as Scott Walker, skillfully directed these rural resentments away from Republican policies that favor affluent people and redirected them toward government, the people who work for it, and urban areas that are home to liberals and people of color. This rural identity with these strong resentments was already firmly established as the result of long-standing difficult rural circumstances and generations of community members teaching these ideas to one another in the context of the national political debate. Scott Walker merely reaped the harvest of a field already prepared for him (how's that for a rural metaphor?). So what are the lessons from these findings? First, as on the national level, citizens tend to vote according to personal identities rather than specific policy preferences, with attitudes toward social groups doing the work of ideology. Ms. Kramer examined the rural identity and its resentments in her state. Nationally, numerous additional divisive identities have been experienced, including those involving race, gender, Northerners versus Southerners, and so on. Second, in Wisconsin, it is necessary to reassess what is going on in rural places and reconsider the policy responses.

- 1) It is possible that resources rural communities are receiving are not effectively addressing the needs of rural communities.
- 2) It is likely that some of the resources rural communities are receiving are invisible to the people who live there so they are unaware of the programs they use.
- 3) The manner in which policy is created and delivered is important. If rural residents feel they have been listened to and respected, they may feel different about the programs that result.

My comments about the book: My main criticism of the book is that the "Where Does Rural Consciousness Come From?" section is inadequate. Radio was dismissed as a source with the comment that public radio transcripts were unavailable but that state and local newspapers were a reliable indicator of the local news environment. Has the author never heard of talk radio? Is she unaware of the enormous audience of Rush Limbaugh? As for local newspapers, her study of papers from 2007 to 2011 doesn't begin to cover the period necessary for "generations of community members teaching these ideas to each other." In my view, her approach likely missed a substantial contribution from several decades of the extensive Koch political network propaganda machine firmly embedding these ideas in rural and other identities.

Excellent analysis of Wisconsin politics that has a lot to say about our national politics at this time as

well. I grew up in Wisconsin (Manitowoc) and have observed Wisconsin politics from my youth onwards. The changes that have happened since 2010's election of Scott Walker have been profound and Katherine Cramer frames the social-political issues very well. That said, I am only part way through, though her description of the geography of Wisconsin politics (and the primacy of geography in American politics) rings true.

This book offers vital insights into the structure of our society. The author makes academic research relevant to every-day life in the U.S.A.

Dr Cramer has been immensely helpful in helping to understand the chasm between urban and rural and where the chasm's roots are to be located. This is 5 star! Easy to read and the research style was really helpful to unfold the chasms that exists.

Just started this. Excellent read.

Excellent read. Prof. Cramer started this interview technique long before Trump was in the picture as a candidate.

I liked her research but her opinions of the results to me got fairly repetitive. She did clarify in a convincing way why the rural voter is voting the way they are.

Good study of Wisconsin voters showing why they supported who they did, especially good on describing tribes - people like me.

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