

What Rural Voters Want

It isn't new policies or programs; it's respect from their fellow citizens.

By Katherine J. Cramer

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Over the past decade, I have invited myself into the conversations of groups of people meeting in rural communities across the state of Wisconsin.

It was different before this time of COVID-19 and racial reckoning, but the challenges we face now make the lessons from those experiences more urgent.

Some of these rural residents voted for Barack Obama in 2008 and 2012 and for Donald Trump four years later. To many progressives, that is simply incomprehensible. But it is important, more than ever, that we try to understand.

In my time listening to people in rural communities, I found that the key thing people seem to want is not a particular policy change but something more fundamental: respect. They want to be heard and to have their concerns addressed by those who are supposedly representing them in their democracy.

I realize some people reading this will object, noting that more resources per capita go to rural areas than to urban areas. They'll say, "Respect is all well and good but their needs have been met, and *still* they vote in people who are running the nation into the ground." Or they may say, "Wanting respect is just a veiled way of saying they want white folks to stay in power."

To make it a little harder to dismiss these people, who will play a key and perhaps decisive role in the November 3 election, let me take you to one particular group that I spent time with over the years.

It is a group of women living in a tourist community in the northwest corner of Wisconsin. They get together once a week at a local restaurant or church—or at least they did, before the COVID-19 outbreak forced an end to this tradition.

For this group of women, whom I got to know while researching my book, *The Politics of Resentment: Rural Consciousness in Wisconsin and the Rise of Scott Walker*, the sense of isolation they are now experiencing is nothing new. They have known it all their lives.

Like much of rural America, they have felt geographically and practically removed from the cities. They have lamented how hard it's been for their kids to find jobs that allow them to stay in the community. They feel as though the people in cities do not know they exist, or care.

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These people come from many different backgrounds and vocations, but are united in their belief that the system is rigged against rural America. One woman I met showed me her list of residents who had moved away because of rising property taxes—due in part to wealthy people from the cities moving in, buying lakefront property, and building expensive vacation homes.

Even some of the group's more left-leaning members talked about people in rural areas and smaller towns not getting their fair share. When the communities in which they live have been struggling for decades, it's easy to conclude that the government is not acting out of any concern for them.

But the last thing they want is a politician who proposes more government or who appears to be a part of the establishment. So when Donald Trump comes along and proposes to take a wrecking ball to the whole thing, it is appealing to some people.

Even though it would not be safe for me to meet with them in person now, I know that the members of this group are worrying about how the pandemic may affect their kids and grandkids. They are wondering how to protect themselves from possibly infected people who travel to their neck of the woods. They are trying to figure out whether the guidelines they hear from public health agencies and elected officials were formulated with their kind of place in mind. They may be wondering whether anyone in the cities, or in their state government, are thinking about any of this.

And you know what? They are right to perceive that few people are.

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