The Heart of Everything in the Middle of Nowhere: The Role of Rural Identity in the Formation and Deployment of Political Attitudes in Pennsylvania

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The Heart of Everything in the Middle of Nowhere:
The Role of Rural Identity in the Formation and Deployment of Political Attitudes in Pennsylvania

Mikaela G. Zimmerman

Dissertation submitted
to the Eberly College of Arts and Sciences
at West Virginia University

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy in
Sociology

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ABSTRACT

The Heart of Everything in the Middle of Nowhere:
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Mikaela G Zimmerman

The world of American politics continues to infiltrate households across the United States as technological advancement extends the reach of breaking news and government action. With this expanding reach, communities all over the country are digesting and contemplating their place in national politics more fervently than ever. At the crux of this discussion is the backbone of political engagement and action—identity and its resulting political attitudes. For decades, partisanship has been a point of contention amongst American citizens. Cities across the nation showcase protests, demonstrations, town hall meetings, and more illustrating citizens’ care for their democratized input in government affairs. But what about those in the quieter parts of America? Until recently, rural America has been overlooked (and underseen) by the social and political sciences. This study illuminates the rural perspective on attitudes toward politics and peers as well as the role of rural identity in attitude formation. As a state with multiple kinds of rurality (suburbia, exurbia, rural farmland, small towns, and Appalachia), Pennsylvania proves worthy of its own analysis—particularly as it finds itself at the heart of political action as a battleground and swing state since the 2016 presidential election. Utilizing in-depth interviews from rural and small-town Pennsylvanians and observational data from the areas in which they live, this study explores rural Americans’ input on their individual contributions to government affairs as well as rural political attitudes and community needs/expectations from their elected officials—ultimately offering a renewed and under-considered perspective on rural identity and rural political attitudes.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Time and time again throughout my many years studying the social sciences, I have been met with the question, “what exactly is sociology?” Also throughout my time in the field, I have heard and delivered many answers. It is the undercurrent of everything; the thrumming heartbeat of society; the mechanisms behind virtually every act both public and private, prosaic and exhilarant, practiced and unfamiliar. While all true, none have dispatched a better answer than renowned sociologist C. Wright Mills—“whatever sociology may be, it is the result of constantly asking the question, ‘what is the meaning of this?’” Such inquisition has guided me through many personal endeavors and, indeed, has driven much of my scholarship. Growing up in Appalachia, paying attention, and constantly asking “what is the meaning of this” for two decades has led me to a myriad of people and places as well as to the fruition of this project as I work to put myself in a position to serve the public world. But I could not have done any of it without the village of support behind me.

As the global pandemic took the world by storm during my third year of graduate school, I was forced to adjust this research to accommodate changing norms and protocols. A special thank you must extend to my family as they embody a call home with open doors and a spare room, especially in this time of uncertainty when I moved my work with me back home to Pennsylvania. Beside me always were my partners in trudging through the doctoral academy during such unprecedented times—Sara, who spent many late nights with me in our office over the years and answered every phone call; and Rebeka, who became a constant companion for long working days and new adventures. Thank you to Abbey, my best friend and fiercest supporter for endeavors both large and small. And thank you to Noah—the one who bolsters my feet to the earth and carries me through the dark and the light. In so many ways, none of you are ever far from me. Thank you, as well, to the rest of my robust support system—Colleen, Annette, Ben, Starletta, Jaylin, Taylor, Josh, and all those who stuck around through this long process and never forgot the important stuff. Thank you, of course, to my doctoral dissertation committee members—Dr. Katie Corcoran, Dr. James Nolan, and Dr. Christopher Plein—for their feedback and guidance through such a monumental project. Thank you, especially, to my advisor—Dr. Jesse Wozniak—for his admirable levels of patience with my infinite list of questions and incessant rambling emails. Thank you to Jamey for being an unmeasurable source of attendant support. Thank you to West Virginia University’s Department of Sociology & Anthropology and Health Sciences & Technology Academy for my education and opportunities. Thank you to my participants for their time and willingness to share intimate pieces of themselves with me, and to my local libraries for giving me a sanctuary in which to write this thing! Finally, a very special thank you to the man who started it all—Dr. Samuel Richards, my guru and biggest role model, without whom I would not be a sociologist today. His teachings extend far beyond his projects and have encouraged me to practice radical empathy in all that I do. Thank you for your wisdom, your guidance, your truth, and your friendship. Surprising to no one, this dissertation is dedicated to you.

“In the case of sociology, we are always walking on hot coals, and the things we discuss are alive; they are not dead and buried.” -Pierre Bourdieu
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INTRODUCTION

“Things just aren’t like they used to be anymore; it’s a real shame.” While especially spotlighted since the 2016 presidential election, politics and partisan priorities have been a point of contention amongst American citizens for many years—particularly between the rural and non-rural parts of the United States. From illuminating and attempting to tackle various economic and social inequalities to defining the moral backbone of a nation, politics are a way for Americans to involve themselves in the broad and complex process of large-scale decision making that affects us all in ways both significant and more minor. Following historical patterns well into modern day, cities and urban hubs across the nation showcase protests, demonstrations, town hall meetings, and more demonstrating citizens’ care for their democratized input in government affairs. But what about those in the quieter parts of America? The parts of America that make the world go round with its fruitful industrial, agricultural, and political influence? In many ways, rural and small-town America provide significant foundational support and impact for the modern workings of both national and international industry, culture, and politics—the heart of everything in the middle of nowhere. Until the recent interest spike fueled by the 2016 presidential election, rural America has been largely overlooked (and, therefore, underseen) by the social and political sciences.

Studies show that 85.3 percent of persistent poverty counties—counties where 20 percent or more of the population has lived in poverty for the last 30 years—are rural (Economic Research Service 2017); but “rural” is a multifaceted title. The US Census (2017) defines “rural” as all population, housing, and territory not included within an urban area—essentially, any area with less than 50,000 people. However, rurality also encompasses unique aspects of adverse identity that factor into political consciousness and attitudes. Specifically, the adoption of an
identity that encompasses deprivation, struggle, misrepresentation, and steadfast conservative
cultural values act as catalysts for rural political attitudes. Further complicating this process is
these political attitudes’ contribution to specific voting behaviors that perpetuate a cycle of rural
adversity and resulting beliefs and worldviews that actively marginalize and stigmatize
conservative rural folks.

According to the United States 2017 Census report, 19.3 percent of American citizens
reside in rural areas—nearly one fifth of the entire population. However, the current structure of
American political institutions demonstrates a unique rural bias and disproportionate electoral
strength. Through systems of urban clustering and strategic land/population delegation
throughout history, rural America pulls more weight in US elections than those areas with over
80 percent of American citizens—and these rural areas tend to lean more conservative both in
fiscal and social issues (GSS). Because of strategic clustering of more liberal Black and brown
Americans in inner cities, conservative Republican voters are more efficiently distributed across
the country than Democrats, who are concentrated in more tightly packed urban areas (about 3
percent of US land mass, according to the 2017 US Census). Broken down, this means that even
if Democrats were to win 50 percent of voters nationwide for an election, they consistently hold
fewer than 50 percent of seats in the House of Representatives, regardless of partisan
gerrymandering. As a result, the will of rural America ends up with disproportionate political
strength; however, they often do not reap the benefits. Urban populations—making up the vast
majority—still tend to receive most of the attention in research, political programming, and
calls-to-action efforts while rural America continues to “fly under the radar” in many ways. This
covertness then allows for the perpetuation of harmful stereotypes often depicted in the media
and further skewing understandings of rural people and places.
This cycle of misrepresentation and deprivation of resources acts as springboard for the rural mindset of mistrust and resentment of high-status politicians and Democrats who have become synonymized with the urban “other.” Rural politics is about rural consciousness (Cramer 2016): (1) perceptions of power or who discusses what/who decides what to discuss, (2) respect to perceptions of values and lifestyles, and (3) perceptions of resources or who gets what. It is the term used to describe a strong sense of identity as a rural person combined with a strong sense that rural areas are the victims of injustice: the sense that rural areas do not get their fair share of power, respect, or resources and that rural folks prefer lifestyles and ethical standards that differ fundamentally from those of city people and breeding an “us versus them” mentality. This stark divide between the perception of rural Republicans and urban/suburban Democrats creates differing expectations for residents’ attitudes toward government and public spending. As with any differing circumstances, expectations for allocation of government-issued funds change; in the case of the rural and the urban specifically, these areas have higher concentrations of different social problems which influence residents’ expectations for public policy, spending, and outreach from their elected officials.

Plagued by geographic isolation, economic privatization of natural resources, and low population density, rural areas face unique adversity that informs much of the identity and consciousness that influences rural political attitudes. This is exacerbated in Appalachia—a region beset with higher concentrations of low income, minimal resource allocation, and harmful stereotypes than the average rural area. As a state exhibiting multiple levels of rurality (agricultural industry, small towns, Appalachian post-industrial settlement, and Pittsburgh/Philadelphia exurbs), rural Pennsylvania offers a unique and important perspective on rural identity and its influence on the political process. Pennsylvania, known both as the
Keystone State due to its pivotal role in holding together the newly-formed Union at our country’s birth and the Unavoidable State with its significant geographic presence in the northeastern US, Pennsylvania positions itself as an excellent candidate for political research. As a state with varying levels of rural adversity and unique political power held by a swing state, Pennsylvania is worthy of analysis on its own; but by studying Appalachian Pennsylvania, we get a look at how rurality, rural identity, and adversity are operationalized in a state with such diverse population. Even a look into more extreme cases of adversity will aid in the understanding of places plagued by lesser hardships, as it may serve to construct logical and empathic bridges when considering better-off rural areas that still face financial and social difficulty. This analysis has potential to produce useful political insight, as Pennsylvania and its assorted population act together as a political swing state. Regarded even as a “battleground state” (Lamis 2009) in recent years, it is especially important for political research to understand the population of the non-urban parts of the state—particularly Appalachian areas, which harbor such a unique perspective and influence. Oftentimes, politicians “fight” for votes in Pennsylvania by rallying in big cities—denser population infers more voters. However, it is this exact mindset that begets an attitude of distrust and abandonment in the middle, less densely populated areas. Political figures end up making promises to people they do not make a recognized attempt to understand, and then move into office with potentially skewed perceptions of what Pennsylvanians need and expect from them as their leader. By entering parts of Appalachian Pennsylvania and speaking directly to folks who live there, this research aims to produce a body of work that will help illuminate the rural Pennsylvanian perspective and encourage further political research in areas similarly plighted in the United States.
This study seeks to explore the role of rural identity in the formation and holding of political attitudes regarding issues of both fiscal and social delineation in rural central Pennsylvania. What, exactly, does this area want and need? How do their opinions and expectations of American government line up with its actions? How does the experience of living in rural Pennsylvania influence political attitudes and expectations? Paying closer attention to rural residents’ expectations and opinions of government and public spending are important to understanding the United States as a more holistic entity, especially when those in rural areas dictate such significant government power. By beginning in rural Pennsylvania, this research will provide insight into the importance of more regionally-based analyses of the United States—especially for purposes of policy-based research. To continue treating rural Americans as an afterthought would be detrimental to the progress of American government and, therefore, American society. This study will not only explore and highlight rural political perspectives in central Pennsylvania, but also beckon further research efforts to better understand and serve rural American communities in both the social and political sciences.

Research Questions

The objective of this research is to explore the nuances and connections between rural life/identity and rural political attitudes in rural Pennsylvania while also exploring how these nuanced attitudes inform political behavior and its effects in the rural places that allow policy advancements. The purpose of this study is to use ethnographic observational data and in-depth interviews to better understand political attitudes and expectations of rural Pennsylvanians and to make a case for future policy-driven research initiatives to include similarly executed rural analysis in public spending plans. Additionally, this study will add to the existing literature on
rural politics and rural disparities by exploring perspectives generally left out of larger national analyses.

Chapter Overviews

Findings are mapped out in three substantive chapters following similar thematic layouts so as to allow for comparison between groups. The first results chapter will analyze responses from democratic and/or more left leaning interviewees; the second will follow the same structure, analyzing conservative and/or more right leaning interviewees. These chapters address the questions: (1) how is rural identity deployed in the formation and holding of political attitudes in rural Pennsylvania? (2) what do rural Pennsylvanians value politically, and how do they assess the current political system in the United States? (3) how do rural Pennsylvanians receive information that influences their political attitudes, and what are the effects of receiving information from these sources? and (4), how does the disconnect between rural political priorities and government action contribute to the cyclicality of rural adversity?

The third and final results chapter reiterates the commonalities between each group and find cohesions within political attitudes and expectations of rural Pennsylvanians. The purpose of this chapter is to compound and prioritize the unifying pieces that the previous two chapters overlook and discuss the common ground where United States politics could meet rural Pennsylvanians for their betterment. It addresses the questions: (1) what do rural Pennsylvanians have in common, regardless of their political affiliations? (2) what role does rural identity play in producing political commonalities, and (3), how can these commonalities be used to unify political goals of rural Pennsylvanians?
Finally, the conclusion chapter serves as a reiteration of the most important themes and research findings while also calling for similar research agendas in other parts of the United States. Conducting similar research allows for a deeper, more holistic understanding of the American political process and experience by delving into the nuances of various identities and the political attitudes and expectations that are influenced by the titles one holds and one’s understanding of themselves, their community, and their life’s circumstances. Specifically in the realm of politics, policy-based research would significantly benefit from further rural analysis such as this because of rural Americans’ disproportionate political power and the notable disconnect between many rural folks and the governmental elite.

LITERATURE REVIEW

As with any research, it is important to find guidance within existing bodies of reviewed literature. Further illustrating rurality’s absence from the academic scope, significant gaps exist between literature grounded in legitimate explorative science and regional reflections—a discrepancy integral to understanding the need for further study of rural areas as researchers attempt to draw connections between narrative/reflective data and empirical foundations of rural adversity and identity. Additionally, the representation and complexity of political affiliation is a concept understood with great care to nuance and dynamic change, as even whole pockets of affiliation data are made up from many differing individual processes. Parties’ definitions change and evolve over time, ultimately leaving an intricate trail of historical influence and, unavoidably, lagging individuals as one’s concept of party and self adjust to accommodate developing definitions and circumstances. Utilizing a collaboration of both scientific and reflective literature, this review attempts to draw attention to such gaps and transparently address the advantages and drawbacks of each when piecing together understandings of modern rurality.
Rural places tend to have higher concentrations of older residents and those with lower educational attainment than suburban or urban areas (Parker et al 2018). And although research suggests gradual diversification, rural populations are primarily white (Parker et al 2018). Demographics are crucial to understanding any region and its adversity, but rural America has become defined by so much more. The rural lifestyle is rich with tradition, hospitality, hard work, and more that all play a part in informing the formation of rural identity political attitudes. However, there are significant deep-rooted hardships that drive the mechanisms dictating what it means to be “rural” in the United States.

There are many bodies of sociological and political literature both regionally reflective and more empirical illustrating that rural populations tend to have more politically conservative ideals and priorities, resulting in part from consequences of rural adversity—ineffective educational funding, for example, has been observed to correlate with cultural isolation and fixation on explosive cultural ideals in politics (Frank 2005). Accompanying conditioned mistrust in academic and political elites (Frank 2005; Larson and Porpora 2011; Hochschild 2016), the stark division between identities and ideals of rural and urban Americans (Belanche, Casaló, and Rubio 2021; Bell 1992; Glenn and Alston 1967; Lipset and Rokkan 1967) often translates to divergent political priorities. But how did this happen? What are the mechanisms behind rural politics?

*Historical Exploitation of Rurality and Resulting Government Priorities*

As globalization expanded in the United States in 1800, local American markets suffered. Quickly, rural Americans saw their livelihoods disappear with the companies, plants, and small businesses forced out of small-town America to survive while others shut down completely. This left the rural folks disproportionately out of work, and poverty rates shot up across virtually all
racial groups; any budding social mobility for residents of rural America came to a stop, and the market continually failed to return adequate employment to small towns. People were experiencing economic strain at bigger rates than ever before and social safety net programs responded, yet conditions for rural America continued to worsen. The economy never quite bounced back to its previous booming state and the population fell as people sought economic stability in more urban places while the rural ones got poorer. As a result, the percentage of rural Americans reliant on social programs increased. A market delivering growth in new sectors and lauded by conservative politicians failed to provide security for most Americans (Scott 1998) and, as a result, inequality soared.

America’s postwar economy flourished under new public policy; prior to the New Deal, Americans had few workers’ rights due to unsanctioned labor unions and a lack of protective labor laws (Mettler 2018). When Congress enacted the National Labor Relations Act in 1935, unions gained the right to organize and bargain—the Fair Labor Standards Act followed with a guaranteed minimum wage and new maximum hour laws (Mettler 2018) illustrating a change of direction from a previously more-conservative Supreme Court. Continuing this trend, labor unions thrived with growing memberships and success in their efforts to raise wages (Mettler 2018; Domhoff 1995). Additionally, the growth of labor rights provided workers with employer-issued healthcare and retirement benefits.

Paradoxically, at this time of great economic uncertainty emerging for so many as the rural-urban divide widened in the 1930s and Great Depression era, a new public philosophy arose centering an acclaimed ideal of the market. This new philosophy eschewed government intervention and featured a faith that the market would naturally maximize the will of individuals and generate positive outcomes if left to its own devices for long enough. For conservatives who
had been wanting to overcome their marginalized status, the economic crisis awarded a political opportunity with a newly lauded market that offered an experimental opportunity for a more hands-off style of government. Contrary to the doctrines of modern conservativism, the market has since receded from its role of delivering well-paying jobs with respectable benefits, particularly for those who are less well-off (Mettler 2018; Harriss-White 2006; Freeman 1998). Employers have rescinded their role in the social contract, and the government has loosened regulations that held employers to their obligations of providing adequate working environments and benefits for employees. Currently, typically only those in the upper tiers of the labor market still enjoy the favorable working conditions reminiscent of those more widely accessible decades ago.

Additionally, the state has imposed certain policies that hurt the American middle- and lower-class. Specifically, certain tax expenditures and assistance programs issue awards based on investment rather than earned income which benefits primarily the top one percent, who amass the majority of these provisions (Mettler 2018; Kapoor 2016; Harriss-White 2006). The grossly wealthy end up paying proportionately less in taxes than the average American, granting them significant economic advantage (Kapoor 2016). In short, while rhetoric of tying one’s deservingness of social benefits for low- and middle-class people to their work efforts exploded in the United States, it also granted substantial tax benefits to those who benefited less from their work efforts and more from their good fortune (Kapoor 2016).

To add onto these disparities, America’s social programming has major holes. Both unemployment insurance (UI) and access to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) remain targeted in ways that exclude many from qualifying for coverage (PGPF 2021; Aaron 2020; Mettler 2018; Damme 2010), and they remain underutilized even by those who are
eligible. To qualify for unemployment insurance, workers must meet three requirements: (1) a minimum earnings threshold, which disadvantages part-time, low-paid, and young workers; (2) a qualifying reason or “good cause” for job loss, which, depending on how states define it, is problematic for those who leave a job because of their own health or that of a family member, or because they lack adequate transportation or care for their children; and (3) evidence that they are actively and continuously seeking employment, which they may be unable to provide if they left a job to care for a family member (US Department of Labor 2021; Mettler 2018). And as we recall, these disparities tend to congregate more in rural areas. Additionally, these eligibility requirements and benefits vary by state, and conservative states tend to have stricter eligibility (Gilman 2019; Mettler 2018). Moreover, as a result of recent migration to parts of the country featuring lower pay and lower rates of unionization, unemployment insurance receipt is strongly related to previous hours of work, level of education, and prior wages (Mettler 2018)—all things felt more negatively and intensely in rural areas, thus widening geospatial social inequality.

Additionally, eligibility for food stamps is limited to families whose gross income falls below 130 percent of the poverty level (PGPF 2021; Aaron 2020), and benefits vary depending on income and expenses for a family’s basic needs. Also informative of one’s eligibility status are their assets—the value of a home, cars, savings accounts, and so forth (PGPF 2021; US Department of Labor); again, we see values of such things decreasing in rural areas and poorer residents unable to acquire better ones. Even after the United States Department of Agriculture Food and Nutrition Service pushed for the dropping of asset-based restrictions, food stamps remained underutilized with 25 percent of eligible individuals opting out of participation—among them were 35 percent of the working poor (Aaron 2020; Mettler 2018), likely abstaining in the interest of pride and an identity touting self-sufficiency. Another federal system targeting
the working poor is the Earned Income Tax Credit program (EITC); the EITC omits unemployed poor people—typically those who also fail to qualify for unemployment insurance or for welfare (Urban-Brookings TPC 2020; Mettler 2018). Additionally, for those working poor people with no independents to claim, the EITC provides extremely mediocre benefits. And, like all means-tested benefits, EITC eligibility gradually decreases as one’s income increases—in effect, taxing individuals at a much higher rate as they fulfill the purpose of the policy, which is paid employment (Urban-Brookings TPC 2020; Mettler 2018). This is a big contributor to the attitude found in rural politics that people feel punished for working hard while others receive (sometimes) better benefits via government “handout” programs—even though this belief that only a minority of Americans benefit from such programs is unfounded (Mettler 2018).

Interestingly, as the government responded to the COVID-19 pandemic with expanded financial relief and benefits, some scholars found that some rural attitudes may have shifted a bit, favoring stronger government interference in the form of aid paid out directly to individuals while reducing financial aid to large businesses and oil/gas companies (Farrell et al 2020). This might suggest agreement with the idea of the deserving poor (Gilens 2000), as folks from all corners of partisanship experienced a direct impact of some kind from the pandemic—perhaps impacts more direct than other financial hardship viewed from an outside perspective. Or, perhaps these impacts were felt more personally as people in many industries suffered consequences of global shutdown like unemployment, furlough/outsourcing due to remote work capabilities, overcrowded healthcare facilities, and more. While these issues may not be unique to the pandemic’s impact on American citizens, it is possible that their exacerbation forced pieces of rural identity/attitudes that demand self-sufficiency and pride to take a back seat in order to survive. Still, authors wonder how permanent these changing attitudes are and if historical
patterns of rural political attitudes toward social safety net programs will persist as life adjusts to a new normal following COVID-19’s initial outbreak (Farrell et al 2020).

As it is, the United States government operates within a system of cyclical economic and social hierarchies. Those with the most money and power (the superrich or corporations, for example) often utilize their resources to influence those with authority to make decisions acting in their favor. This can take the form of funding political campaigns or super PACs, funding or representing certain cultural issues, and even lobbying (investing money and influence into favorable policy). Wealth gives spenders leverage to restructure the economy in their favor via things like low tax rates and underinvestment in policy and programming aimed at promoting social and economic equity. These investments perpetuate the structural constraints that work to reduce the likelihood that those with state power will act in opposition to the will of the elite capitalist; this sheds light on why, so often, politicians tend to pursue policies and rhetoric that act primarily in favor of capital rather than of humanity.

Necessary to accomplish this agenda is the evaluation of society in terms of its overall stability and whether or not the working class is subdued enough to allow for their continued oppression. These things inform business decisions and investments, which contribute to business confidence. Business confidence considers only politics that may interfere with the economic market (Mettler 2018). Businesses will rise and fall with various levels of political mobilization and only take real interest in short-term interests of capital. Links between reformist politics (higher levels of unemployment, redistribution of wealth to the poor, improved social services) and business inflation directly or indirectly lead to a shift in income and profits toward the working class. Businesses attempt to prevent this by price inflation, keeping goods and service still equally out-of-reach for poor people as they were before. In response, the working
class has two options—reassure the business community both domestic and international by making clear its intention to pursue orthodox economic policy; or forge ahead with its reform program (Block 1987:17-18). If the government follows suit in political reform, it poses a threat to business confidence; why should businesses continue to invest in a market that does not support their best economic interest? This, in turn, results in parallel economic disparity, pairing high rates of unemployment with commodity shortages (similar to what is happening amidst the current Coronavirus pandemic). If the government decides to stand with the working-class proletariat and reform, familiar structures will undoubtedly crumble. If not, and the working-class rises up, either the repressive government will be voted out or removed militarily at the state’s command. All of this helps significantly to explain why governments are so hesitant and unlikely to pursue anti-business/capitalist policy (Block 1987), thereby maintaining stark social inequalities that favor the upper-class over the average American (and in effect, demographics like older white men who are not as intensely affected by these inequalities as racial minorities, immigrants, young people, and the poor—all tending to swing in favor of Democratic policy).

Further reflecting the government’s unfavorable reach to these groups is their party’s representation. Democratic representation in the United States government suffers because big democratic states have the same number of senators as small conservative ones. Even though California sends more representatives to Congress than states like Wyoming, they end up having the same number of senators. Many explain this inequality with partisan gerrymandering; Republicans gained control of many state legislatures in time for the most recent round of redistricting in the early 2010s, then drew odd-shaped boundaries that packed as many Democrats as possible into a handful of districts that they easily won, leaving the remaining districts with Republican majorities. Armed with sophisticated geospatial software and a large
budget, Republican operatives carefully drew maps that distributed Republicans as efficiently as possible across districts so as to win the maximum number of seats (Kang 2020; Rodden 2019). This is widely accepted, yet it is not wholly truthful. Democrats’ problem with votes and seats goes much deeper and is far more intricate. It is all in the polarized partisan geography; we must first understand why cities and Democrats came to be synonymous. Democrats are gaining support not only in big knowledge-hubs (like Seattle and San Francisco) but also in poor postindustrial cities like Detroit and Akron that are losing population. People displaced by the Industrial Revolution (often to cities, which moved much of America’s sustainability work out of the rural parts) faced a basic problem with the system of winner-take-all districts.

Since industrial workers were concentrated in urban working-class neighborhoods clustered around railways, warehouses, and factories, even if these parties performed very well and earned the support of vast majorities of workers, their votes would inevitably be concentrated in well under half of the winner-take-all legislative districts. Workers’ parties ended up “wasting” too many votes in their core districts; that is, winning by very large margins in some districts when those votes would have been more helpful elsewhere (illustrating inefficient geographic distribution of support). The party developed a coterie of incumbents who won their seats with a class-based appeal. In a lot of cases, the party’s most successful urban appointees then came to have a significant influence over its platform and reputation (Rodden 2019). Those leaders organized strikes that turned violent and earned their legislative seats in unification with efforts for organized labor by using the language of class conflict; the task of broadening the party’s class appeal became difficult while rigorous efforts to form alliances, blue-collar “skill” workers, small business owners, and farmers often lacked credibility.
In this way, Democrats gradually adopted the mission of expanding urban interests in the globalized knowledge economy while Republicans claimed the causes of exurban and rural manufacturing, agriculture, and natural resource extraction (Mettler 2018). Democrats were influenced by their urban base to adopt progressive positions on racial and social issues and Republicans assumed the conservative positions of the rural base. Each party became associated with clear positions on these issues, a new set of educated urban and suburban dwellers became Democrats, and a new set of exurban and rural traditionalists became Republicans.

Starting in the 1980s, American cities have become increasingly defined by their residents’ level of education (Mettler 2018; Anyon 2014). While manufacturing has become increasingly geographically dispersed in nonmetropolitan areas, where costs tend to be lower than in cities, the knowledge economy—along with new college graduates, specialized high-end service jobs, and ultimately wealth and prosperity—has become increasingly concentrated in high-education urban centers (Betz, Partridge, and Fallah 2016; Berry and Glaeser 2005). This happened because new knowledge hubs (big cities with strong manufacturing histories) already had a strong Democratic base. Democrats have traditionally supported science funding and financial market deregulation as well as capital gains taxes. They also embraced free trade deals that seemed explicitly geared toward helping technology firms in the urban knowledge hubs, perhaps at the expense of increasingly low-skill manufacturing outside urban centers. The growing political cleavage based in economic sectors—pitting the urban/suburban knowledge economy against the exurban/rural manufacturing and natural resource sectors—crystallized with the Trump nomination. As a result, the already strong relationship between education, knowledge-economy employment, and Democratic voting grew even stronger in 2016 (Mettler 2018; Drutman 2017). Republicans gained support in exurban and rural areas struggling to
maintain manufacturing employment and the Democrats gained support in higher-density areas with significant knowledge-economy employment. The growing industry and education divide have contributed to the increasing geographic concentration of Democrats (Mettler 2018; Anyon 2014). Democrats are clustered not only in impoverished post-manufacturing city centers, but increasingly in growing, affluent city centers as well as in small knowledge-economy hubs. Democrats continued to grow their urban support by associating themselves with a variety of new urban issues such as race—the realignment of which laid the foundation for the politicization of virtually any human rights issue and even religion.

With racial minorities now “othered” from rural and small-town whites even further with the geographic divide, cultural and religious differences became more about ethical misalignment than a variance in lifestyles. These politicized moral judgements flamed feelings of ethnocentrism as cultural divides became synonymized with personal, cultural, and moral failure on the parts of non-white, non-rural, and non-Christian enclaves. And as a result, the world of politics began to take the shape of larger, more explosive cultural issues that asserted the difference between “us” and “them” for every participant of the political process. Along with the various personal and cultural consequences of such developing mindsets, this political shift presented some significant issues for Democrats that have persevered into modern-day politics.

When winner-take-all districts are drawn on top of highly concentrated geography (urban Pittsburgh and Philadelphia vs. rural everything else), Democrats end up with a highly inefficient distribution of support across districts (Rodden 2019; Mettler 2018; Anyon 2014). Where they win, they win by excessive margins; where they lose, the margin is relatively narrow. As a result, their seat share falls well below their vote share—sometimes even when they win statewide majorities. Because of the scale and geographic arrangement of Pennsylvania’s cities, the
Democrats’ problem is severe when districts are very small—as in the state house of representatives—and even worse when they are medium-sized, as in the state senate. But small cities string together in such a way that the Democrats’ geography problem is less pronounced at the larger scale of US congressional districts (Rodden 2019; Mettler 2018). This issue can be blamed, in part, on partisan gerrymandering. Rural and exurban areas are also far more heterogenous than urban areas, which means cross-cultural exposure suffers greatly. But is this poor Democratic distribution across districts due so much to intentional gerrymandering by commissioners, or because of their residential geography? When the demand for housing near manufacturing and industrialization grew, urban areas became more densely populated, creating densely packed housing units. When manufacturing base shrank and economic activity died down, population loss proved much slower than expected. Even as cities deindustrialized and the manufacturing-oriented urban proletariat (described by Engels) faded away, the affordable working-class housing from an earlier era has continued to attract poor migrants from other cities, regions, or countries, and the spatial distribution of income described by Engels remains. It is no longer necessary to live so close to factory jobs, as employment in the service sector is spread throughout the city and surrounding suburbs, and many manufacturing jobs have moved to the sub/exurban periphery. Yet the poor tend to be quite geographically clustered, often in the old working-class neighborhoods; the wealthiest residents often live in suburbs. This is explained in part by “flight from blight” (Rodden 2019) which argues that poor people had little choice but to live in the city center initially and the wealthy chose to flee the social problems associated with the urban poor. Additionally, wealthy individuals often move to suburbs because they have a preference for more land and larger houses. Even further, transportation technology is important in that cars are often too expensive for the poor, who are better off in residential
settings near public transportation. This results in post-manufacturing cities being characterized by a remarkably similar economic and political geography; the city center is dominated by some mix of poor people, immigrants, and minorities—and they vote overwhelmingly for the party/parties of the Left. This creates districts with either Democratic supermajorities or just smaller Republican minorities. However, those in the urban core neighborhoods of post-manufacturing cities (minorities, young people, renters, and the poor) are far less likely to vote. But no matter how district plans are drawn up, Democrats almost always end up with poor geographic support distribution which affects how traditionally-liberal groups and demographics—racial/ethnic minorities, the young, and the poor, for example—are represented in government priorities. These things, of course, are felt in more concentration for low-income and minority communities. Communities that are subjugated by race and class are governed less through the provision of rights and benefits and representation but rather through “coercion, containment, repression, surveillance, regulation, predation, discipline and violence” (Mettler 2018).

The reasons that the United State government’s priorities have come to favor certain locations and demographics can be traced back to pre-industrial rural exodus where folks previously earning a living doing skill-based labor not requiring higher education fled to developing urban areas where the need for college degrees increased with the knowledge-sector. Geospatial inequality increased, creating a significant wealth gap and allowing the superrich to influence the economy (and therefore social systems as well) in their favor. Narratives of rural identity championing self-sufficiency and a resentment toward those who utilize government safety net programs perpetuated a deep divide in American politics while the Democratic and Republican parties continued to align themselves with the poles of contentious policy—all while
the wealthy elites in the state continue to manipulate the United States government in their favor in order to maintain social inequality that awards them their status.

**Resulting Rural Adversity and its Consequences**

Rurality and adversities of the rural lifestyle can be understood through the lenses of various social inequalities plaguing these areas. All intricately intertwined with one another, issues may be better understood broken down by their individual problems and then tied together following separate problem analysis. Issues afflicting rural America can be traced back to the following main systemic inequalities: a glaring lack of public transportation and infrastructure; various health disparities; lack of education; and poverty, which infiltrates and influences virtually every other adversity associated with rural places. However, this is an area glaringly lacking in empirical evidence even though adversity’s presence in rural areas is widely understood by scholars and those who live there. It is here that understanding rural spaces relies more on reflective literature in conjunction with more scientific observation as researchers attempt to contextualize rural hardship and its place in identity formation.

Among these understood adversities is the issue of geographic spread and its effects on areas with notoriously poor systems of public transportation. Spatial inequalities between rural and urban areas illustrate unique challenge for residents of rural places when needing to get from one place to another (Logan 2012). It is often the case that people must rely on personal vehicles for transportation in rural America. Systems like trains, subways, buses, taxis, ride share services (such as Uber, Lyft, or bike shares) are not typically as prevalent or available in many rural spaces. In fact, there are several places where pedestrian-friendly accommodations are difficult to come by as well—things like bike lanes, bike racks, and kept-up sidewalks are resources forfeited due to a lack of infrastructural funding in rural America (Cramer 2016; Logan 2012).
How, then, are rural residents supposed to get where they need to go? Assuming one can afford all the expenses necessary for vehicle ownership, driving everywhere is still inevitable. If not, people may either become reliant on someone else who *does* own a vehicle (and therefore be at the mercy of their schedule and generosity) or their options for everything—including food, employment, and medical care—are constrained by what facilities are within walking distance from their residence, which often is not many. Many rural places have such facilities miles and miles apart, likely with no walkable space other than the side of a country road. Issues of rural poverty are exacerbated by poor infrastructure because employees are penalized if they succumb to the risks of unreliable transportation (tardiness, absence, or an inability to travel for work), which may result in employment termination and the reliance on unemployment benefits as well as other social safety net programs. Those in extreme poverty, perhaps facing homelessness, are also further disadvantaged by spatial inequality. Urban centers often have more resources available to transient folks, including food drives and walkable shelters; in rural areas, these things are harder to find (Murdoch and Pratt 1997). This is likely in part, not only to a lack of sufficient social program funding, but also to the invisibility of homelessness perpetuated by habits of “couch surfing” in lieu of living on busy urban streets.

Consequently, then, many rural residents are confined to convenience for their food consumption (Morton and Blanchard 2007). While grocery stores do, of course, exist in rural spaces, they are often located either in small urban hubs (sharing zip codes with more spread-out rural residences), allowing for more walkability for those living in town but still miles away from those living farther in the outskirts; or they are located miles away from both nearby urban hubs and the more isolated residents. Either way, convenience becomes not only a commodity, but a necessity for some rural people. Things like Dollar Stores and gas stations that are more scattered
throughout such communities offer geographically closer options for food and drink—and they are more affordable for those dealing with poverty and food insecurity. People can qualify for social safety net programs like food stamps (the Supplementary Nutrition Assistance Program and Women, Infants, and Children programs, for example) and Medicaid (a joint federal and state program providing healthcare to low-income recipients); but those who live just above the federal poverty line often find themselves missing out on such eligibility and struggling to get by without them. Both camps of folks often find themselves turning to these more affordable options for nourishment, but these places stock food with high concentrations of preservatives, sugars, and sodium; fresher options like produce and organic selections are not available here.

As a result, rural Americans face a slew of health disparities disproportionately to their urban counterparts. According to the Center for Disease Control (2015), rural Americans are more likely to die from heart disease, cancer, chronic lower respiratory disease, opioid overdose, and stroke than their urban counterparts. Additionally, geographic spatial inequality affects emergent medical transport to spread-out hospitals from too few ambulance services stationed many miles away from the residents in their coverage areas, putting rural residents at higher risk of death and subjection to various environmental hazards (such as driving longer distances in inclement weather). But even when people can obtain the medical care they need, many find themselves struggling to pay for it. Rural places have higher concentrations of people in poverty and without health insurance (Ziller 2014). It is partially due to this that people often do not seek appropriate mental health care either. Instead, it is not uncommon in poor rural areas with limitations of geography, career opportunity, and resource availability for community members to seek coping mechanisms like drugs and alcohol in order to live with things like the trauma of
uncertainty, despair, overwhelming medical issues, and domestic abuse resulting from poor management of these prevalent stressors (Jackson 2019; Vance 2016).

Another significant adversity plaguing rural areas in the United States is educational inequity. “Rural schools, as institutions that prepare youth for the challenges they will face in adulthood, play a fundamental role—perhaps, the fundamental role—in fostering this resilience and securing a sustainable future for rural America” (Tieken, Casey, and San Antonio 2016: 132). While research shows trends of increasing educational attainment in rural areas, the number of residents with at least a bachelor’s degree is still less than those living in urban spaces (USDA). Several factors could be responsible for the urban-rural college completion gap. Education is often associated with higher levels of wealth regardless of one’s geographic region (though there are still slight variations within regions themselves, particularly among different racial groups), and rural household income trails urban household income by roughly 20 to 25 percent (USDA), making higher education following high school a more significant economic obstacle for those living in rural areas with lower income. Poverty comes into play here, too; not finishing school (or even pursuing higher education at all) may lead to lower paying jobs with little to no potential for upward mobility, which then continues the cycle of generational poverty and will stunt opportunities for educational growth for one’s children in the future. Those who do obtain their college degree often decide to migrate to urban areas that offer higher wages, more jobs with opportunities to utilize their education and skills, and more open-mindedness. Carr and Kefalas (2011) refer to this as “the rural brain drain,” which illustrates the youth exodus to more urban places in the interest of social and financial opportunities, leaving their rural homes missing out on the economic fruits of their higher educational status (such as adding more
higher-paying employment sectors requiring college degrees and the wealthier people who follow such sectors).

Another challenge faced by rural education is representation in crucial policy and its informative research efforts. Rural schools are often left out of policy, and when they are included, they are often prescribed a narrative of “backwoods,” “backwards,” and stupid (Tieken, Casey, and San Antonio 2016:133) that is most accurately and consistently reported within pragmatic reflective literature rather than reports generated by empirical testing. However, without such observation, researchers would have even less to contextualize beliefs and behaviors of rural youth and their lifepaths as identity and aspirations develop. Through reflective literature, researchers may familiarize themselves with the issue of conceptual misalignment when discussing and measuring rural youth aspiration, which is often problematically and inaccurately conceived. Approaches to any youth’s educational development is almost always exclusively centered around three main aspects: career goals, choices about further education, and decisions about where they might want to live (Tieken, Casey, and San Antonio 2016). Along with the constraints that accompany only focusing on these aspirations—particularly educational and residential aspirations—they tend to be evaluated too narrowly anyway. Binaries of “high (i.e., college or beyond) or low (i.e., any plans aside from college), here (i.e., in this rural community) or away (i.e., anywhere else)” congest any in-between aspirations and contribute ultimately to a stark “us versus them” mentality which will be discussed in further detail later. Absent from this narrow understanding of rural youth aspirations are more personal ethical questions that influence a person’s life choices, consideration of broader civic and community needs, and the acknowledgement of relational and spiritual desires that come with a life of purpose and meaning (Tieken, Casey, and San Antonio 2016). Also
absent from youth education mentoring and empirical rural research are the complex dimensions that the rural context found in more reflective literature adds to youth aspirations both in and out of school, further perpetuating a one-dimensional version of rural America and sabotaging its potential for better policy recipience.

*The Role of Misinformation Spread in Political Communication and the Deployment of Rural Identity*

Integral to current political discourse is political communication. Especially in the age of modern technology, political communication takes a wide variety of forms. Regardless of which form, political communication is highly influenced by one’s partisan alignment (Knobloch-Westerwick, Mothes, and Polavin 2017), which we have already established is greatly influenced by one’s sense of identity and associated ethical standing—especially in rural communities. As with any identity, there emerges a “deployment of ‘the rural’” in modern political communication which influences both larger-scale discourse and individual affirmations of one’s belief system.

For example, rural spaces are disproportionately affected by educational adversity (Pew Research Center; Mettler 2018; Frank 2005). Oftentimes, critical thinking skills are encouraged more rigorously in higher educational institutes than those of high school or some technical training programs. As a result, lack of access to educational resources leaves people unable to assess the information they consume as critically as they should, especially regarding difficult and complex political issues. Additionally, studies show that people generally prefer to consume information that affirms one’s existing biases (Ribeiro et al 2017). This added component makes fact-checking even more difficult in the face of modern technology and social media which utilizes algorithmic targeting to engage its audience using “filter bubbles” whose objective is to show users things (not just political news—videos, photos, ads, etc.) to which they have already,
and are therefore are predicted to, respond positively (Ribeiro et al 2017). More simply put, the more a person uses social media (platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter) and any kind of searches tracked by technological algorithms, the more targeted and affirming media they are likely to consume. Rural identity and educational adversity are pieces of how “the rural” is deployed in modern political communication. Also, at play are the targeted “filter bubbles” generated by technological algorithms that feed impoverished rural consumers reaffirming media that further reinforces beliefs about deeply divisive and explosive cultural issues. This kind of filtered consumption is even further perpetuated by joining certain social media groups, particularly those with messages of nationalism, pride, and strong opinions on cultural issues (such as anti-abortion support pages, All/Blue Lives Matter support pages, or religion-based groups, for example). This phenomenon, of course, is not unique to rural folks nor conservatives; however, when examining the deployment of “the rural” in political communication, it is important to note not only the role of the process at work, but also the role of the information being consumed by rural Americans as a result of such a process. To be further examined in the deployment of “the rural” in political communication is the inevitable spread of misinformation and its implications on the current political climate—particularly that of rural America.

“Fake news” is defined as fabricated information that mimics news media content in form but not in organizational process or intent; it lacks editorial norms and rigorous processes ensuring accuracy and credibility of information (Lazer et al 2018). It exists alongside other inaccurate news mediums such as misinformation (false or misleading) and disinformation (information made purposely to deceive people and spread quickly). When assessing the political and societal impact of fake news, it is important to note its uniquely pervasive and pernicious characteristics of both benefiting from and undermining credibility of legitimate news sources. It
is noted that several outlets and their followers (Facebook, for example) prefer the term “false news” because “fake news” is often associated with political warfare (Lazer et al 2018); it is important to consider the avoidance behavior at work here, actively disregarding the political implications and avoiding critical thought. Technological advancement and the rise of the Internet has made the spread of fake news and misinformation much easier, as false outlets have easier/free entry to their platform and the general public has greater access to its spread. The Internet has also allowed for a lot of discourse regarding distrust of the media, which is a large proprietor of the spread of misinformation and offers a sense of solidarity with its believers (Lazer et al 2018). This media distrust skyrocketed to an all-time high during the 2016 presidential election (even further exacerbated by the global coronavirus pandemic in 2020), particularly among the rural political right and focused on the “misrepresentation” of Republican candidate Donald Trump. This fueled his rise to the top of the rural American working class, as it targeted individuals with fewer educational resources and who had been significantly politically underserved. Vance (2016) describes a true and tangible distrust in the media (192) that helped contribute to ignorance and its resulting belief systems. He says specifically, “With little trust in the press, there’s no check on the Internet conspiracy theories that rule the digital world… Everything the media tells us is a lie—” except those sources which confirm one’s already-skewed understandings of social and economic issues that then inform political opinions with real societal consequences. “This isn’t some libertarian mistrust of government policy, which is healthy in any democracy. This is a deep skepticism of the very institutions of our society. …We can’t trust the evening news. We can’t trust our politicians. Our universities, the gateway to a better life, are rigged and against us” (193).
Due to this parallel geo- and sociopolitical evolution, the divides between political parties and networks have expanded and, as a result, created more homogenous networks that reduce acceptance of alternative views and boost the likelihood of accepting ideologically compatible news (Lazer et al 2018) and creating “news deserts—” a community, either rural or urban, with limited access to credible and comprehensive news and information (Abernathy 2020). These can easily become political echo chambers. Polarized “echo chamber communities” are more susceptible to the spread of misinformation, fueling both desirability bias (assigning more weight to agreeable information) and confirmation bias (seeking out favorable information) (Tappin et al 2017). On the other hand, misinformation plays a key role in creating polarized groups (Ribeiro et al 2017). People have justifications for what they think, and these justifications make sense to them and are steeped in their personal sense of who they are in the world. Identities people use to make sense of politics are constantly evolving and change salience in response to the context. In this view of public opinion, bottom-up and top-down processes are occurring at the same time and influence one another; elites mobilize public opinion and benefit from the divisiveness they create—they tap into preexisting sentiments and values they find it advantageous to activate, and market research/campaign consultants try to figure out what will successfully resonate and ignite dormant opinions (Lazer et al 2018).

Another interaction of these phenomena is when consumers mistakenly classify real news as sources of misinformation simply due to ideological divergence, not because it contains actual false or imprecise facts. This creates alternative and divisive narratives of what is actually fake, which changes with one’s political ideology and makes it harder to distinguish between biased and false information. Social media bots (intelligent adaptational technology often used for generating automatic responses, advocating ideas, and inflating follower counts) posing as active
human users also propagate specific ideology, perpetuating the spread of this misinformation and therefore increasing total view counts as well as the integration of misinformation into the general algorithm that shows users relevant content. This filters into a cycle of desirability bias in one’s media consumption which has large political implications, especially when considering this finding alongside discussions of “fake news” and evidence showing an unwillingness among the public to research information inconsistent with their worldview and instead, publicly label it as misinformation. As seen in notes regarding fake news, pieces specifically tagged as “fake news” often showcase a great deal of political polarization in comments and sharers as well as significant circulation throughout mediums like social media (Tappin et al. 2017).

*Rural Identity and Political Attitudes*

Peter Berger’s theory of reality construction states that habitualization—repeated behaviors and interactions in society—is responsible for humans recognizing social patterns as objective, correct, and worthy of internalizing (Berger and Luckmann 1996). In other words, society and its influence are largely habit. Drawing from this perspective, the development of rural identity likely results in part from the repeated patterns of adversity faced by rural areas for many years in addition to rural folks’ repeated patterns of perception and consciousness of such hardship and similarly plagued “communities” who habitually respond in certain ways. These patterns may contribute to patterns of conceptualization regarding one’s identity and place in society that become passed down through generations and infiltrate communities of similar or relational identity. For example, those in rural spaces learn from each other by being socialized by each other—such socialization and habitualization is not isolated only within relational units. Therefore, patterns of adversity in rural spaces serve to reinforce identities held by rural folks as victims of inequality, hardship, and elitist ignorance.
These systemic and spatial inequalities of rural life factor into rural political attitudes in significant and complex ways. Part of the rural lifestyle and mindset is a narrative of identity (Falk and Pinhey 1978)—stark individualism and self-sufficiency, partially stemming from traditions of hunting and/or ideas of simplicity and minimalism—found consistently within bodies of more reflective literature as researchers document their own experiences and observations from extended time spent in various rural areas. There exists a pride in rebellious roots, partially spilling over from the United States’ secession from Europe, therefore breeding ethics and identity tied strongly to independence and freedom, that often may translate into nationalism (Ashwood 2018). The pride associated with the ability to “pull oneself up by their bootstraps,” live independently, and overcome the adversity dealt to them can have negative effects on those rural folks too proud to ask for or utilize the assistance they may need—especially if it comes in the form of government-funded safety net programs that require no qualification prerequisites other than a certain income threshold (unlike funding such as farming subsidies, which necessitate action and labor). This plays directly into the idea of the deserving poor and the undeserving poor (Levine 2002; Gilens 2000). Part of identity politics means a transcendence from merely political ideology into core personal principles with much stronger roots and implications that end up surfacing as habitual beliefs and behaviors after generations of passed down knowledge and socialization (Berger and Luckmann 1996). Politics under threat is not just politics—it is often one’s core sense of self and being. This goes hand-in-hand with poverty and its traumatizing effects on those who grew up with food or housing insecurity and the belief that their personal worth was dependent on what they could contribute to society (i.e., hardworking, tax paying citizenship).
Another significant part of rural identity politics is the acute awareness of how they are perceived in other parts of the country and even the world (Ashwood 2018; Cramer 2016). Many rural people are aware of the stereotypes assigned to them by non-rurals and, as some may conceptualize them, liberal elites (Ashwood 2018)—ignorant, ugly, poor, unhealthy, radical, gun toting, and even bigoted in certain instances. Part of this identity, then, becomes an acceptance and/or reclamation of these titles and oftentimes a desire to “stick it” to their persecutors; such rebellion becomes a necessary reality constructed from many years of repeated marginalization and degradation that has resulted in habitualized identity (Berger and Luckmann 1996). But what are the major aspects of such rural identity?

According to Cramer’s (2016) thorough reflective analysis of rural space, rural politics is about rural consciousness: (1) perceptions of power or who discusses what/who decides what to discuss, (2) respect to perceptions of values and lifestyles, and (3) perceptions of resources or who gets what. It is the term used to describe a strong sense of identity as a rural person combined with a strong sense that rural areas are the victims of injustice: the sense that rural areas do not get their fair share of power, respect, or resources and that rural folks prefer lifestyles and ethical standards that differ fundamentally from those of city people and breeding an “us versus them” mentality. Such a mentality even infiltrates the identity of those with minimal contact of such perceived “outsiders”—further illustrating Berger’s (1996) theory of habitualization and reality construction.

Also heavily observed through important reflective literature, American politics is becoming increasingly polarized due to “arbitrary” explosive cultural issues such as abortion, same-sex marriage, and gun control rather than its past swaying issues of economic and social policy (Frank 2005; Hunter 1991); instead of political opinions focusing on fiscal and social
issues, the political pendulum now swings most dramatically in favor of opposition to these explosive cultural issues, redirecting anger toward “liberal elites.” Rather than a spectrum of liberal and conservative, there seems to be more of a spectrum of moderates and conservatives that dominate the political discourse of rural Republicans (sure, there are rural liberals, but not in such numbers with such force as the moderates and conservatives). Frank (2005) and Hunter (1991) suggest that this may be the new direction of American politics—with fiscal conservativism as a fulcrum and hot-button cultural issues as swaying points in either direction in this explosive political warfare.

The Democratic party systematically failed the rural working class by directing their efforts to socio-cultural wedge issues—electing elite and educated socially liberal people to government positions in an effort to neglect the blue-collar working class. Frank (2005) suggests that the conservative coalition is the most prominent in American politics—one side of which focuses on social and cultural issues, and the other on economic and fiscal regulation. The economic part of this coalition has been fiscally rewarding for them only, while simultaneously economically hurting the social coalition. This helps explain the conservativism of the rural poor who are primarily radicalized by hot-button cultural issues that never pick up speed after the election anyway, conceptualized by Frank (2005) as cultural battles that are nearly impossible to win. Perhaps the staunch commitment to these impossible cultural battles are why cultural rural conservatives continue to vote Republican even though it is economically not in their best interest to do so. This, coupled with a lack of resources and education, contributes to the poor Republican (particularly rural) downfall where Republican elects capitalize off of these cultural conservatives’ agenda to get into office and then turn their attention to more mundane economic issues that often go over the heads of those who propelled them into power in the first place. In
this vein, the rise of Donald Trump in 2016 excited many rural conservative Americans, as his emotionally charged and persuasive style resonated with a group of conservative folks who felt left behind by the liberal wave of “political correctness”—the avoidance of expression perceived as exclusive, marginalizing, or insulting to socially disadvantaged groups. Trump appealed to people’s emotional self-interest, which may be the reason for paradoxical voting.

There is little evidence supporting that rural areas are receiving fewer resources, but it is widely “known” and understood, and you can find examples in real-world application where it may be more difficult to measure resources empirically. Again, the importance of more reflective literature can be found here as empiricism falls short; without authorship of personal reflections of considerable time spent in rural spaces, much of the rural adversity stemming from disproportionate resource allocation would remain largely unseen and, therefore, unaddressed.

Rural areas have been dying a slow painful death for decades and their attempts to adjust to changing expectations of them and protecting themselves from changing macro environments. Rural consciousness also finds itself with attitudes of distance from universities (Jaschik 2018; Frank 2005)—ideas of social class and attitudes toward education are intertwined—liberal elites who are overpaid and challenging their way of life. People feel like they are being punished for working hard because the more money they make, the more they must pay in taxes; because of this, they feel like they can’t reach the same milestones or resources as people who “get government handouts.” In other words, they get rewarded for being lazy, which is something viewed as highly disrespected (Gilens 2000). Support for small/limited government is also very important; but rather than findings this in arguments supporting small government, it is found in arguments against big government (Gilens 2000; Frank 2005). Race is tied in with the idea of hard work and the deserving/undeserving poor (Gilens 2000). Small towns exercise a sort of
ownership over blaming the government for their and the nation’s problems (Hummon 1990). That creates a certain disdain for public employees, painting them as undeserving because their work does not fall in the same sector of respected work that blue-collar workers or non-public employees do. People who have struggled to get by their whole lives associate their economic circumstances as inseparable from their identification as people of a certain type of place. They screen out the idea that public workers could be like them, but rather as an out-group of urban, wealthier people. Given this view, it is not difficult to see where a disdain and distrust of government and public officials stems. Anti-government (anti-state) leaders can emerge from this (Scott Walker and Donald Trump types), gaining power and notoriety on the basis of being non-politicians and therefore “of and for” the people rather than supporting the agenda of “liberal elites” that make up the public service sector of government.

Within this mentality, there emerges a sense of a duty to “take care of your own—” whether that be your family, your local community, or some earned network of the two—and to all outsiders, good luck. This loyalty is seen in other rural communities as well; though there seems to be some bit of cognitive dissonance in understanding exactly how far the notion of “one’s own” extends. For example, many rural people would be (and have been) far more willing to donate their time, money, and supplies to neighbors, close friends, and those with whom they identify in some way than to contribute their tax dollars to social programs helping these same groups of vulnerable people (Carlson-Thies 1997)—community members on welfare, homeless locals wandering the streets so frequently they’ve earned themselves nicknames, and local children launched into foster care systems due to the many covert effects of generational poverty.

*How Rural Adversity Shows Up and Operates in Rural and Small-Town Central Pennsylvania*
Issues of rural adversity show up in unique ways across the country and especially so in small towns and rural parts of central Pennsylvania. As of 2020, central Pennsylvania counties reported slight population decline with racial distribution of over 90 percent white; Black, mixed race, Asian, and all other racial categories each make up only 4 percent of current residents (FocusCentralPA 2020). Of this population, only 40 percent of residents have educational credentials exceeding a high school diploma and the median household income is just over $58,000 (FocusCentralPA 2020). At first glance, these numbers do not appear terribly uncommon nor even concerning; however, several things crucial to understanding adversity in central Pennsylvania are missing from this report.

Included in this county-level analysis are four counties (Appendix 1) that house major hospitals and universities (two of which are privatized and therefore very expensive to attend)—institutions that may skew central Pennsylvania data in the direction of higher educational attainment, higher household income, more financial assets, and number of white-collar versus blue-collar workers. For example, the median household income for all central Pennsylvania counties (Mifflin, Centre, Snyder, Union, Northumberland, Montour and Columbia) combined is reported as $58,232. However, Centre, Snyder, Union, and Montour Counties all have median household incomes nearing $60,000 while counties like Northumberland and Mifflin who lack such community assets have median household incomes of less than $50,000 (US Census 2020). Illustrative of this discrepancy, data from the US Census (2019) shows Northumberland County’s median household income as nearly 40 percent less than the national median and 21 percent less than the state of Pennsylvania while counties housing universities and hospitals come in at 25 percent less than the national numbers and 3-5 percent less than the state’s. In this same vein, central Pennsylvania counties show higher rates of poverty than the state as a whole
as well as exceeding the national poverty rate by several percentage points (US Census 2020) (Appendix 2). Federal funding to the few public universities in central Pennsylvania deters adequate funding for more locally based community colleges (Kahlenburg 2015), making it more difficult for those students to get a competing education with other university students who live and invest only temporarily in the area. Additionally, all the rental properties utilized by temporary student tenants end up generating less revenue in property taxes as landlords receive tax breaks that non-renting homeowners do not (US News and World Report 2010).

So, while central Pennsylvania looks more well-off on the surface, institutions like hospitals and universities tend to draw pockets of residents that are not necessarily as representative of the regional population as such surface-level reports would lead on. Among the more common workers of these institutions such as administrative, sanitation, and other general staff, hospitals and universities also draw doctors, surgeons, professors, and other high-ranking positions that generate annual incomes much higher than that of the average central Pennsylvania resident. Higher incomes mean more financial freedom and ability to invest in the futures of younger generations than others in the area with lower incomes. Major issues of rural adversity probably would not affect this population as significantly as the average central Pennsylvanian, therefore potentially skewing the area’s need for government aid for various programs and initiatives like Medicaid, education, and transportation (PA State Budget and Finances 2016).

Further indicative of discrepancies in socioeconomic status are reports of homeowners perhaps somewhat influenced by these wealthier pockets of academic and medical professionals as well as a myriad of other factors. As of 2019, Northumberland and Union Counties showed a homeownership rate of roughly 71 percent; Snyder County showed 73 percent; and Columbia County showed 68 percent (US Census). Comparative to the Pennsylvania-wide homeownership
rate of only 69 percent (US Census), these counties appear fairly well off. But again, such numbers must be considered in proper context. While homeownership rates appear to align, or even compete, with statewide numbers, the median value of occupied households fell significantly below that of the state (Data USA 2019) and even lower compared to national numbers. Combined with other adversity factors that affect one’s ability to buy property or own a home (or multiple and draw passive income by renting), it is important to recognize that rental opportunities are not as abundant in rural areas, and rural counties are beset with higher concentrations of older residents in which rates of homeownership are higher due to a much healthier housing market several decades ago. Recalling the phenomenon of the “rural brain drain” (Carr and Kefalas 2011) in which younger generations are migrating to more densely populated areas in search of opportunities absent from their rural roots, higher concentrations of elderly folks, along with pockets of more highly-paid and highly-educated professionals, create depictions of rural Pennsylvania’s socioeconomic standing that are not entirely accurate next to larger statewide or national numbers.

Understanding Larger Trends of Sampled Counties

The sampled counties represent part of the northern Appalachian region (Appalachian Regional Commission 2020). As such, it is important to understand certain demographic, economic, and political trends throughout recent years in order to further contextualize the importance of these areas in sociopolitical research.

As previously noted, Appalachia struggles with more adversity and fewer resources than other rural areas and America as a nation. According to the Appalachian Regional Commission, per capita income in Appalachia was 18 percent lower in 2009 than that of the national average. Appalachia receives 31 percent fewer federal expenditures per capita, topping barely more than
$11,000 in 2010. That same year, salaries and wages in these areas were only 51 percent of the national average, and the allotment of loans and insurance made up only 34 percent of national numbers. Further contributing to understanding Appalachian regional demographics are the various industry shifts in the last 20 years; notably, Appalachia saw the biggest growth from industries with the lowest employment concentrations (finance/insurance/real estate, technological services, and health/social services) and, conversely, the biggest declines from industries with higher employment concentration (manufacturing, farming, and utilities work). Although, one industry seems to be the exception; across the region, the mining industry has grown approximately 40 percent despite the lagging employment growth and resulting harder-hitting economic recessions since 2000 (Appalachian Regional Commission 2020; Data USA 2019; American Community Survey 2020). Perhaps explaining some population shifts in the observed counties discussed later, mining may be one of the primary draws to northern Appalachia even as the area struggles to reach economic parity with the rest of the nation while public and private financial investments do not keep pace with regional levels of need. All this helps to contextualize more detailed demographic information of the four sampled counties.

In addition to income, data outlining housing demographics, broadband Internet access (which, in these areas, falls below national non-Appalachian rural areas by nearly 5 percent, according to the Appalachian Regional Commission and the American Community Survey), and changes in population all help to paint clearer pictures of observation sites and therefore, better understand rural partisanship in these areas. According to the US Census Bureau, all observed counties except Northumberland showed population growth over the last 40 years. Northumberland County is the only observed area whose population declined in this time—by nearly 10 thousand residents, in fact (US Census). This was particularly interesting because
larger trend data suggests that the net migration responsible for rural population growth happens primarily in more densely populated rural areas; of the four observed counties, Northumberlander is the more densely populated county, but experienced the least amount of growth in this time frame. One could speculate that this is due to the notable growth in the mining industry and the educational institutions in the other three counties. Recall that Union, Snyder, and Columbia Counties are home to multiple accredited universities while also housing some of the area’s coal region. So, while net migration to these areas has decreased a bit since 2013 due to job loss in the oil and gas industries (Appalachian Regional Commission 2020; Data USA 2019), perhaps the population growth in Union, Columbia, and Snyder Counties can be attributed in part to such industry shift and influxes of less permanent student residents as home ownership is more localized farther from university student housing. Lacking relocation resources and changing birth/mortality rates may also be considered in this phenomenon.

All this is important to understand when grasping the operationalization of rural and small-town adversity in central Pennsylvania counties—institutionally-skewed or not. Without an accurate portrayal of the region’s need for social programs and government funding, central Pennsylvania suffers unique hardships that make it nearly impossible for the average resident to overcome. Made largely of small towns and pockets of rurality, central Pennsylvania clearly demonstrates the literature’s claims of rural adversity—educational inequity, inaccessible/underutilized infrastructure, and various health disparities that result from effects of generational poverty, “rural brain drain” (Carr and Kefalas 2011), and inadequate government aid.

Such context proves important to better understand the various political affiliation trends over the years. While each observed county has a prolonged history of conservative preference,
data from the Federal Election Commission suggests trends of changing party affiliation that largely mirror one another (Data USA 2019). Since 2000, Republican affiliation has seen a 14 percent increase in Northumberland County, a 3 percent increase in Snyder County, and a 9 percent increase in Columbia County (Data USA 2019; Best Places). Following inversely with the dip in Republican affiliation in 2008 (Obama’s first presidential win) and the spike in 2016 (Trump’s emergence), these counties saw declines in their Democratic party affiliation while conservativism continued to dominate these areas (Data USA 2019). Union County broke this mold slightly by showing slight decreases in Republican affiliation over the 20-year span (about 4 percent) and a slight increase in Democratic affiliation (about 5 percent) (Data USA 2019; Best Places); however, the dips and spikes found in affiliation trend data remain similar to those found in the other counties. The major difference is that, instead of the increase of Republican support and decrease in Democratic support changing so much that the numbers surpass their starting points in 2000, they level off more than numbers in Northumberland, Snyder, and Columbia Counties (Data USA 2019), creating a less drastic partisan split. Since Snyder County—home to a major private university and more healthcare facilities just like Union County—has the least notable party affiliation change, it could be speculated that these puzzling trends may be attributed to the uptick in liberalism associated with educational institutions and highly education populations. However, despite this partisan leveling, the sampled counties have held onto their conservative representation over the last several years. Northumberland and Columbia Counties are housed in Pennsylvania’s 9th Congressional District, which have elected Republican representatives consistently since 2008 despite the uptick of individual Democratic support around that time. The more liberal of the sampled counties—Snyder and Union, housed in the 10th Congressional District—have fluctuated only marginally more, switching from blue to red in
2010 and maintaining Republican representation ever since (Data USA 2019). And in cases where Democrats do claim small victories, they are often short lived and highly contested in rural counties; for example, Democratic Pennsylvania Senator Bob Casey Jr. elected in 2007 has notable negative presence in the sampled counties as both public and private affiliative signage (found in businesses and backyards) tout support, instead, for Republican Senator Pat Toomey. Even further, data from federal election results and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology Election Lab (2022) show, as understood by discrepancies between rural-urban electorate representation, a large majority of Republican support in all popular votes since at least 2000 in each of the observed counties as well as other, less densely populated areas (Data USA 2019). Regardless, the four observed counties reflect a significant conservative majority that has held steadfast over the last few decades and continues to inform much of the areas’ ideological presentation and, therefore, identity formation.

**RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY**

Multiple kinds of “rurality”—Appalachia, small towns, exurbs, and agricultural settlements—exist in Pennsylvania, making this state a worthy subject of sociopolitical investigation. This study’s sample will be drawn from residents of rural Appalachian Pennsylvania counties: Northumberland, Union, Snyder, and Columbia. Home to the various kinds of aforementioned rurality within Appalachia and located between two major urban areas (Philadelphia and Pittsburgh), these counties will provide a broad look into the rural lifestyle and offer insight into rural political attitudes throughout less densely populated parts of this political swing state. In this study, I will be utilizing ethnographic methodology to better understand the nuances of rural political attitudes in central Pennsylvania.
Blending In

Such research entails integrating networks in rural communities. An important, and sometimes overlooked, part of a thorough research design is the way in which the researcher may present themselves to the area and sample from which they are gathering data. Naturally, people begin forming opinions on others based off their presentation (Mullings 1999), and this is certainly something I had to consider when attempting to represent a group already perceived somewhat negatively by my research subjects. For this reason, “blending in” is an integral part of this research project’s design. Knowing one’s audience helps a researcher gain access to insider perspectives by gaining the trust of community and organizational gatekeepers—in this case, a person or people who control(s) access to information regarding others in their represented group (Mullings 1999; Weiss 1995). In areas with significant skepticism of the academic institution, it is important for a researcher to prove trustworthiness quickly and honestly to their research subjects. This can be done in a variety of ways, but notably through appearance and familiarity with colloquialisms (McGrath et al 2019; Le Dantec and Fox 2015; Mullings 1999). For example, showing up to a rural dive bar or café with intentions of interviewing staff about the area and the institutions “regular” customers may prove rather difficult should the researcher be dressed in clothing more suited for a formal business seminar or academic conference. To dress appropriately and blend in is to demonstrate understanding of local mores and folkways as well as narrow perceived gaps between one’s represented “elitist” institution and skeptical rural spaces. In this way, researchers can gain “temporary insider” status and gain respondents’ trust by presenting themselves as intellectual and cultural equals (Mullings 1999). However, in rural Pennsylvania, I am not a “temporary insider;” I grew up here and am very much in tune with the
cultural norms of the area which allowed me to build trusting relationships quickly with residents.

As the primary investigator, I presented myself in clothing appropriate for the establishment in which I conducted my research; for example, when I met with interviewees at a local diner or bar, I dressed more casually (i.e., not in suits or other formal attire) and when I met with subjects at a community meeting (such as a school board meeting), I dressed similarly to the attire I observed by others in attendance. These attires were one in the same—jeans, a t-shirt, sneakers, and sometimes a sweatshirt or jacket. Additionally, I followed conversational suit with my interviewees; for example, certain slang/colloquialisms (i.e., something being “all” to indicate that there is none left, phrases like “yeah well” and “in the road,” or “up/down the way”) or profanity served as a means for dialogic connection, and matching such language allowed me to communicate honestly and thoroughly with my subjects. Such conversational adaptation served as a way for my subjects to feel comfortable being genuine in their responses and organically engaging with me; I was careful not to explain any more than my research initiatives and not to communicate in a way where I may present as “teaching” the things we discuss. Specifically, I explained my intentions very plainly in conducting interviews and attending certain meetings and was careful to be as transparent as possible with my participants so as to appear relatable, honest, and worthy of their time. I did not, however, correct my subjects if they made an inaccurate statement or expressed interest in my personal expertise. Instead, I either continued listening and searching for the mechanisms behind such beliefs or reiterated that my purpose in speaking with people was to hear their perspective as wholly and deeply as possible—not to presume that my niche background knowledge made me any more qualified to speak about any subject more than they were. This was done extremely casually, meaning that I did not
present any official documentation explaining my research or subjects’ role within it; I simply explained briefly and informally while taking special care to answer any questions they had and providing adequate space for them to ask. Matching my subjects’ conversational style in this way served to build rapport between us and allow for a meaningful conversation about topics often considered controversial or uncomfortable, especially since I never revealed my own political attitudes. By taking extra care to build this kind of rapport with my interviewees, I presented myself as an interested peer rather than an academic elite of which rural folks are often skeptical.

**Recruiting**

Obtaining my sample required multiple efforts. One way I recruited interviewees was by reaching out to community figures found through various searches for neighborhood groups (school boards, girl/boy scout troops, neighborhood watch forums, local churches and associated outreach/study groups, owners of local small businesses, etc.). Making contact with organizations and their gatekeepers helped award the time and connections necessary to sell the reputation of the research objective and make its goals—ultimately, to help rural communities—relatable and important to my desired recruits. Another way I was able to recruit interview participants was by sitting in hangouts like diners, coffee shops, or bars and making connections with employees who are engaged and friendly with the “regular” patrons that go there. For example, there is a local “bar and grille” that hosts a regular early-morning breakfast crew who all ended up interviewing with me over a meal; the staff of this bar and grille served as a connection between patrons of the establishment and myself, as they are extremely friendly with one another and helped to facilitate my addition to their familiar network. Building rapport and interviewing the wait staff and bar tenders in this establishment and others like it helped
demonstrate my trustworthiness and my project’s worthiness to regular patrons who already have stronger relationships with these gatekeepers.

To thoroughly communicate my trustworthiness as a researcher, I also volunteered my time in these communities by working with organizations and asking them how I can best serve them. Volunteering with local organizations encompassed a variety of duties—setting up and tearing down meeting spaces, hanging fliers, sorting through (clothing and food) donations, providing water and supplies, and even attending protests. In total, I attended 20 meetings and events throughout the summer months of 2021; I was able to offer my services at some, while others served strictly as observational opportunities. Along with attending meetings and helping with events, I also engaged in multiple meaningful dialogues with members of goal-oriented organizations (i.e. labor unions and politically-motivated groups) regarding their reasoning for engaging and volunteering with such organizations. Dialogues like these encompassed things like commiseration with participants when their jobs were furloughed, when state and federal politics had a direct impact on their livelihoods or on those they loved, and even the undesirable state of people’s homes due to the exhaustion that accompanies everyday responsibilities for the average person. At times, people cried. Some yelled in anger. Some shook their heads and apologized to me for their home environment or for emotionally unloading on me while others were more composed and private. At some point in every interview, my participants were able to laugh with me. Regardless, folks were much more likely to open up in an otherwise uncomfortable political dialogue when we were able to engage in conversation more casually as people first and researcher-participant second.

My engagement with groups in this way demonstrated genuine care for the area and its residents as well as communicated sincerity in my motives for my research; it also helped to
make my efforts worthwhile to my subjects, ultimately building relationships and fostering trust between my subjects and me. And while this step was important in recruiting interviewees, it also helped to provide insight into the priorities of these communities and, therefore, afforded observational data and context to their political attitudes. Finally, as a way of more passive recruitment, I posted fliers and business cards around local businesses (with owners’ permission) with a streamlined pitch for my study (Appendix 3) and my contact information for local patrons to reach out of their own accord should they wish to be interviewed.

**Interviews and Observational Data**

This project’s goal is to analyze rural Pennsylvania’s political attitudes and the role of rural identity in such attitudes’ formation and sustenance. Although there is a large body of evidence exploring connections between socioeconomic status and political affiliation (Gramsci 1990; Hummon 1990; Mettler 2018), this research further investigates the effects of these interacting factors on real-life political policy in rural Pennsylvania as well as how cognitive biases and the spreading of misinformation influence political attitudes of the people that live there. The sample of this project includes residents of rural Pennsylvania—specifically from Northumberland, Union, Snyder, and Columbia Counties—over the legal voting age of 18 years.

This study’s data comes from in-depth interviews with residents of rural Pennsylvania—20 interviews total—drawn primarily from network multiplicity and snowball samples of connections made through relationships with various gatekeepers and word-of-mouth recruitment from my interviewees. Only 3 of my 20 participants were recruited completely randomly with the help of the flyers and business cards I left at various local businesses. No matter a participant’s age, all subjects in the sample share one crucial characteristic; they are “lifers”—people who have either grown up in central Pennsylvania and been here all their lives.
people who left the area and then returned, or people who have been here for the majority of their lives. By interviewing lifers exclusively, I was able to eliminate data from people with weaker ties to the area of interest. Lifers have a unique investment in the area that outsiders do not; many of my interviewees have families, raised children, have peers, work, recreate, and more in central Pennsylvania. Lifers also have paid local taxes into the area, and many have participated in local elections. Lifers are able to offer a perspective unique to them and only them; they have watched their home change, develop, and serve (or not serve) the community in which they are personally and professionally invested.

In addition to in-depth qualitative interviews, data was also collected by participating in and observing meetings and events held by local organizations. I attended 10 meetings—several of which I attended on multiple occasions—and 10 events facilitated by a variety of groups. From school board meetings to protests, local political activism, public outreach initiatives, and even independent militia organizing, I volunteered my time to groups located in central Pennsylvania whose purpose was to engage in some way with the community in which they operate. While attending these meetings and events, I collected observational data focusing on the way rural residents operationalized their political attitudes and priorities within their communities. This helped provide context to any interviews recruited from these groups as well as how political information is communicated between formal and informal parties in rural groups. And while non-political proceedings provided a breadth of contextual data, most of my interview participants were recruited at politically focused meetings/events. Only 6 of my interviewees were recruited utilizing snowball sampling methods outside of events I attended. Contact with these people was facilitated using social media platforms Facebook and Twitter as
well as personal cell phone numbers or email addresses either given to me by shared contacts in my network or obtained on folks’ public profiles.

Part of the process of getting to know lifers and their political attitudes included speaking to them about their existing knowledge base on certain political processes and policies, exploring interactions of misinformation consumption, confirmation bias, and cognitive dissonance by getting insight into their opinions of their perceived understanding of public spending and political issues. Interviews allow for more personal responses with well thought-out narrative data that would otherwise be filtered or constrained in surveys or questionnaires (Weiss 1995; Glaser 1992). Interviewing research subjects, especially on multiple occasions, encourages more detailed or holistic descriptions of various attitudes or perspectives, thought process descriptions, integration of multiple complex perspectives, event interpretation, the bridging of intersubjectivities, and the identification of additional variables for tweaking hypotheses for analysis (Weiss 1995). While I did not conduct any multiple-meeting interviews, I was able to attend multiple meetings for various local organizations and gather contextual observational data. Interviews garnered primarily generalized and issue-focused conversation, drawing from responses regarding aspects of one’s rural identity and how spending most of their lives in central Pennsylvania has informed the things they value and find important.

Data Collection Logistics

This project gained the approval of the West Virginia University Institutional Review Board (protocol number 2104300970) under the Flexibility Review Model on May 26, 2021. A letter of informed consent was approved by the IRB; however, I was granted permission to obtain oral consent rather than a formal signature due to concern of jeopardizing my rapport with my subjects.
Due to the ongoing pandemic and maximum adaptability of interviewee schedules, nearly 50 percent of interviews were conducted virtually or over the phone, though most did take place in-person. For those who preferred a virtual interview, I met with subjects using free video chatting software such as Facebook Messenger, Google Hangouts, and my university-issued Zoom license; these applications allowed subjects to meet with me with no time restriction and at no cost to them. Interviews were recorded on a private recording device and transcribed via Trint transcription software purchased with department-issued funds.

Some meetings and volunteering sessions were recorded, while others were either notated in real time and/or recounted shortly thereafter to optimize maximum recall of events. All observational data was used in conjunction with interview data in a method known as the “talk-in-interaction” approach often seen in conversation analysis (Oliver, Serovich, and Mason 2005), where both verbal and nonverbal data are considered to appropriately showcase the nuances of contention or discomfort often found in political conversation as well as the operationalization of rural identity in the deployment and interaction of political priorities and attitudes. Participants were sorted into partisan categories based off of their self-identification and the values they expressed.

Of the 20 interviews conducted, 8 came from Northumberland County, 6 from Union County, 3 from Snyder County, and 3 from Columbia County. Only 4 interviewees were under age 35 and the majority of participants exceeded age 50. Some were retired while others were in the process of retiring, some were in school, and 18 had at least one source of full-time employment. 11 of the 20 interviewees were women, 8 were men, and 1 identified as gender nonbinary.
Along with in-depth personal interviews, observational data was collected over the span of four months (May 2021-August 2021); depending on the space, I spent anywhere between two and five hours observing various spaces. Places that served only as observational spaces (i.e., not volunteer/rapport building spaces) were bars, diners, coffee shops, and parking lots. These spaces were chosen because of their capacity to capture the mundane, everyday aspects of the area—people going about their normal routines, getting coffee, running errands, getting drinks, having a meal, etc. Also observed were local fairs/carnivals and certain organizational meetings; oppositely from the aforementioned, these spaces were chosen due to their depiction of the special, more purposeful presentation of what the area has to offer. For example, fairs are a big part of central Pennsylvania culture; they showcase local harvests, local businesses, and special events like tractor pulls and livestock auctions that draw significant crowds for days on end. At these fairs and carnivals, there are game stands with various prizes that often breach political territory (signs, flags, shirts, bumper stickers that endorse specific causes and/or candidates) even though the game stand has no official political affiliation. Other things are decorated with political agitprop as well—independently owned food stands, merchandise tents, vehicles, and more. Rather than promote any official affiliation, these displays illustrate aspects of the stand owner’s identity and beliefs—a common and telling observation of those who financially and socially contribute to the area.

Other areas observed, however, included rapport building efforts such as volunteering my time and networking with others in the space. In total, I spent approximately 30 hours total volunteering with various groups and organizations—canvassing for reproductive rights advocates, setting up and tearing down tents for political rallies, phone banking for two local political candidates, and picketing/protesting for a striking labor union. I gained access to these
organizations by reaching out via their social media platforms, making phone calls to numbers found on public databases like Facebook or personal websites, and by showing up to publicized events and introducing myself to folks who seemed to be in leadership positions. My affiliation with each group was largely unofficial and short-lived—I was known only as a volunteer or partaker among several other participants, and my affiliation lasted only for the duration of my time volunteered or attending preparatory meetings. I used these volunteer opportunities to build rapport with members of the groups and fellow volunteers/participants; I handed out business cards to the people with whom I connected and later followed up with those who wished to be interviewed.

Coding and Data Analysis

The coding process for this project required compilation of interview transcription data as well as integration of interviewer observations of relevant nonverbal cues (such as pauses, looks, different facial expressions, body language, tone, etc.) (Weston et al 2001). Aiding in the coding process along with rigorously kept interview notes was the qualitative analysis software Atlas.ti which, along with transcription records to retain participant confidentiality, were kept on a private password-protected computer to which only the primary investigator has access.

Political attitudes and aspects of rural identity were coded thematically using the Atlas.ti software and thoroughly notated interview records marking informative nonverbal cues and/or important shifts in interviewees’ tonality. Themes that emerged the most clearly and consistently throughout the interview process were noted in a running document with examples and quotations that were later revisited with coding software. Because the emerging themes were in alignment with literature on rural identity and rural politics, the coding process was a conglomeration of literary expectations and presently evolving patterns coming directly from
interview notes and transcriptions. Specifically, transcriptions and notes were searched with coding software to identify indicators (iterations of certain words, phrases, and/or sentiment expression) of important themes and then collected in coded groups to keep track of thematic recurrence. Additionally, supportive quotes and notated indicators of nonverbal cues were gathered and organized into appropriate code groups so they could be retrieved during the writing process. Observational data was coded similarly, except specific detected details and sentiments were organized into code groups instead of direct participant quotations.

Once identified and gathered, themes were organized in order of importance by noting which themes had the strongest and most frequent emergence—specifically, those themes exhibited by both rural liberals and rural conservatives were deemed most poignant because they showed up more frequently and bridged significant ideological gaps. Despite the potential differences in trivial details or approach within these bridging themes, their significant recurrence on both sides of the political aisle indicated great importance in analyzing rural liberals and conservatives separately as well as one unit who largely wants the same things. These bridging themes were used to explain the similarities in political goals and values between rural liberals and conservatives but were also used to better understand liberal and conservative viewpoints separately using more literary context and interview-based/observational nuance. Other themes more specific to either side of the political aisle were organized by importance within their respective “liberal” or “conservative” categories in the same way—more frequently emerging themes with strongly supportive quotations and sentiments were considered more important and then examined alongside other findings in order to gauge their places in the discussion of rural identity and political attitudes.
RESULTS

Familiar with hardship and adaptation, rural Americans face stigma from many avenues of society and politics—stigma that carries societal implications that actively marginalize the people in these areas in several crucial ways. Central Pennsylvania encompasses the consequences that accompany systemic disenfranchisement of both Appalachian and non-Appalachian rurality. More specifically, Pennsylvania has areas of suburbia, small towns of varying industry, and rural farmlands. Even in a state with such diversity, the less populated parts of Pennsylvania still face consequences of rural stigma and marginalization both in the political process and in residents’ senses of identity as rural Americans.

As a general stigmatic assumption, rural Americans are regarded by many as bumpkins and backwards—those left behind in an advancing society due to their lack of education, dwindling resources, and closed mindedness. Rural America has also been synonymized with political conservatism, though of course, this is less than representative in many areas. Especially as a political swing state, even conservative-dominated parts of rural and small-town Pennsylvania are home to folks with diverse political opinions. And while there are distinct differences in stances on certain issues, interviewees with different political affiliations showed similar themes of what they value in political candidates and hopes for their community as well as how they conceptualize and operationalize their identities as rural Pennsylvanians.

The following chapters will discuss themes found in conversations with more liberal-leaning folks, more conservative-leaning folks, and the middle ground they share. Some themes to be discoursed in these chapters are the conceptualization and operationalization of rural/small-
town identity, various political attitudes and expectations, and hopes for community betterment and political direction.

**Rural Identity Conceptualization/Deployment and Political Attitudes of Central Pennsylvania Liberals**

Even though rurality has largely become synonymized with political conservatism, the rural identity does not evade the more liberal leaning groups that also live out in the country. One’s understanding of their identity as a rural or small-town citizen is just as influential for Pennsylvania liberals as it is for anyone else. Nearly all the liberal leaning interviewees with whom I spoke indicated that, overall, they liked the area, enjoyed raising children here, and had no intention of leaving should the opportunity ever arise. Specifically, this emerged within middle aged and older liberal interviewees; younger participants expressed the desire to leave the area eventually, though they did not feel disdain for having been raised in central Pennsylvania. They liked it well enough and the idea of leaving appealed more to a yearning for newness and better employment opportunities than an aversion to the area.

**Community Value**

Within my sample of rural/small-town liberals there were several young college students who had grown up in the area and stayed local for their schooling; these people, while having mentioned no overt dislike for their hometowns, were more excited to leave central Pennsylvania in search of new opportunities than their older peers. More formally recited as the “rural brain drain” by Kafalas and Carr (2011), those happy to stay are not strangers to this phenomenon, yet seem to hold no animosity toward those eager to migrate. In several interviews, there was an air of pride and understanding exhibited by middle-aged and older liberals when discussing why younger, more educated folks might aim to leave their hometowns in search of something better.
“I get it, you know? I’m not saying our little town couldn’t benefit from young, educated adults staying here and investing [in the community in some way—small businesses, entrepreneurship, etc.], but I get it. There aren’t exactly a ton of opportunities around here, especially if you have a degree that prepares you for something other than industry [factories and plants] and technical skills [HVAC, electrical, plumbing, etc.]. Hell, even teachers are running for the hills because our schools are taking a hit with all the budget cuts and downsizing. You can’t take a job at any school anymore without worrying about being furloughed.” While spoken by a high school support staff member recently laid off, this sentiment was echoed several times by several people, including the small group of ladies I visited in late May.

Three women and I sat around a Tuscan-style kitchen in the outskirts of one small town nearby; the house was decorated with antique heirloom crystal, collectible wines and spirits, and ornate wooden furniture meant less for sitting and more for admiring as we left our shoes by the door. The property itself spanned a generous two or three acres, accommodating for an in-ground swimming pool, hot tub patio, bonfire ring, outdoor garage, and custom-designed “she shed” (a small bungalow designed for the women of the family to escape the everyday routines lying inside the main house—conceptually similar to a “man cave,” but with “far more class” according to its owner). Surrounding the property on all sides were dense wooded areas and corn fields—Lizzie’s little patch of paradise among the wide-open spaces preferred to the more cramped dwellings in town. Inside, Lizzie and her two friends Fern and Darlene very kindly prepared some snacks and wine for the four of us as I set up my interview equipment. Darlene brought her young grandson who played in the next room; throughout the interview, the women took turns checking in on him.
Lizzie, Fern, and Darlene all grew up in the areas where they currently reside with families of their own. They, along with other liberal interviewees, expressed great care and concern for their local communities. “Moving to an urban area…it would sacrifice the closeness I feel with the community here… the closeness we all feel together,” said Lizzie. “I love the city, but I want to know who my neighbors are. I like knowing I can be there for somebody, and somebody can be there for me.” A key component of rural identity, these women found fulfillment and joy in taking responsibility for “their own”—contributing to the communal good however possible. “I live here, I’ve always lived here; I love it here! This used to be such a great little area. Just because some aspects of it have changed doesn’t mean it’s unsalvageable. I like to participate and give back when I can!” said Fern, referring to her involvement in community aspects like small business support and volunteering her time and resources to help her children’s clubs at the local high school. Exhibiting another key component of rural identity, the responsibility felt for one’s community translated to an individual duty to get involved and offer time when needed. As mothers and members of their kids’ groups in school, they felt a shared partnership and responsibility to contribute as a group for the good of their community (in this case, a community of mothers and children—in others, the local community that benefits from their kids’ volunteer service, arts organization, or athletics). In every way, patterns emerged with this group and other liberals that the obligation to contribute to and help one’s community fell on that of the collective more than any one individual.

This theme also arose within other liberal leaning meetings. One recurring meeting I attended virtually over the course of one month was for Planned Parenthood Pennsylvania (PPPA); the main purpose of these meetings was to discuss action plans for community distribution of health services fliers and brainstorming initiatives for future policy-based
partnerships with governmental figureheads. Volunteers were split into their respective regions of Pennsylvania; being located in central PA, I was assigned to the small group representing PPPA’s northeastern branch (or NEPA). As we all introduced each other, everyone presented reasons for the dedication of their time and energy. “I feel that accurate information about women’s health is severely lacking in our area, and I think people need to know that PPPA has so much more to offer than just abortion services,” one volunteer said. Another chimed in, “I want to help get information and resources out there [into the community] that I needed and wished I would have had when I was younger.” These volunteers felt a draw to contribute collectively to their community in the interest of communal public health and resource outreach. PPPA’s initiatives were understood as less of an individual’s contribution to a cause, but more of a collective group’s contribution to a larger community. Discussed in these meetings was the responsibility of society to better educate young people on the sexual health resource available to them, and work was always divvied out among group members to achieve a collective goal (in the case of my group, number of informative fliers and pamphlets distributed in assigned areas).

**Attitudes Toward Elites and Media**

Also contributing to the rural identity development and deployment among rural Pennsylvania liberals is the level of trust toward elitist figures and institutions; though this had interesting variation within the liberal sample. While all ages expressed trust in major medical institutions like the Center for Disease Control, the National Institute of Health, and the World Health Organization (particularly regarding information on the coronavirus pandemic), only those aged over 30 years felt as though they could trust the government and its current elected officials. Lizzie and Fern both reported trusting President Biden and his administration to carry the United States to a better place than previously held in the Trump presidency while also doing
their best to fulfill promises made during Biden’s presidential campaigning. However, younger interviewees were more protective of their high hopes and did not feel as though the government has yet given them reasons justifying the surrender of their confidence. Some even laughed when I asked if they trusted the current administration. “Trust Joe Biden and Cop-ala [a jab at Kamala Harris and her past record of policing policies] Harris? Probably not,” said Marlena, a university junior and member of a local climate action council. Marlena and the other members of the climate action council whom I interviewed virtually one afternoon articulated dissatisfaction with Biden and his history with climate impact policy, previous affiliations with Big Oil, and inconsistent promises regarding student debt forgiveness. “He’s already gone back on promises he made campaigning—exactly what I expected.” Marlena and her peers in the climate action council agreed that, like other politicians, Joe Biden and Kamala Harris incorporated as much mass appeal as possible into their campaign in order to secure their spots in office with little to no intention of following through on the grand gestures they spouted. Relatively well informed and clued into current political discourse, each of the council members remained unimpressed with the more progressive direction Biden and Harris have taken since their election. However, some remained (though, not necessarily enthusiastically so) hopeful with this shift. When asked how support was weighed without trust in any government officials, Marlena researches politicians’ track records, weighs pros and cons, and pledges her support accordingly; though she reported never getting to a point where she felt she could trust any candidate entirely. “In the case of politics, I look for consistency,” another member said. “That’s why I like [Vermont Senator Bernie] Sanders; he’s been in politics his whole life and hasn’t wavered. He’s been campaigning with the same message and goals since he started.” Others shook their heads in agreement. Unfortunately for these progressives, Bernie Sanders did not advance to the final
ballot in the 2020 presidential election. Marlena took over once more; “once the only candidate I believed in fell off, I had to do what I’ve always done—decide who’s the best option of two that I don’t particularly like.” Like any other voter, these students selected the available candidate that best represented their personal values; in this case, progressive climate action, racial justice, police reform, universal healthcare, and student debt forgiveness were prioritized—all things where Biden fell short in their eyes, but still far exceeded his opponent in progressivism. These young social justice advocates, while disheartened and a bit more jaded, followed suit of their older liberal peers—choose “the lesser of two evils” and hope for the best, but with relatively low expectations.

Of course, there are many ways in which people gather information and develop opinions on world affairs and political candidates; a major one is media consumption. Central Pennsylvania liberals overall reported a general sense of trust in the media so long as the intentions of the source seemed consistently informative rather than mongering or purposefully deceptive or “just for clicks,” as a young, liberal-leaning independent put it. Sitting across from me in an off-campus coffee shop, Matthew looked inquisitively at the table. “Some sites just put out blatant clickbait, and it’s so obvious,” he said. “How can you tell?” I replied. He thought a moment, letting the mundane sounds of a small business at the lunch rush—the clinking of mugs, the whistle of milk steamers, receipts printing, and the polite chatter between patrons and employees. He backpedaled a little. “Well, sometimes it’s blatantly obvious. You’ll see some wild headline that just screams clickbait, and you’ll know to look more into that one. Or just a quick glance at the [web]site itself will tell you. You know, maybe don’t trust the Being Liberal page on Facebook or TrueTrumpers.com to put out the most accurate information you could find. But sometimes there are other headlines or sites that look more convincing, and you don’t always
think to fact check every single thing you see. That would be exhausting, right? So, it almost
seems better to pick like…three or four sources you know you can trust and only stick with them.
So many random sources pop up on social media—especially Facebook—that have no merit
whatsoever and people circulate it because they don’t know any better. There’s so much
incentive out there now for people to mislead others that sometimes it feels impossible to know
who to trust to get their news.”

As a college educated individual and communications major, Matthew knew a thing or
two about vetting sources, and he had a point. Multiple interviewees reported apprehension
regarding sources they saw online that negated sources they had previously deemed trustworthy.
Mentioned also was the seemingly growing number of unvetted source material popping up
amidst the 2016 presidential race and even still, years later in its afterglow. But even amongst
this perceived inundation of irreputable new sources, folks found their way to ones those that
made sense to them and were confident in their choices. In addition to a source’s perceived
intentions and consistency, those who reported more in-depth research processes also mentioned
the importance of the references cited in whatever outlet they were consuming, whether that be
videos, news channels that verbally reference sources, or written pieces. As previously noted,
major medical institutions like the CDC, NIH, and WHO were viewed as legitimate and
trustworthy by every liberal interviewee, and therefore, sources that echoed and supported them
in their reporting were also deemed reliable. These organizations became particularly prominent
in conversation due to the ongoing global pandemic and conflicting views in central
Pennsylvania about vaccination—whether or not one should get vaccinated, how much
precaution should one be taking on an individual level, mask and vaccination mandates,
mandated business closures, and how much responsibility we as a community and society bear
for rising case numbers were among frequently mentioned topics. Though, non-pandemic news worked the same; sources were largely assessed by their references, intentions, and consistency. Among those deemed most trustworthy were the National Public Radio and the Wall Street Journal—both sources typically associated with more centrist reporting according to All Sides’ (2021) media bias analysis. However, also popular were more left-leaning sources like the Cable News Network and the New York Times (Ribeiro et al 2018).

While faith in media outlets is not the best indicator of educational background, interviews demonstrated that rural liberals’ willingness to trust certain outlets is based off of whether their trusted sources report with consistency the statements issued by other reliable institutions. For example, NPR and the CDC may issue the same statement on a recent public health finding or suggestion while more media outlets with more conservative bias may question the CDC’s judgement or blatantly oppose it. Recall that liberal-leaning folks tended to trust major medical institutions (Reinhardt, Findley, and Countryman 2021); this is because they are operated by those in the academic elite—specialized field professionals rigorously trained by elite academic institutions. Trust in the academic elite did not end with medical organizations, though they were the most referenced as the global pandemic dictated much of our conversations and, often, the very nature of our meetings. Also highly trusted were academically trained experts of other fields such as race scholars, climate scientists, sociologists, and economists. These fields were specifically mentioned among discussion around hot-button cultural issues like the Black Lives Matter movement, national student debt, and the climate crisis. Liberal interviewees seemed to have an adequate understanding of the issues of their highest concern, and they trusted their knowledge gaps to the experts. For example, while the average liberal participant had less to say about the effects of capitalism on many social issues than the group of
young progressives from the climate action council, they trusted that those whose job was to understand complex social indicators lying beyond their understanding would do so and believed that their expertise should be called upon in large-scale social decision making.

While there are several contended explanations for the liberal academic bias, the most popular seems to be that political liberalism is associated with higher educational attainment (Pew Research Center 2016). According to Pew’s 2016 report, those with more education are consistently more liberal, and liberalism increases with level of education. While this phenomenon can be speculated, its effects in the deployment of rural identity among small town Pennsylvania liberals are evident. Even for those liberals who do not have college degrees, they are largely supportive of their peers, family, and community members who fall in the highly educated liberal trend; this is particularly worth noting here because, as will be discussed further in following chapters, this was not found within the conservative sample. “I’m just so proud of all you kids nowadays, getting college degrees and having the courage to get out of here and do important things,” said Lizzie. Fern continued, “It’s nice to see you kids out there learning for yourselves instead of just whatever you’re taught in this tiny little town.” Even those liberals with fewer years of formal education like these two women who only have high school diplomas and a couple semesters of college aligned themselves with more educated fellow liberals, participating in the prominent “us versus them” mentality that is so integral to understanding rural identity. Even an ex-high school teacher with a master’s degree, Danielle, echoed the sentiment; “you kids, I’m so proud of you kids—the ones that got out and got educated. More and more of you are getting degrees even past college, and I think that’s awesome. Some of us weren’t so lucky. There are people I went to school with back in the [19]80s who never went to school or learned anything after high school, never left, and surprise surprise—they’re
Republicans.” This sentiment, while perhaps flattering to some, illustrates a divide between those believed to be “properly” educated (and therefore, liberal) and those who are not (and therefore, conservative). While less educated folks were not inherently understood as conservative or immoral by the liberals in my sample, conservatives were inherently understood as uneducated; this painted a picture of moral superiority among those more-educated liberals and those with less formal education who were, in a way, able to overcome this intellectual “deficit.”

While not as strongly portrayed as in rural conservatives, rural Pennsylvania liberals had prominent senses of “us,” or ingroups, that directly conflicted with “them,” or outgroups. For left-leaning folks, this mentality was less about geography, status, or nationalism the way it (partially) was for conservatives; instead, it arose more within the drawing of ethical guidelines. Largely, “us” was conceptualized as those whose education exceeded high school (even for those that did not fit this category themselves, so long as they had viewpoints that aligned with the liberal academy), those who exercised social and self-awareness, and those who touted politically correct, non-racist, tolerant worldviews. Of course, these labels are completely subjective and would likely be found contentious in dialogue with any of the liberals’ outgroups. But all of this to say kindlier what was most often meant—in many ways, liberals saw themselves as the direct antithesis to Trump supporters. In the most rudimentary of senses, Trump supporters were seen by liberals as the opposition of all the things most vital to their own rigorous ethical code—ignorant, immature, racist, prejudiced, nationalistic, intolerant, and even cruel. “There’s no getting through to these people [Trump supporters]; I’ve tried, and there’s just no reasoning with them,” said Lizzie, who is a proud Trump opponent and vehement conservative adversary on Facebook both on her own page and in the comments of others’ posts. Her friends nodded and laughed in agreement. This was a mindset found commonly among
liberal interviewees; “we” are smarter, more open-minded, kinder, and more evolved than “them,” the political (and sometimes, personal) enemy. This mentality takes special care to call into question each group’s morals and ethical codes which, naturally, translate into various political attitudes, values, and priorities.

**Political Attitudes, Values, and Priorities**

One question I made sure to ask participants no matter the direction of our conversation was this: if, hypothetically, you could continue to pay the same amount in taxes that you currently pay, but you had total control in how exactly they were allocated, where would you want your tax dollars to go? Regardless of how we arrived at this question, asking this helped me to understand where each respondent found their most influential political priorities. Their answers allowed me to better situate the rest of the conversation within meaningful political context, providing insight into how the complex nuances of rural identity influence personal values, political engagement, and one’s expectations of their elected officials. While each person did not have identical responses, a few distinguishable patterns emerged within rural Pennsylvania liberals. Notably, liberals as a group tended to focus their political priorities toward major systemic issues and their roots; their areas of concern often were the origins of the problems they saw, and the hypothetical allocation of tax dollars were more proactive in nature than reactive. For example, the topic of education was popular among both more progressive and more centrist liberals. When discussing the issues with the American educational system, there was some talk about the subpar resources given to local public schools, but only among deeper discussion about how the current curriculums in place exacerbate other disturbing systemic issues like structural racism and American nationalism. Of even deeper concern than school resources were things like teacher/staff compensation and total curricular rehails. Gabby,
another member of the climate action council and local university student said, “I would want my tax money invested in really digging up some main issues. Restructuring the education system could really help overturn some serious nastiness in this country. In our area, even. Educational restructuring would…I mean, granted, it would take a long time…we wouldn’t see it in our lifetimes. But it would change mindsets and other systems. Housing crises. Poverty. Policing. Religious persecution. A whole mess of stuff that stems from the fact that we teach inaccurate, white-centric history in schools from the jump [young age; elementary school and before]. It feels like the place where it all needs to start. So, I think that’s where I’d want my money to go.”

I pressed her a little; “it all—what does that mean? Where what needs to start?”

“Everything!” she said. “If we ever want to see any meaningful systemic changes in this country, I feel like it needs to start with education. How we teach our children and shape their minds.”

Even the less progressive folks agreed. “I would want my tax dollars to go toward our education system,” said Darlene. “Kids aren’t coming out of school as well equipped for the real world as they should be, and that’s not necessarily their fault. We should be changing the way we teach kids and making sure they know what they’re going to be up against out of school.”

She went on to elaborate on how students graduate high school not knowing how to maneuver some of the most basic processes of adult life—buying a car, taking out loans, negotiating employment benefits, looking for insurance, and more. “All that stuff is so important, not only because everyone has to do it, but because those things [processes] are pretty much designed to take advantage of the average person. If you don’t know what to look out for, you get boned.”

Also discussed around the kitchen island with Darlene, Fern, and Lizzie were the implications of white- and Christian-centric curriculums. “These kids leave [school] thinking that all this fake
stuff [referring to certain history lessons] is how it actually was, and that shapes a whole worldview that just feeds into itself. It’s a cycle that only hurts people, particularly people of color and small towns like ours that have segregated low-income housing and major drug problems,” said Fern. “Folks in the area see these problems and don’t actually know how or why they happen this way. They only know that there are people different from them that make their lives harder by being part of the problems they see. And then they become bitter and resentful. It’s a cycle.”

Fern had noted an observation I also noticed as I continued interview conduction. As will be discussed in later chapters, there is a notable stigma around her hometown that the low-income housing was where all the Black and Hispanic people lived, and because of that, the neighboring grocery store is plagued with “welfare queens” and buyers of “government cheese.” It is common knowledge around this area to avoid the store during “food stamp days,” or the first week of each month when food stamps are distributed if one wishes to avoid crowds and long checkout lines. It is also common knowledge to avoid these few blocks in general, as they are associated with criminal activity and dangerous individuals, and it all traces back to the learned stigma of the low-income housing units nearby. Regardless, the desire to invest personal tax dollars into the roots of major systemic issues was a persevering trend among the liberal sample.

In addition to funding educational reform, many liberals wanted their tax dollars invested into more accessible public infrastructure—particularly public transportation systems in rural areas and better road conditions. Food deserts and walkability are major hurdles of navigating life in rural areas, especially when one lives outside town centers and/or does not have access to a reliable vehicle. Recounting her experience working in elder care, Lizzie says, “some of these older folks…they’re all alone and need to rely on public programs to get their groceries. We [the
area] just now got things like Instacart (grocery delivery systems/apps), but these people aren’t using that. They don’t know how! And it’s expensive. They rely on [the rapid transit system that takes scheduled riders to and from stores and appointments], but it’s so slow and inconsistent that it makes it impossible for people to get any last-minute things they need, or anything they need without scheduling a week in advance. And these aren’t always people who are incapacitated! These are people who are more or less self-sufficient—they just either don’t have cars or don’t drive anymore. And lots of them don’t have family that can help. If we had a more comprehensive transportation system other than the shitty roads around here, it would make their lives so much easier.” Fern continued, “kids could also take themselves to school that way. Not as much congestion in the morning, not so much extra time needed in the morning. The [school] buses are great and all, but there are even some circumstances where addresses are so out there (secluded/isolated) that you have to drive your kid to the bus stop! I don’t know how exactly to fix that problem, but I have to believe that a better public transportation system would help.”

Another benefit of investing in public infrastructure was brought up by Riley, a local candidate for county office. He said, “if we invest money into fixing the roads, fixing the buildings, and making things overall just look nicer, more people might want to stay.” Riley grew up in a small coal town in central Pennsylvania, left to pursue a college education, and returned upon his degree’s completion. With the new tools he gained in school, his eyes opened up to a slew of social issues faced by his hometown. His voice sounded saddened over the phone as we talked on his way to a meeting with state representatives in Harrisburg. “All the houses in [his hometown] look…well, pretty terrible, honestly. And it’s not fair because this vision is so pervasive. Everyone knows [his hometown] as a dump—a washed up coal town eaten up by poverty and drugs and apathy. We’re [the people of his hometown] seen as slobs. But, at least
with the houses, so many people just don’t have a reason to fix up their porches and busted windows. When money is already tight, and people already see you as a loser slob, what’s the point of wasting money on home improvement? Porch value? Property here is dirt cheap because no one wants to move here with the way it looks. But I think that would change if people felt more incentivized. For instance, if we invested money into fixing the sidewalks, the roads, all the potholes and crumbling buildings—people might see that and think, ‘oh, maybe [the town] isn’t so bad after all. My house looks pretty bad next to these new changes. Maybe I should do something about that.’ And then people would have more incentive to stay in the area, fix up their properties, and ultimately raise the property values and living incentives in town. People would want to stay, open businesses, maybe a community college. And we’d get a nice cycle going.”

In a similar vein, liberals also highly valued healthcare and opted to invest their personal tax dollars in a more universal healthcare system, including rebuilding a deserted hospital in the area. J.R., who works as an emergency medical technician for a local ambulance company reflected on his time with patients during the pandemic while we sat at a smoky bar, noisy with regular patrons milling around and making small talk with the familiar bartenders. “With the old hospital there, we used to be able to take people in less than ten minutes no matter where we were. Now, it can sometimes take more than twenty. That’s too long for a lot of people. People have died in the back of my truck because the hospital was so far away, and we were the closest option to respond [to the call].” Whether he realized it or not, J.R. was explaining another significant barrier faced by rural Americans—the effects of infrastructure on healthcare are plentiful, but the geographic isolation was of particular concern to him as an EMT. “Sometimes it takes us more than twenty minutes to even reach an address, which is bad enough. But then to
rush patients as fast as we can and still not make it in time? It’s very sad.” He went on to postulate about the benefits of reopening the old hospital or expanding physical healthcare infrastructure as he recalled all he has seen as a pandemic first responder. Within the four counties studied, there are two major hospitals located approximately thirty minutes from each other by car. But some addresses within these counties are more than forty-five minutes away. There are smaller, more regional hospitals located throughout this region, but they are not as well equipped for more serious conditions or high-level trauma, so ambulances take higher-risk individuals (including COVID patients) to the main trauma centers to avoid unnecessary patient transfers that would further prolong proper care. “It’s dystopian,” J.R. mused; “they’re [hospital staff] putting people in beds in the hallway. Sick people are waiting to be seen in the emergency room for hours. Like four, sometimes even six hours or more. People sick with COVID, just sitting there, potentially exposing everyone else. COVID patients are in beds in the hallway because there just aren’t enough rooms.” Hospital overcrowding has been an issue for central Pennsylvania since the pandemic first took off in 2020. Even as vaccination rollouts expanded in the US, many rural Pennsylvanians chose to remain unvaccinated (PA Office of Rural Health 2021). Coronavirus variants ripped their way through these areas and took hospital resources, triage space, and patient lives with them. “I feel like every time I end up back at the ED [emergency department] and check in about a patient I took early in the week, sometimes even hours before, I find out they’re either on ventilators or they’ve passed away. Almost every person I take anymore is a COVID patient. We gear up [with personal protective equipment] for almost every call, and we’ve run out multiple times. It’s exhausting. Compartmentalizing is a big part of this job, and I’ve gotten pretty good at it. But I’m so tired and I’m running out of empathy.”
Another popular healthcare issue was that of insurance coverage. J.R. expressed to me that he is essentially unable to treat someone without health insurance, and that many people are assuming the risk of being uninsured due to rising insurance premiums and inadequate coverage packages offered by individual employers. Even with insurance, many people face significant financial burden following emergent medical care—especially when this care includes multiple-day hospital stays and equipment like ventilators and oxygen masks. But for many liberal folks, the desire for investment in systemic healthcare issues preceded the barriers exacerbated by the pandemic. Karla, a former employee of a local newspaper, spoke to me on the phone on her way home from an appointment across town and recounted her insurance plan at her old job. “It was awful,” she said. “I had the family plan of course, or I could have chosen a cheaper one. But I needed the family plan. But the packages offered by [the newspaper] have just gotten so bad. I mean, with the insurance plan I could afford on that salary, I was paying a six-thousand-dollar deductible…each. Six-thousand-dollar deductibles for each of us on my insurance plan. In addition to forty-dollar copays every time we need to go the doctor. And that was just for general practice visits. Specialists—so allergists for my kids, dermatology for me, and any other specialist—was fifty. We had next to no emergency room coverage, no ambulance coverage, and a few of our normal prescriptions weren’t covered. I think I had to write two different appeal letters to my insurance company to ask them to reconsider covering things we had been filling for years. I could have picked a better plan, but at that point, I would have been giving up half of my paycheck to pay for the plan. And I just couldn’t do that. It felt smarter to take the risk, and I’m not really a risk taker.” Karla was more than relieved to find a different job with better insurance before the pandemic layoffs began in the spring of 2020. She and other liberal interviewees expressed interest, if not explicitly for universal healthcare, for more standardized
care that would cut down on facility-insurance contract negotiations that can unjustly burden
single-payer plan holders. While there was a theme of concern expressed over scarcer resources
under a more universal system, many liberals were comfortable with one major contention—the
idea of healthy people essentially paying for sick people. In fact, most liberals expressed feeling
that being a part of a more accessible system was their civic and ethical duty. They would rather
contribute to a system that helps others and trust that the system would be there for them should
they need it someday than gamble on single-payer plans that not only fell short of their needs but
helped no one else either.

In this same vein, rural liberals wanted their tax dollars invested in the development of
the local communities. Most everyone spoke of the devolution of their communities in the last
few years, mostly referencing the growing presence of drugs and the dilapidation of property and
storefronts. The two most popular responses to these concerns were the funding and development
of after-school programs and addiction rehabilitation centers. Folks believed that students may
be less likely to wander the streets after school, getting in trouble by offering more generalized
after-school programs that did not necessarily have any qualifiers or goals other than giving
students a safe and controlled space to socialize, study, and even exercise. Additionally, folks
brought up the idea of repurposing abandoned spaces in local towns as addiction treatment
centers; the most progressive participants even suggested supervised injection sites wherein the
administration of intravenous drugs are monitored by medical professionals in hygienic
environments. This provides users with a safe setting in which to consume illicit substance,
thereby decreasing rates of overdose mortality (CFP 2017). Multiple people with multiple titles
and perspectives elaborated on how addiction recovery centers would help community health and
growth, therefore making them a worthy recipient of their personal tax dollars. J.R. pointed out
that, in addition to COVID patients, many people he takes in his ambulance are drug users who either require brief medical supervision following a Narcan (an emergency opioid overdose reversal medication) revival or folks whose struggles with addiction send them to the hospital with medical complications from excessive drug and alcohol usage; either way, these folks, he says, would be better off in treatment centers than contributing to the already-congested hospital waiting rooms. Others mentioned fewer unnecessary arrests resulting in a decrease of prison overcrowding. But the essence of this ethical responsibility illustrates another important aspect of rural identity deployment in Pennsylvania—prioritizing one’s community.

Discussed further in chapter three, participants expressed the desire to support local businesses and organizations as much as possible, often choosing to patron these smaller entities over larger corporations if possible. This included supporting church sales (baked goods, soup, and holiday candy), donating to local charities that specifically aided county citizens rather than larger goodwill stores. This theme was not unique to left leaners, but particularly among rural liberals, the prioritization of one’s community demonstrated the theme of valuing individual sacrifice in the interest of the collective good found in many leftist ideologies and viewpoints. This theme interwove itself through several other major political attitudes among rural Pennsylvania liberals. Among these attitudes were those expected of typical liberal voters—pro-women’s rights healthcare policy/pro-abortion, pro-gun control and stricter regulation, and pro-vaccination. In particular, pro-vaccination stances demonstrate the idea of valuing individual sacrifice for the best interest of the collective. All liberal participants reported either receiving both doses of the COVID-19 vaccine or had plans to receive it soon following our interview. Some were excited to get their shots while others were more apprehensive and saw the hasty rollout as a bit risky. However, even those more hesitant trusted the medical advice to the
medical professionals and got their vaccines in the interest of protecting themselves and their communities. And while many mentioned potential valid reasons for not getting the vaccine and even empathizing with others who were afraid, most viewed the decision to remain unvaccinated while participating normally in community life as selfish, needlessly putting others at risk for a potentially life-threatening illness. Known more satirically as “social justice warriors,” altruism emerged among rural Pennsylvania liberals as it often does in larger scales—so much so that it plays into one’s sense of identity as the antithesis to their conservative counterparts. The idea of altruism, particularly in politics, was found also in another major social issue discussed at length among liberal interviewees: Black Lives Matter (BLM) and the call for racial justice in American policing.

Predominantly among white participants (most of the sample), supporting initiatives for racial justice and systemic justice reform were seen as a duty of their privilege. Younger, more progressive participants reported attending various Black Lives Matter protests in 2020 and 2021 locally, at the Pennsylvania capitol building, and in Washington D.C. I decided to attend several myself in the area organized by two separate (yet collaborative) groups. These groups were both founded and run by people under age 25 and arranged legal, non-violent protests around central Pennsylvania. The first one I attended took place in a public park located in the middle of town; surrounded by busy streets on all sides of the park, protestors lined the perimeter holding signs (Appendix 4), clad in masks and casual clothing. In the center of the park were coolers with water, a table with snacks, and two bottles of sunscreen to combat the unrelenting summer heat. These were donations from fellow protestors and supportive community members. Passing a megaphone around, the organizers of the protest thanked everyone for their support and led various chants to be followed by the (mostly) young activists at attention. As people drove by,
we got a range of responses; from approving honks, waves, and thumbs-up to beratement, disapproving gestures, and violent threats, passersby were not shy toward the commotion in the park. I will discuss these protests further in following chapters, as much of the discourse observed suggested a more conservative reaction to the cause. But among the more supportive things said to me personally and those within earshot around me were “you kids rock,” “Black lives matter,” and “thank you.” Observations like these proved consistent throughout the three BLM protests I attended around the observed counties. Liberal views of the BLM movement were consistent with the values portrayed on the organization’s website: liberation and justice for Black folks. Younger, more progressive participants rattled off well-informed social commentary explaining their contempt for opposers of the movement which primarily settled on their ignorance and closed-mindedness. Older and more centrist liberals seemed to lack the same language to describe their positions as thoroughly, but ultimately saw the BLM movement as a noble organization trying to elicit positive systemic change. Even those liberals who uttered the ever contentious “all lives matter” demonstrated understanding the difference between the two phrases; they just did not recognize that the phrases occupied opposing viewpoints on the issue. For example, Fern recounted on the protests that happened in 2020 right after the death of George Floyd in Minneapolis, MN. “I was so proud to see so many young people out in the streets fighting for that poor man. Surprised, but so proud to see that there are people around here who are paying attention. I believe that all lives matter, of course. All lives matter! But all lives are not affected the same way in this case [the case of policing and the American justice system]. And I just can’t believe that people won’t see that.” She, Darlene, Lizzie, and other liberal participants used this issue to further explain their hopes and expectations for America’s
political future. However, this and other liberal superiority mentality has implications for America’s political present as well.

**Cognitive Dissonance and Dissonance Avoidance among Rural Liberals**

It is part of the moralistic process to engage with various levels of ideological dissonance (Rabin 1994); without these challenges, perspectives cannot grow or evolve. Cognitive dissonance is understood as the perception of contradictory information. Essentially, it is state of having thoughts and perspectives inconsistent with one another and, often, one’s corresponding actions. It is known that people have a tendency to disregard information that contradicts their worldviews and political beliefs, including things widely regarded by professionals as facts based on substantive scientific evidence (Rekker 2021). To properly regard new and inconsistent information requires a willingness to challenge one’s existing worldview and, by extension, one’s sense or understanding of themselves. One would need to be willing to engage with this dissension and potentially admit error or poor ethical judgement—for obvious reasons, this is not easy for most people to do. At its most extreme, this process can entail reevaluation of one’s identity and the titles with which they most closely identify. For example, someone growing up poor may not realize their family’s status relative to their peers if they grew up around a community of similarly situated individuals. This person may consider their circumstances pretty normal and may understand their family to be middle-class while, in reality, they fall either close to or beneath federal poverty lines. To receive information contradictory to this understanding would offer its recipient an ultimatum—reject the confines of the national poverty line in an effort to retain their identity as a middle-class American, or adjust their understanding of their societal status, thereby altering their identity to better fit the new information. Put more simply, when faced with conflict between one’s attitudes and their mindset or behavior, people tend to
change their attitudes to make their cognition consistent with their current behavior rather than adjust behavior or mindset to be consistent with their attitudes. Granted, this particular example is rich with nuance and oversimplicity; more examples will be discussed in further chapters. For the sake of understanding the presence and role of cognitive dissonance in rural Pennsylvania liberals, it is important to define and contextualize such processes.

It is documented that, in context of political ideology, liberals are less likely to avoid dissonance-arousing situations than their conservative peers and feel less need to reach epistemic certainty and closure in their views (Zmigrod, Rentfrow, and Robbins 2020; Nam, Jost, and Van Bavel 2013). This translates to more open-ended views on religion (for example, being satisfied with theological uncertainty), willingness to trust science (for example, being content with novice understanding), and openness to engage in critical thought regarding one’s perspective.

By and large, the liberal sample from rural and small-town Pennsylvania fell in line with these expectations. Liberal participants were more willing to engage in bipartisan discussion of issues while considering their opposing perspectives; while no one’s views actually changed, it was evident that empathy played a significant role alongside the logic necessary to execute such an exercise. Many people said things like, “I can understand where they’re [opposers] are coming from, but…” and, “I get it, I really do.” Statements like these were often followed by legitimate, respectful reflections of opposing views on an issue; folks empathized with visceral reactions like fear and anger before explaining their stance despite such intuitions—something conservatives did not do with the same consistency. Additionally, liberals seemed to feel more comfortable questioning their own beliefs and admitting that they do not necessarily have any definitive answers to remedy their political concerns. They were not as determined to identify a distinct mechanism of control over their circumstances or beliefs by inventing justification for
their uncertainties; liberals in this sample were okay with not knowing and seemed more open to learning new information that could potentially alter their worldviews. However, that is not to say that liberals did not exhibit some instances of cognitive dissonance.

One theme found among liberals in my sample was a certain hypocrisy; liberal folks showed concern over wealthy donors’ excessive political impact and the influence of the superrich—an ideology which aligns with liberal attitudes toward wealth inequality and people power among more average Americans. However, some liberals expressed this sentiment quite strongly while simultaneously advocating for politicians who they claim to be beneficiaries of wealthy, self-interested sponsors. Perhaps an example of dissonance avoidance in this case, this ethical inconsistency was a theme unaddressed by my liberal sample; instead, it was merely observed. Fern and Lizzie, for example, enthusiastically supported Joe Biden’s campaign from the beginning of the presidential race, stating that, “I do trust Biden to take care of us. He cares about the little guy! He puts average Americans first and doesn’t bend to big business like Trump did.” However, while Biden’s policy pitches have grown more progressive over the last several years of his political career (Tindera 2021), much of Biden’s financial campaign support came from super-PACS— independent political action committees with limitless fundraising potential from various sources, often including large corporations (Tindera 2021). In fact, some of Biden’s most generous donors hailed their fortunes from gas/oil moguls and corporate retail beneficiaries (Tindera 2021)—both industries often under fire for their exploitive business practices, wage inequality, and environmental damages. Also among the Biden campaign’s most significant contributors were risky hedge funders (Forbes 2020) whose potential failures could cost American industry greatly and cost working folks their jobs. Sampled liberals expressed disdain for these snags; they supported the idea of shrinking America’s wealth gap, felt that those who
had exorbitant amounts of money had too much, and articulated the desire for more “people power” in the US political process. “No one should have that much money [billionaires]; it’s unethical. It should be redistributed,” said Josie, a self-identified Democrat and Biden supporter.

So, while Joe Biden may have appealed to their ideology on many important issues, his donor history was less than consistent with what my liberal sample seemed particularly concerned with, making their enthusiastic support of his campaign dissonant with many of their ethical assertions. Interestingly, this theme was most evident among older, more centrist liberals whose top presidential pick was Joe Biden even before the official Democratic nomination; younger, more progressive liberals preferred candidates like Bernie Sanders, whose primary campaign donations were much less significant because they came from smaller sources and did not include collaborative super-PACs (Open Secrets 2020). Sanders supporters in my sample liked this fact; “he says he doesn’t like when mega rich people try to buy political power, and he means it,” said a college aged member of the climate action council. “He doesn’t take money from super PACS and he rightfully criticizes people who do. I just like that he seems really consistently on our [average Americans rather than the superrich—further illustration of in-group versus out-group mentality] side. He even hated when his staff made one. They had to change the name!” Sure enough, some of Sanders’ top staff founded a super PAC called “Future to Believe In” with intentions to endorse Biden after Sanders abandoned the presidential race and push his policies farther left (America’s Promise 2020). Expressing disapproval of the PAC’s formation and usage of his campaign slogan, they changed the name to “America’s Promise” and formally declared no affiliation with the senator (America’s Promise 2020). Despite feeling disappointed with the official Democratic nomination, young progressives in my sample felt as though they “had no choice” (Marlena, of the climate action council) but to relinquish their support for
candidates more aligned with their personal ethics in the interest of America’s collective best interest, thereby settling for Biden. They did this begrudgingly, fully aware of the dissonance between their political attitudes and corresponding behaviors. Choosing what they believed to be the best collective choice, they cast votes for Biden/Harris with the hopes of being able to return their support to more progressive candidates and causes in future election cycles. Older liberals in my sample, however, were less concerned with such dissonance.

Also found among older, more centrist liberals was cognitive dissonance regarding wealth and housing. While most younger, more progressive liberals found themselves in various states of transition (college, graduate school, and early stages of career building) and therefore in less permanent housing situations like renting or temporarily living at home, older liberals were more established and seemed to occupy fairly well-off properties. Despite rural housing being cheaper than urban and suburban spots (newhomesource), properties occupied by centrist liberals in my sample were not cutting any corners. Not only were these folks homeowners, but they also lived outside of town away from excessive disturbance, had ample space for multiple vehicles, had lawns and furnished outdoor seating areas, and even had storage sheds. Some had swimming pools. They had heirlooms and dishes reserved for special occasions as well as rooms in their houses dedicated to guests and leisure. One had two individually owned business establishments occupying the property and had an entire guest house attached. Some of these houses were purchased and thoroughly renovated while others were built from the ground up with idealized and personalized blueprints in mind. In short, older, more centrist liberals appeared comfortably middle-class. Those with more progressive ideologies occupied less-desirable places like college town apartments, compact rental units in town with unguaranteed street parking, and small borrowed spaces intrusive to parents or other family. And while conservatives, of course, also
owned homes with backyards and storage spaces outside of town, they do not find themselves at as significantly at odds with their beliefs on wealth and housing equity. For example, older, more centrist liberals reported valuing equitable housing policy and efforts to reduce local homelessness—a growing issue in central Pennsylvania (PA DCED 2021)—in ways that conservatives did not. Whether they realize it or not, liberal middle-class/upper-middle-class homeowners benefit from local zoning regulations that help protect property values at the expense of more accessible housing in less-appealing areas. One way zoning regulations affects community is the prohibition of business operation in residential areas; less affluent entrepreneurs who are often already taking on significant financial risks must choose between living farther away from opportunistic centers or moving into cheaper, more densely populated areas with fewer zoning regulations at the expense of economic fertility. Ultimately, regulations like these end up hurting communities and those forced into these struggling areas—the lower-class, young people, and oftentimes, people of color. So, these more affluent liberal homeowners end up benefiting from the systemic oppression of those they claim to uplift; at some point, self-interest takes precedence. This self-interest is found in quotes from older, more centrist liberals regarding their community; “the wide-open space is my favorite part of living out here,” said Margaret, a member of the local high school support staff union. “I like not being right on top of my neighbors.” Fern, Lizzie, and Darlene built off this thought. “I wouldn’t want to raise kids in town. It’s more dangerous there. I can’t keep an eye on them. You can’t live how you want to because you have to rent or buy houses that have been there and been dilapidated for decades. I like being able to have my own space that’s just mine that works perfectly for me.” So, while, advocating for more equitable housing action in their communities and across the United States, liberals in my study still preferred the dissonant, self-interested dwelling that ultimately hurt their
own cause. While not explicitly admitted, the indulgence and comfort of this self-interest seemed worth the cognitive disagreement, if it was even realized at all.

The degree to which this dissonance is conscious and deliberate is a focus for a different study. However, it is important to note in this study that central Pennsylvania liberals are not immune to the cognitive dissonance they so often identify and berate in conservatives. My interviews revealed far less cognitive dissonance among liberal participants than conservatives but can likely be explained by mechanisms of rural identity rooted both in American conservativism and rural adversity that will be further discussed in the following chapter as well as the review of relevant literature.

Looking Forward: Hopes and Expectations for America’s Political Future

Overall, this sample of rural Pennsylvania liberals believe that the United States is heading in a more positive and hopeful direction relative to Donald Trump’s presidency. Both Biden supporters and those who settled for him agreed that, despite Biden’s promises potentially being kept or not, he was bound to do far less damage to the United States domestically and internationally than Trump would have should he have been reelected for a second term in office. Their hopes and expectations for America’s political future all fell together in a consensus of progressive social change as well as candidates who exemplify consistency and integrity in their policy advocacy. Most liberals also felt that Joe Biden and Kamala Harris have the country’s best interest at heart; those who did not feel this way were the more progressive left leaners who were disappointed by Biden’s democratic nomination but saw him as a far more responsible choice in the polls than a Republican candidate. These folks figured that Biden’s main loyalties lie in donor profits and the upper class but were pleased to observe that his campaign appeared more progressive than in the past. They did not express much hope or faith in this observation, as they
posited that much of this platform change was an attempt at pandering toward younger voters, but they liked that the campaign brought more attention to social causes about which they were so passionate. Regardless, they hoped (even if not trusted) that their elected administration would carry out decisions in the best interest of average American citizens—an important bipartisan commonality often forgotten amidst explosive political interface.

**Rural Identity Conceptualization/Deployment and Political Attitudes of Central Pennsylvania Conservatives**

In the 2016 presidential election, Republican candidate Donald Trump won Pennsylvania’s popular vote by less than a single percentage point with counts reporting 48.2 percent of voters in his favor; in 2020, the state flipped blue, but not by a very large margin (Ballotpedia 2020). Unsurprisingly, the less densely populated counties overwhelmingly showed up for the conservative candidates—including Northumberland, Union, Columbia, and Snyder counties. But why? Rural conservatism is a complexly nuanced phenomenon characterized by the historical unfolding of American identity and class development. The development of American rurality rooted itself in ideas of rebellious nationalism and stark individualism wavering only in devotion to one’s own ingroup—all ideas that translate into conservative politics.

*Valuing One’s Community*

One prominent finding within the conservative sample was a significant value for one’s local community. This group showed profound respect and care for the idea of supporting local businesses and neighbors; many mentioned donating to churches who financially aid congregation members in need, local charitable organizations that provide clothing or temporary housing, and even acquaintances grieving various losses (of loved ones and employment, for
example). One instance of strong community support from conservative folks that stood out was the rebuilding of a bar and grille in Union County called Bar and Grille. In the summer of 2018, Bar and Grille—a beloved regular hangout for a group of old Union County lifers who I affectionately refer to as “the breakfast crew”—suffered a devastating fire that destroyed so much of the establishment, they had to close their doors. In an issued statement to the local newspaper, the reporting fire chief deemed the blaze “a total loss” (The Daily Item 2018) and Bar and Grille officially closed. Heartache echoed through the valley as people throughout Union and surrounding counties felt the aftershocks of the fire; whether they knew an owner, employee, or regular patron, everyone seemed to be connected to this loss. Shortly thereafter, community members came together to donate money, time, and materials to help rebuild the bar; and in a spectacular display of care and collaboration, it was able to reopen despite the harrowing damage. Now, it resumes business as usual—hosting groups of regulars from 7am to 2am, holding special events that draw crowds of locals, and organizing fundraisers for resident chapters of various charitable organizations.

Throughout my collection period, I spent many early morning hours at Bar and Grille observing the regular clientele and staff. In particular, I became familiar with a group of senior Union County lifers whose morning routines begins with breakfast together at the bar. Of them, there were five; Dewey, Bill, Ken, Howie, and Bobby. They sat at the same high wooden table every morning and ordered black coffee appetizers before their regular plates before flipping the bar television to Fox News. Each morning, they carried on with their familiar banter about friends and neighbors, community gossip, post-retirement hobbies—particularly hunting, as this group often meets at one member’s hunting cabin located on a nearby mountain where they hunt together every fall—and politics. The members of the breakfast crew were all strong-willed
conservative Republicans and Trump supporters; they spoke often of their gripes with President Joe Biden and how their community is changing at the hands of illegal immigrants, “lazy liberals coming in [to the town or the surrounding areas],” and the “liberal agenda.” They were not often boisterous or overly assertive, however they had developed such comfort with the establishment and its staff that they felt no shyness acting overly friendly. They all playfully negged the waitresses and staff who responded with equal bite; “here’s your coffee—extra spit in there for ya,” was a common exchange. “Hey look, asshole’s here!” the head line cook would greet one of the breakfast crew regulars each morning. “Where’s asshole junior (his son, who would show up a few minutes later like clockwork)?” After five separate observations of these dynamics, I decided to more formally introduce myself to the waitstaff; this prior connection, I hoped, would help establish some credibility for when I approached the breakfast crew for interviews. My waitress was kind yet doubtful of their willingness to participate but introduced me to the group anyway. At first, the men were very skeptical of my intentions; I was asked about my political beliefs immediately, what exactly I was studying, and why I wanted their input specifically. Navigating this dynamic as best I could, I assured the crew that my only intention was to learn from them and to give them an opportunity to speak freely on things often discouraged in daily conversation with strangers. While they unfortunately did not warm up to the idea of being explicitly interviewed—a demonstrated aspect of rural identity I will further discuss in the next section—they did invite me to sit and have breakfast with them a few times. So, for the next four days, I joined the crew at their high table and listened intently to their regular conversation, inserting some casual questions when appropriate.

The breakfast crew exhibited strong community ties; not only did each of them grow up in the area, they each raised families there too. Among the sometimes gossip-like talk of friends
and neighbors was a theme of responsibility for “their own” that they spoke of quite casually despite its recurring importance. Talk of church donations, donations to neighbors’ medical bills, neighbors’ lawn upkeep, and personal vehicle loaning were not communicated with airs of pride or persuasion; they were simply normal everyday responsibilities that needed attending. Sometimes these tasks were even spoken of with annoyance, as if they were just some mundane expectancies of which everyone claimed a part—a real “well, what are you gonna do” attitude, not unlike paying taxes or gassing up a car.

Another impressive display of community value within rural Pennsylvania conservatives came from two local advocates, Vic and Cory. Vic and Cory are members of a local chapter of Pennsylvania Righteous Bikers—a non-profit organization of motorcyclists dedicated to fighting injustice and helping those in need. Some of their efforts include fundraiser rides, kids’ toys and coats drives, and supporting bullied children by showing displays of strength to their terrorizers. These displays usually consist of bikers making an effort to look “extra tough and scary,” (according to Cory) as they make appearances and high-five victims in locations requested by a parent or guardian that reached out to the organization asking for their services. Usually, these locations are the ones where much of the bullying takes place—outside of their school, at the skate park, or on the street near their homes. The idea behind this display is to show force to someone’s bullies that they have trouble showing themselves. Pennsylvania Righteous Bikers support the whole community, but primarily focus on aiding local children in whatever ways they can. The organization also does not accept monetary donations, and membership requires only an interview to ensure proper alignment of values; there are no fees or necessary contributions otherwise. Vic, president of the local chapter, sat with me at a corner booth in Burger King; he brought his wife, Cory, who is also a member of the organization. Vic and Cory
both talked substantially about the importance of their community and the duty they feel to contribute toward its betterment. Cory had grown up one county over while Vic moved to the area and stayed for the past twenty-some years (he could not recall exactly how many). They talked mostly about their anti-bullying efforts; “it’s all about the kids,” said Vic.

“These kids that get bullied…they’re all pretty young. Most of the time, all the kid needs is some backup. Some show of support from some people who are bigger and scarier than the kid who’s giving them a hard time. Even the bullies probably feel bullied at home or something, so they compensate by picking on other kids at school or wherever. Parents reach out to us, we gather the troops, put on our toughest getup, and go give the kid high-fives or fist bumps…you know, we make friends with them. The bully usually finds out about it somehow if they don’t see it for themselves, and they usually back off.”

Cory cut in, “yeah, Vic here can be real scary…what with the long beard and tattoos and all.”

She laughed and patted his arm. “Mostly, we’re just concerned with helping our community.”

Vic and Cory went on to describe care for their community outside of Pennsylvania Righteous Bikers as well. They make an effort to order from local restaurants instead of chains, follow and promote local businesses on social media, and even refrain from much travel to keep their money recycling into their own community and country; in fact, they refuse to travel abroad and contribute to foreign economies in this way.

The idea of valuing one’s community and “one’s own” extends past locale, especially within conservative ideology. Community, in many cases, appeared ethically selective, and “one’s own” can refer to any in-group, reaching as far as one’s national identity. Vic demonstrated this by prioritizing the United States economy over those abroad. In addition to travel overseas, Vic and Cory also commented that their main issue with immigrants entering the
US is that they send their earnings to their families back in their home countries. This, of course, is mostly speculation; however, the idea that it happens at all is enough to insight anger. “I don’t mind them [immigrants] coming here, I guess. I know most of them want to work and contribute. Problem is, they send money back to their families in Mexico or wherever. They don’t contribute to our economy—the ones who took them in the first place.” This kind of in-group prioritization and loyalty crosses quickly into the realm of nationalism—a common product of conservative ideology and identity that will be addressed further in the discussion of political attitudes, values, and priorities that reflect it. Regardless, conservatives in my sample seemed to highly value their communities, but preferred the idea of individual responsibility to contribute to a collective rather than the combined responsibility of multiple groups unlike liberals who seemed to better understand their place in the larger contributive system of both smaller in-groups and larger society.

Attitudes Toward Elites and Media

Characteristics of rural identity are intricately intertwined in many ways. For example, themes of valuing one’s community appear in rural conservative attitudes toward elites and media. Specifically following the idea of communities being conceptualized as in-groups, elites were seen as illustrative of a problematic out-group. In alignment with rurality literature, my sample of conservatives were largely mistrusting of “elites” in particular, academics and politicians. Perhaps part of the reason academia was othered so fervently was because, by a large margin, my liberal sample had far higher educational attainment than their conservative counterparts. While some of my liberal interviewees did not have education exceeding high school, none of the conservatives with whom I spoke had education exceeding a bachelor’s degree, and most of them had only a high school diploma. Some had a General Education
Development (GED) certificate and a couple had no official education credentials at all. By and large, academia was seen as an out-of-touch institution which pushes liberal agendas, which were never actually defined with elaboration that surpassed cultural hot-button issues like religious deconstruction, “socialist” (also never accurately defined) ideology, and environmental junk science. It was a common belief among my conservative interviewees that academic institutions were, first and foremost, indoctrinators of worrisome liberal ideologies that denigrate American values, encourage entitlement, and soften the work ethic of younger generations.

Rural identity encompasses largely senses of stark individualism and vigorous work ethics that translate to notions of the American Dream. At its conceptualization, the American Dream painted a picture of the average person’s ability to earn their wealth and comforts with adequate hard work (Cornuelle 1965). Conversely, this idea pins the plight of financial hardship solely on oneself rather than contributing circumstances that are, many times, outside of one’s control (Cornuelle 1965). This mentality regurgitates ideas of meritocracy, wherein some folks are deserving of their lots in life, and some are not. It is widely understood, though, throughout the social sciences that social inequities are products of systemic issues larger than any one person. And being so well understood, academia as an institution has taken to studying mechanisms for systemic inequality while the conservatives sampled in rural Pennsylvania still largely reject the fact that such mechanisms even exist. It is not difficult to imagine, then, that an institution dedicated to studying one’s denied reality would not rank highly on their trusted sources. But conveying these realities is not as simple as presenting the material; no matter how reputable the source, the acknowledgement of these social realities would challenge the core individualistic value of American conservative identity found so prominently within rural areas. Therefore, academic elites remain among the least trusted in my conservative sample.
Academics are also mistrusted within the rural conservative sample because, by extension of the challenging of the conservative worldview, academic elites were often thought of as anti-conservative or anti-rural; not only is the academy pushing the liberal agenda, it is thought to be pushing anti-conservativism. Among rural central Pennsylvanians, conservatives in my sample viewed academics as either overpaid liberal puppets or young, naïve underlings whose financial misfortune is the product of their poor decision to invest in useless liberal arts education. Many of my conservative interviewees thought that business or STEM degrees were the only ones worth pursuing because they produced the highest income, and they saw the study of other fields as a confusing waste of time and money. My conservative interviewees also viewed those in academia as snobbish individuals representing the height of rural conservative discrimination; academics use their undeserved privilege to exploit young, vulnerable minds and phase out the conservative American way of life by forcing its antithesis on students who have no choice but to adhere to it for their grade. Academics were seen as out-of-touch and assertive of ethical judgement over a lifestyle about which they knew nothing, or at least, very little. Commonly brought up by my conservative participants was disdain for academics and politicians who never make the effort to visit rural places or speak with rural people before they make claims about their lives or enact policies that affect them.

Vic and Cory were not shy about their feelings regarding academics. According to them, people come out of academia thinking they know better than everyone else and try to impose their views on rural people and places. For example, it was a popular understanding among my conservative sample that climate scientists and officials at the Center for Disease Control are elites who impose policies over honest, hardworking people for the sake of benefiting some liberal agenda to phase out rural conservatives. Sitting unmasked in Burger King, I asked Vic
and Cory their thoughts on the state of the COVID-19 pandemic and its resulting mandated closures in 2020. “The pandemic?” said Vic, “honestly I think it’s bullshit.” Cory nodded her head and said, “yeah, I’m only vaccinated because we had to get it [the vaccine] for work, which was also bullshit. We were told either get vaccinated or take leave—as if anyone could afford to do that right now.” Cory works for one of the major hospitals in the area as a certified nursing assistant (CNA) and Vic for an elder care high rise facility downtown. “I’ll never get vaccinated,” he said. “Why should I? I’ve had the flu before. It isn’t any worse than that. All the hospital numbers coming out are just to inflate their profits and scare everyone into getting the vaccine anyway. I won’t be a part of that.” Despite working for the hospital, Cory agreed once more. “I think this whole thing [the pandemic] is being blown so far out of proportion just to make Trump look bad…so they [Democrats] could run him out of office,” said Vic. He and Cory were not the only ones who felt this way.

Also convinced the pandemic was invented or exaggerated to threaten Donald Trump’s reputation was Andrew—independent owner of a mechanic service twenty minutes outside the nearest town. Upon first meeting Andrew, he was very hesitant to speak with me; he asked me many questions about my intentions, what exactly I studied, and what my personal political views were. Even after answering his questions, he still assumed I wanted to speak with him and his wife in order to teach them something; only after a fourth explicit assurance that this was not the case at all was he willing to meet with me. On our agreed-upon date, I met him at his house just up the hill from his shop after winding around miles of wooded, unmarked dirt roads. Piled high with tires and spare auto parts, Andrew’s property housed his business and his family. Upon my arrival, he wiped grease from his hands and forehead before leading me up the hill to his front porch and inside the house where his wife Caroline met us with glasses of water. The three
of us sat at their fold-out dining table with a box fan on high blast to combat the late June heat. The pandemic was among the first things brought up in our discussion about his community’s willingness to help each other. “They [those in the local community] really came through for me these last few months,” he lamented. “With all these businesses closing because of COVID, lots of people are having to permanently close their doors. But not me! I haven’t even seen so much as a slow in business this past year. I guess people will always need working cars,” he laughed.

“But yeah, it’s a real shame, these closures. [Pennsylvania Governor Tom] Wolf really screwed everyone over, here. See how that works out for him.” Caroline quietly agreed and Andrew continued, “it’s all shit anyway; I don’t even know how real it even is. Like, obviously it’s ‘real,’ but it’s being blown way out of proportion. Like, why are we still on this? Trump’s out of office. You [Democrats] got what you wanted! You ran him out with the witch hunt [referring to allegations of Trump’s tax fraud and criticism of his handling of the pandemic].”

Andrew was very passionate about the things he said, and his train of thought became difficult to follow at times because of it. “So how do—” I was cut off. He continued, “and you can’t trust the media, either. They’re all owned by liberal politicians and the liberal elites anyway. The only news I trust is Fox, because they’re the only ones that tell the truth.”

“And how do we know what’s true?” I questioned. I never got a straight answer. Without missing a beat, he replied, “because they’re the ones telling the truth, I don’t know. They’re not the ones telling lies about Trump just to make him look bad. They’re the only ones who were saying what was really going on with the inflated numbers and duplicate cases while the liberal news media was just saying whatever they needed to [do] to get him [Trump] impeached.”

Andrew was greeted then by his two neighbors who walked in the front door—Kurt and Sydney. Upon hearing the last few words of Andrew’s sentence, noticing his tone, and seeing a stranger
with a voice recorder sitting at the table, he hesitantly asked what we were discussing. “You
don’t wanna know,” said Andrew spiritedly. I jumped in with, “politics—the media and the
pandemic. What do y’all think?” Kurt and Sydney laughed and after a few exchanges of playful
banter, the two of them sat down and joined our conversation. “I hate politics,” Kurt said rather
sternly. I smiled, threw my hands in the air, and said, “me too! That’s why I’m here!” Everyone
laughed and Kurt cracked open two cold beers for him and his wife.

While we continued our conversation on political attitudes and personal values, it became
clear that, just like liberal folks, the conservatives in my sample trusted the media sources that
validated their personal views. When this happens, subjective ethics can get confused for
observed and tested truths. As more isolated news consumers with less reliable access to the
Internet and fewer fact checking skills, rural conservatives in my sample often fell victim to
media bubbles and political echo chambers riddled with misinformation. The matter of which
media or institutions to trust ends up being less about receiving the most accurate information
and more about differentiating between moral right and wrong. This becomes particularly
problematic when drawing partisan lines; this notion of ethical news contributes to the prominent
“us versus them” mentality that fuels disdain for outsiders and translates into harmful political
behavior. In the case of this conservative sample, ideas of “one’s own” and selective community
translate to more hostile conceptualizations of “us” and “them” that encompass partisan ethics as
well as other indicators of likeness within rural conservativism. “Us versus them” exceeds the
notion of geographic, attitudinal, or other less significant identifiers and graduates to stark ethical
divides that become far more personal in the realm of political decisions. Distrust of certain
media outlets and political figureheads came across less as distrusting and more as outright
hostile while the notion of being “anti-media” emerged as a cornerstone of rural Pennsylvania
conservativism as their few trusted sources reaffirm that more mainstream media sources cannot be trusted. And it is worth noting that this distrust surpasses the concern of misinformation; rather, mainstream media was seen by those in my sample as institutions whose goals, values, and output were the direct antithesis of their conservative values as rural Americans. This conceptualization tapped into a fear of change for my conservative sample—a fear of being stripped of their lifestyles, their comfortable worldviews, and their triumphs among rural adversity. In this vein, distrust for media and elites becomes an agent of protection against these feared changes, and therefore is very personal for many folks and felt as an integral part of rural conservative identity.

*Political Attitudes, Values, and Priorities*

Political attitudes, values, and priorities among sampled rural conservatives, while characterized by complex interactions and nuances, can be traced back to two main ideas—stark individualism and robust work ethics. And while these ideologies were observed in all my conservative-identifying participants, none so clearly represented their mobilization than the folks of Patriots for Freedom.

One of the hottest nights on record in central Pennsylvania, I drove up to a gravel lot neighboring a small horse barn. One by one, vehicles touting American and Confederate flags, bumper stickers, and window clings proclaiming things like, “gun control means using both hands,” “God. Guns. Trump.,” and “Black Rifles Matter” filed into the lot, all here for the same reason—their biweekly organizational meeting. Wearing jeans, sneakers, a t-shirt, a baseball cap, and no face mask, I found my way inside and sat on the bleachers amongst a sea of nearly 200 people, mostly middle-age or older and all appearing white. The barn was noisy with friendly chatter and the shuffling of pre-meeting logistics like microphone stands and squeaking of
markers on white boards. Just inside the doors sat tables filled with lawn signs, hats, bumper stickers, and more, all for sale and benefitting the organization.

People for Freedom is a political-interest group based out of a local community in central Pennsylvania. They describe themselves as, “Proud Americans making a BOLD statement that we will NOT stand for abuse of power.” They are comprised of radical right-leaners and hold Christian nationalism—the belief that the American nation is defined by Christianity, and that the US government should take active steps to keep it that way (Miller 2021)—as central to their agenda and beliefs. As a group, they meet to discuss objectives for community preparation of a potential doomsday and political civil war; for all intents and purposes, this group is an independently organized militia.

The meeting began with prayer and the Pledge of Allegiance toward a tattered American flag hanging from the rafters of the performance arena. Before the discussion of action items, the first speaker on the agenda, Dale, ushered a distinct and pointed warning to any outsiders (me) attending with intentions to record the meeting or cause any disruption: “…and to any of you out there who came here to cause trouble, to record us… just get up and leave now.” This was met with cheers and encouraging hollers. “…Because we will find you, we will find out who you are, and we’ll deal with you our way.” Here, Dale scanned the crowd and pantomimed cocking and firing a shotgun. More cheers erupted.

From here, the meeting saw five speakers, each with a specific agenda to discuss. Their nine-step action plan, referred to as “battlefronts” and “fronts in the war” included everything from community protection to educational curriculum restructuring. They discussed and collected volunteers to explain the United States Constitution to fellow members—an item they called “protecting and preserving our Constitutional rights.” Additionally, they fleshed out a plan
to educate “the youth” on second amendment rights, God’s rightful place in American
government, and placing group members on local school boards to combat the “Leftist
indoctrination they’re [the ‘progressive’ board members] trying to shove down our kids’
throats.” The indoctrination in question centered mostly around the implementation of critical
race theory—something largely misrepresented in this meeting—, gender-inclusive school
restrooms and language, and the inclusion of global news in social studies classes. Critical race
theory was described as the Left’s attempt to “demonize whites” and make white children feel
ashamed of their race and background by teaching false historical narratives that paint racial
minorities (specifically Black and brown people) as “martyrs and saviors.” Talk of gender-
inclusive curriculum and facility changes were rich with aggressive and misleading language
regarding the transgender population—things like slurs, the assertion that transgender folks are
“confused trend followers,” and sex predators whose goals are to assault and violate [our/your,
speaking specifically to the group and further to the ideas of “one’s own” and selective
community] children. Here, and as they moved on, the rural conservative theme of protecting
one’s own became extremely evident. Specifically, they addressed the rising issue of human
trafficking in central Pennsylvania (National Human Trafficking Hotline 2021), and their goals
to “protect our boarders [sic]” by independently combatting local human trafficking and
exposing politicians who promote, fund, or ignore such an issue. Again, the elites could not be
trusted—so much so that this group believed action must be taken into their own, more capable
hands.

Another important action item on the meeting agenda was “rebuilding [our] political
party.” They spoke specifically about putting “patriots” in local government and getting folks to
the polls to vote for conservative candidates in smaller elections. Discussions like this followed a
theme of stark nationalism in their language and tone; they actively refer to themselves as “patriots,” “warriors,” and “soldiers” both for God and for the United States—specifically the conservative United States. As soldiers for conservative Christian values, they also discussed the agenda item to “overtake” the local media; they put together a lengthy list of volunteers to bombard the local newspapers with anonymous letters to the editor and opinion pieces, stating specifically that volunteers are not to name themselves or, at the very least, associate themselves with the group. This overt display of Christian nationalism demonstrated this group’s dedication to centralizing God and Christianity in government; they wanted to elevate Christian voices who would pledge to uphold laws and policies that reflected “God’s intentions” (gender/sex exclusive policies maintaining that God created only two genders and trans/nonbinary individuals are “abominations” and “corruptive, anti-abortion policy, implementing religious rhetoric/lessons in public school, etc.) as well as ensure that hard work is rewarded and laziness is punished. By calling themselves “soldiers for God” and intentionally remaining anonymous and unaffiliated with the group, these individuals also demonstrate an understanding that they (conservative Christian patriots) are among a targeted minority whose responsibility it is to reclaim Christian America.

The final agenda item on the docket was emergency preparedness. “We need to be prepared,” one speaker said, “for the inevitable civil war” [against patriots and non-patriots, patriots and the Left, good and evil]. They discussed their current progress and future plans to continue stockpiling various weapons and ammunition as well as other resources like food, water, and even generators. Volunteers—among them, self-proclaimed former military snipers—signed up to train members of the group how to operate handguns and assault rifles in addition to making house calls to assess members’ doomsday/war preparedness. Do they have the proper
accommodations for a bunker? Do they have enough nonperishable food and water to last several months? What about appropriate electrical hookups for emergency generators and security equipment like cameras, trips, and fences?

Also amidst these action items was the concerning discourse of hostile language towards minorities. For example, several jokes were made by speakers about killing Black Lives Matter protestors and shooting President Obama. Additionally, claims of significant misinformation were spread by speakers and audience members alike. During allowed time for member comments, an older man took the microphone passed to him and warned others to be mindful of what they say on their cellphones and post on the Internet regarding government agendas (specifically about gun legislature) because he believes the United Nations is currently implementing a police state and has presence in the Carolinas—“people with guns” will come to your door, take you away, and throw you in jail if one does not comply with the Left’s proposed gun laws, which were never specified. Also represented inaccurately was the distribution process and properties of coronavirus vaccines. The organization’s website and Facebook pages are littered with unreputable articles and narrative accounts of medical malpractice regarding vaccine distribution, government tracking initiatives, and aggressive religious rhetoric that leads readers to a conclusion suggesting fetal mutations, vaccine-induced abortions, and an anti-Christian leftist agenda. Supporting this misinformation spread at a later meeting was guest speaker Dr. Simone Gold—an anti-vaxxer doctor noted for her hydroxychloroquine advocacy and her role in the January 2021 Capitol insurrection in Washington D.C. Dr. Gold spoke to the congregation unfoundedly about the dangers of the COVID-19 vaccine, various vaccine mandates, and human experimentation.
At a later meeting, United States Representative Lou Barletta attended and spoke to the organization about the consequences of growing immigration rates in Pennsylvania, transgender students playing sports in schools (“girls should be playing girls’ sports and boys should be playing boys’ sports; there is no grey area”), and closest to People for Freedom’s agenda, the implantation of critical race theory in Pennsylvania public schools. In line with the organization’s misinformed outbursts regarding such a curricular addition, Barletta affirmed their resentment by stating that critical race theory only serves to turn children against one another based on complexion and teaches white children to feel shame regarding their ancestral history while elevating Black and brown history to a level above their white counterparts. They believe that such curricular implementation leads to more racism in society and therefore pushes “leftist agendas” of controlling certain race-based policies in society and systemically disenfranchising white Americans and the white rural ways of life (see image shared on the community Facebook page in Appendix 5). Not discussed at these meetings was the actual goal and teachings of critical race theory, which is the idea of socially constructed racial identities and their consequences on society and policy throughout American history (Sawchuk 2021). However, their aversions to such teachings paint a fascinating picture of the rural conservative “us versus them” mentality that permeates much of the conservative worldview.

This militia group served as a clear example of political values and priorities informed by stark individualism and the emphasis of strong work ethics, even in the face of clear community value. This group worked together to create action items and preparedness initiatives for the benefit of their community and undoubtedly highly valued their in-groups, but the responsibility to contribute to this collective good was emphasized on individual contributions to the organization’s goals rather than the group’s ability to contribute to larger society as a whole.
Echoed throughout other conservative interviews was, again, this value of community when asked how tax dollars would be ideally spent. Like my liberal sample, the conservatives with whom I spoke wished for their tax dollars to be invested in local small businesses and educational overhaul; though conservatives were more concerned with the implementation of critical race theory and more progressive social teachings like gender inclusivity of which liberals approved. Specifically, this concern was found in several local school board meetings which I attended throughout the summer while board members met and volleyed curriculum addendums for the 2021-2022 academic year. Worries of “child corruption” and race shaming were common among disagreeable public commentators; one perturbed mother said, “I won’t be sending my child to a school that teaches him to be ashamed of his whiteness and tells him that he’s wrong for being a boy.” Of course, these claims were wholly misinformed and inaccurate, but they were clear responses to perceived threats to the conservative worldview that calls for pride in one’s roots and ability to overcome hardship on one’s own. Teaching the realities of systemic racial adversity in the social world paints a picture of hierarchies that places certain majority-group privileges over others that some perceive as a threat to their triumphant personal narratives—“just because I’m white doesn’t mean my life has been easy. You have no idea what I’ve been through.”

Further elaborating on themes of individualism and strong work ethic found within the militia, self-sustenance, and the ability to climb the class ladder as of result of one’s own choices echoed throughout my conservative sample’s political attitudes. In other words, the notion of the American Dream was prevalent in their political motivation. The American Dream is the idea that socioeconomic opportunity is equally available to all Americans and can be attained through honest, hard work—in theory, as long as one works diligently and well, their highest dreams and
aspirations can be achieved. When envisioning the ideal distribution of individual tax dollars, many sampled conservatives were passionate about stripping the current government-issued welfare system and reallocating those funds elsewhere, especially emphasizing the welfare system’s enabling of unfavorable, indolent behavior. By encouraging those in the system to remain in the system, the possibility of honest, hardworking folks to fulfill the American Dream is diminished.

In many instances, instead of telling me how they wanted their money spent, they told me how they did not want it spent. “Don’t get me wrong; there are plenty of people out there that need it,” said Vic across the booth, leaned over his coffee cup. “But there are plenty out there that don’t need it, too. Plenty of people who take advantage [of the welfare system] and teach their kids how to do it, too. They teach them how to live their lives mooching off the government instead of actually working, even when they’re a hundred percent capable of holding a job.”

Cory pursed her lips and shook her head in disgusted agreement. “Honest working people like us end up paying for them to sit around on their asses and collect welfare checks. We pay for their groceries, we pay for their healthcare, and God knows what else,” she said. “All the while, they have brand new iPhones and cars and gadgets, some of them. Nicer than ours, and we have jobs. We actually contribute [to society].” While not all acknowledgers of this concern were as colorful with their phrasing, the issue of undue welfare qualification was a common conversation among this group. One younger conservative, Ty, used this shared grief as part of his platform running for local office. Across the table at a crowded coffee shop, unmasked, he said, “It’s unfortunate that the ones who take advantage [of the welfare system] make all the other recipients look bad. I know there are people who really do need the help, and I don’t mind contributing to those people. But unfortunately, they are not in the majority, especially around
here.” He motioned in the direction of the town’s low-income housing development, which was referenced also by Andrew even from several miles away. “They just…why do they deserve that, and I don’t? I’m the one with a business, a job. I’m the one that has to drive to the store in my piece of shit car that I could barely afford even with my job, and I fix cars for a living! I can’t just walk to the store. I gotta drive there just to get stuck behind some welfare queen with a litter of kids and a cart full of garbage and government cheese that my tax dollars are paying for. And they always have the long nails, the new iPhones, the iPads. They’ll separate transactions so they can get the max[imum] amount of formula and milk and shit because the [welfare] checks have certain limitations on them. Why are they buying that much? There’s no way they’re gonna use it all. Either it goes to waste, or I’m sure they pass it around [the low-income housing units] so it gets used…which, I guess, is better than wasting it, but still.” Even more blatant was one white woman’s remark toward a group of local Black Lives Matter protestors; “you live off white people!” she shouted over protestors’ chants of “we love you.” “You fucking communists…keep your HIV over there” (Newsweek 2020).

This disdain for funding laziness and welfare abusers calls back to notions of the “deserving poor” and the “undeserving poor” (Bonilla-Silva 2003). The “deserving poor” are those whose poverty cannot be blamed directly on them; their misfortune is not due to character flaws, moral inferiority, or poor behavior. Instead, they are seen as victims of larger systems out of one’s control—in this instance, the perpetuation of a welfare system that enables the “undeserving poor” who knowingly abuse government systems meant to help those who actually need assistance. Intertwined with this conceptualization is that of race-based prejudices within this rural conservative sample. Although few would likely admit to being outright racist, traces of racism were littered within conversations about welfare and class-based affirmative action.
For example, phrases like “welfare queen” and “government cheese” are not vernacular unique to Andrew; they are Reagan-ERA derogatory terms ascribed to public aid recipients and often directed toward Black single mothers (Gillam 1999). Throughout history, understandings of deserving and undeserving poor have been largely racialized (Bridges 2017). In particular, Black and brown folks have often been stripped of their deservingness regarding institutional impoverishment solutions and social programming and are seen as the “undeserving poor,” deeming them, therefore, less respectable. Conservatives in my sample were no strangers to this mindset as they saw racial minorities as the primary beneficiaries of class-based government programs—even Medicaid—that they defined as “government handouts.” For many of my sampled right-leaners, the low-income housing units scattered throughout their home counties embodied undeservingness which became synonymized with the racial minorities who live there, making them the unfortunate scapegoats for a deep-seated resentment toward a government who overlooks their hard work and grit…or, as Andrew put it, “they get free money while we [the deserving poor] get the shaft.”

Here again, divisive “us versus them” ideology permeates the conservative sample’s worldview and informs their political attitudes. By categorizing oneself as deserving and others as undeserving of certain benefits, there develops a pervasive rift between groups that surpasses grit and rigor. Particularly within racialized conceptualizations like class-based affirmative action, it becomes easy for misinformation to saturate understandings of one’s community and, therefore, one’s place within in. For example, the inference that Black and brown people make up the majority of welfare recipients in the United States was a common understanding; however, it is not accurate. According to the US Department of Agriculture (2021), white folks are the primary recipients of government-issued welfare; with about 37 percent of SNAP
(Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) recipients reported as non-Hispanic white, 26 percent as African American, and 16 percent as Hispanic/Latinx, racial minorities trail the white population in benefit recipiency (USDA 2021). Proportionally, whites utilize less welfare than other ethnic groups (USDA 2021), but that is due to various consequences of systemic racial inequity that places racial minorities in less advantageous socioeconomic positions like racialized wage gaps and barriers to wealth building—something difficult for my rural conservative sample to recognize or acknowledge as it poses a threat to the identity narrative of difficult and earned successes on one’s own.

Also highly treasured among the rural conservative sample were individual rights and freedoms. Branching further from rural values of individualism was the desire for independence, especially from the government. While it is not uncommon for people in general to be confident in their knowledge of their own best self-interest, this became particularly prevalent in conservatives’ discussion of decision-making elites and policies (recall the resentment toward academic and scientific elites who assert the needs of rural people despite their removal from rural spaces). Rural conservatives in my sample highly preferred small government and states’ rights over larger federal intervention, in part because each state may have different needs. “Why should we trust the clowns in [Washington] D.C. to know what’s best for us up here in PA? How would they know what’s best for California? Or any other state they don’t live in? Me and my family know what’s best for us. We don’t need you.” Uttered by an exasperated Kurt over a second beer, his remark illustrated a shared frustration—that politicians assume they know everyone’s best interest. One common issue among the sample was gun control policies. “Some of them [politicians] want to take our guns completely away. Now, I understand wanting background checks and all that. Permits, fine. But why are we trying to undo open and concealed
carry? I’m sorry but protecting myself and my family is my God-given right. And I will exercise that right.” Open and concealed carry laws refer to one’s ability to carry licensed firearms in public spaces, either hidden from plain sight (typically under clothing) or visible to others (PAFOA 2022). Regarding an argument for states’ rights, Ty said, “guns are more of an issue in urban places because there are more people with ill intentions rather than rural people who mostly have guns to hunt or for sport; people are more familiar with each other in rural areas and therefore are less inclined to be violent with one another.” This statement, again, stresses the importance of familiarity in trustworthiness; and with the stark divisive attitudes toward out-groups in this sample of rural conservatism, distrust contributed to a cycle of misinformed prejudice and hostility reflected in the patriotic values of this group.

Values centering individualism were also found in conservatives’ stark support for nationalism—support for one’s own nation, especially to the exclusion or detriment of other nations. Support for the United States as an independent nation guided much of the conservative worldview found in this sample. Stemming from America’s secession from Europe in the search of freedom from a despotic government, the conservative worldview finds a great deal of pride in the notion of independence and even the possibility of heroically overthrowing modern leaders should circumstances ever require it. Recall the language used in the People for Freedom meeting; “patriot” was used to describe members as well as any other sharer of their values of rehauing government and other too-liberal systems like certain school curriculums and pandemic-related mandates. Language used at this meeting was indicative of self-sustenance and unwavering devotion to one’s country as well as those who have served it. Each People for Freedom meeting featured a recognition of veterans in the audience and other conservatives in my sample wanted more support for veterans rather than aid to troubled citizens in foreign
countries. “Here we are,” said Andrew, “sending money and food down to Africa or Arab
countries or wherever while people who served this country are homeless. What a slap in the
face.” Veteran support and nationalism echoed throughout the rest of my conservative sample as
well. Many interviewees preferred their tax dollars be allocated to the United States military and
the Department of Defense, and they did not care about the amount of money already being spent
there. “I’m not sure we could ever have enough [defense funding and weaponry], honestly,”
lamented Sydney. “Our military is the strongest in the world, and I’d like to keep it that way. I
don’t want no chances taken, what with China and them over there building God knows what.”

Understandings like this, no matter how ill-informed, reflect a profound fear that lurks
deep within the rural conservative worldview and fans flames of racial and ethnic prejudice that
linger from deeply embedded legacies of racist structures throughout America’s political history.
Likely also blending with fears of being left behind by the liberal swell, feelings of resentment
and hostility toward out-groups (often racialized) find themselves at the center of a battle to
reclaim the ease and familiarity accompanying political favoring of the white majority. These
views largely reflect those of white Evangelicals, whose political behavior has been found to be
highly motivated by appeals to white supremacy (Valentino and Zhirkov 2018) while more
liberal-leaning voters prefer a more multiracial America (Brooks, Manza, and Cohen 2016).
Such leans also contribute to a strong backing of law enforcement, as police are often hailed as
heroic protectors overly scrutinized by a micromanaging team of “politically-correct liberal
yuppies”—especially in the face of the newly-emerging Black Lives Matter movement. Here,
still, themes of white supremacy emerged in the culture war that pitted law enforcement and
Black folks against one another. While not necessarily mutually exclusive, the phrase “Blue
[police] Lives Matter” arose as direct opposition to the message of Black Lives Matter rather
than in support of police and developed into a zero-sum duality that believes officers put themselves in danger by pursuing more effective public service to communities of color. “Blue lives matter because they put themselves at risk all the time; they do that for us. And you know what? They do it for all the Black Lives Matter people out there who have all day to sit and scream about how evil they [cops] are. You know, since they don’t have anything better to do.” This assertion came from Vic, who had voiced his distaste for police not an hour before because of “their tendency to breathe down my [Vic’s] neck all the time.” Though despite this, he and his wife empathized with cops because of the public flack they get. “People—we, I guess—look at cops like they’re these bad people, when in reality, they’re out there doing what’s best for the community. We kind of relate to them in that way. Bikers get a bad reputation because we’re big and scary looking. But we’re actually out in the community trying to help out and do what’s right. I guess we’re both [police and bikers] misunderstood in that way.” This commiseration, while stemming from a common perception of being wrongfully judged by society, presents a common instance of cognitive dissonance within the rural conservative sample. Conservative participants valued stark individualism and independence from government bodies, but strongly supported surveillance bodies like law enforcement and the military.

Once again, themes of political motivation stemming from white Christian nationalism emerge as fear of being left behind and overlooked in a society that unjustly rewards the undeserving and un-American—a fear that, in many instances, clouds rationality and enables cognitive dissonance. As rural identity places so much weight on one’s hard work and associated deservingness, too much government interference (at least, operating as it does now) is seen as too “soft,” disproportionately “rewarding” and “elevating” the lazy and “undeserving” folks often understood as racial and ethnic minorities. By contributing to social programs they do not
themselves utilize, white conservatives in this sample felt as though they did not get to reap the benefits of their labor, therefore throwing a wrench in their individual—and by in-group association, other hardworking white American patriots’—pursuits. Folks seemed to feel that the very essence of America is threatened by the government’s willingness to politic non denominationally and unjustly redistribute social/economic resources, and therefore, this sample’s ideal nation is under attack by those who negate such core ethics, and becomes something to be nobly reclaimed by voting against policy that (disproportionately, as they see it) aids minorities. However, it is likely that much of the underlying mechanisms of such political motivation go unrecognized. Few people take pride in association with racist ideals and instead situate their political views within the scope of taking back the power and individualism stripped by bigger, more liberal, elitist government bodies covertly synonymized with racial/ethnic minorities and misdirected out-groups. By placing so many on the outskirts of one’s accepted ideology, cognitive disagreement becomes nearly inevitable as the dissonant rearrange reality to fit their ethical inconsistencies. Speculated further at this study’s conclusion, it is also possible that this cognitive disagreement could be more accurately understood as dissonant explanation, as respondents seemed to tiptoe around more blatant racism as justification for frictional ideologies like support for law enforcement despite disliking government interference.

*Cognitive Dissonance and Dissonance Avoidance among Rural Conservatives*

Aside from the aforementioned dissonance between preferring small government and diehard support for tools of the state, the most prevalent observation of cognitive dissonance among the rural conservative sample besides the disagreement between values of small, unintrusive government and steadfast support for police and military were attitudes on “people power.” The idea that the responsibility to defend the rights and integrity of average American
people must fall upon groups of dedicated anti-establishment vigilantes was prominent. Among criticism of the “snowflakes [overly sensitive liberals who value political correctness]” and followers of the perceived liberal majority, Vic looked at me intently and asserted confidently that “it’s time to sedate the sheep and wake up the lions.”

The illustration of blind followers of the establishment as sheep is a metaphor used to paint a picture of a triumphant group of vigilante freedom fighters who are smart enough to recognize their oppression and break free. Throughout history, sheep have been used to represent meekness and gullibility, being easily herded and motivated by fear. In this instance, lions are seen as their direct antithesis—strong, calculated, independent thinkers. This visual of breaking away is a symbol of reclamation of rights, freedom, and what is owed—all things threatened by the wave of outsider liberal ideology and multiculturalism. People for Freedom formed an entire group of fed-up average folks whose goal is to prepare for the inevitability of a citizens’ mutiny against a tyrannical government; they believed fervently that when one’s government no longer works for them, they must take it upon themselves to rise up and reclaim justice. Though again, not everyone is viewed as victims of governmental injustice, setting up the opportunity to significantly operationalize cognitive disagreement.

Conceptualizations of the deserving and undeserving poor infiltrate this mindset, carrying over racially charged understandings of the systemic injustice so vehemently despised. Returning briefly to conversations with welfare recipients, Andrew said, “they get free money while we [the deserving poor] get the shaft. And they’re the same ones out there screaming ‘Black Lives Matter.’ Give me a break.” Though not explicitly said, this remark implies the synonymization of welfare recipients and Black folks and sympathizing freeloaders. This racial othering acts as a catalyst for resentment widespread across entire racial groups—especially if the group is vocal
about the systemic inequity that the conservatives in my sample would not acknowledge. Throughout the summers of 2020 and 2021, the four sampled counties held numerous non-violent protests in support of the Black Lives Matter movement—a social movement which acknowledges systemic oppression of Black people and aims to eradicate systemic white supremacy through grassroots local mobilization (BlackLivesMatter 2022). As a participating observer of several protests, I saw firsthand examples of the hostility resulting from challenging the conservative worldview on systemic racial inequality. As properly permitted groups of roughly 15-100 racial justice advocates lined public parks, streets, and parking lots with signs and chants demanding police accountability and policy reform, plenty of passersby presented stark displays of opposition and hostility. From gestures like thumbs down and middle fingers to spitting and screaming, the presence of Black Lives Matter antagonism did not go undetected. In fact, antagonism often turned outright volatile as conservative counter-protestors issued violent threats and posted up with weapons (Appendix 6). Violent opposition was also observed on various locally based conservative social media groups and individual posts (Appendix 7) as well as the posts’ positive reactions. Among these counter-protests were comments like, “get a job,” and “all/white lives matter,” which further illustrate the conservative conceptualization of the deserving and undeserving poor (poor, in this case, also encompassing Black and brown victims of police brutality). The assertion, “get a job,” implied the assumption that those protesting were either unemployed or at least not employed to the standard necessary to access ranks of the “deserving.” It exemplified frustration with protestors who had enough time to protest during conventional working hours while the passersby perhaps did not. The declaration “all lives matter” or “white lives matter” acted as direct opposition to the phrase “Black lives matter” by undermining the systemic injustices faced by Black Americans. By acknowledging specifically
the plight of Black and brown Americans in a system that also hurts white rural conservatives, these agitators felt left out—particularly since the reality of “white privilege” is largely contested and jeered in this group; recall the angry mother’s quote, “just because I’m white doesn’t mean my life has been easy. You have no idea what I’ve been through.” Even though Black and brown Americans face economic and social adversity disproportionately to white Americans, they are often “othered” as elites privileged by unjust social and economic redistribution like welfare and Medicaid. This sample of white rural conservatives saw themselves as the American standard—average, regular folks morally superior to these elites yet unfairly economically disadvantaged by comparison. These feelings of abandonment and unfairness likely resonated with the anger of feeling overlooked by a too-large, unjust government, which is often the inspiration for a people’s uprising. In this case, the desire for citizen victims to advocate for and reclaim justice from an oppressive government is at war with the refusal to acknowledge systemic racism while they, the white majority, are still suffering. Power to the people—not those people.

The dissonance regarding people power is so momentous due its affiliation with a fundamental misunderstanding of the United States’ capitalist economic system. Finding my conservative sample’s attitudes toward individual opportunity and government programs reflected in a national attitudinal survey conducted by Pew Research Center, I speculate that Pew’s findings echo similar phenomena happening in rural and small-town central Pennsylvania. According to the Pew Research Center (2019), 65 percent of Americans reported positive views of capitalism. Conjunctly, 55 percent viewed socialism negatively, associating it with weaker work ethic and excessive government intervention/reliance—both in direct opposition to major pillars of rural conservative identity that informed my sample’s political attitudes. However, accounts from Pew Research Center’s (2019) survey indicate inaccurate and/or incomplete
understandings of capitalism as an economic system. Among the top responses for positive views on capitalism were “essential to America,” (PRC 2019) which illustrates no real understanding of its operationalization. While negative views on capitalism were better articulated (unequal wealth distribution, exploitative, and democratic undermining) (PRC 2019), capitalism’s positive views were less than vague regurgitations of general favorability peppered with misguided accreditation toward socioeconomic victories that belong less to the system’s opportunistic nature and more to its ability to elevate certain groups over others. Feeble work ethic and government intervention were seen as threats to the American Dream by my conservative sample; this is particularly upsetting, as such a dream is so central to the process by which they passed judgement on themselves and others. Accepting handouts from the government belittles the more honest efforts of those willing to put in hard work for socioeconomic success; for the undeserving poor (and all its affiliates), government help is seen as cheating. Therefore, qualms with people power become more about peer morality—the cheaters and the non-cheaters, the weak and the tough, the sheep and the lions—than about citizen-electorate relations.

But despite the rough nature and convoluted roots of political attitudes and values of this conservative sample, the core values remain similar to that of the liberal sample—community betterment, safety, prosperity, and personal liberty. The main differences lie in the worldviews informing opinions on how best to pursue these goals and maintain these values. And while many of these fear-driven attitudes likely festered for decades beneath the sometimes-monumental task of simply surviving for many folks, it was noticed and nurtured with the arrival of fresh presidential candidates following Barack Obama’s second term in office. Someone finally emerged who would validate the fears, concerns, and frustrations of my rural conservative sample, as well as affirm and share widespread philosophies of how to best lead the United
States in the direction they wanted. Because of this freshness, this candidate gained popularity rather quickly and encouraged a resurgence of rural conservativism previously squashed by an evolving political system.

*Donald Trump and What he Represented*

In June of 2015, former reality television host Donald Trump formally announced his candidacy for the 2016 presidential race from Trump Tower in New York City. Running under the slogan “Make America Great Again” called to the nostalgia and angst for an America “lost” to the cultural evolution that left rural conservatives and Christianity behind. The implication of Trump’s campaign motto was that America had been, at some point and by someone, stripped of its “greatness”—something widely understood among the rural conservative population yet unspoken due to its sensitive and politically incorrect nature. Trump’s goal of returning America to its greatness awarded the assumption that there were people and things to blame for its fall. Trump conjured messages appealing to the neglected rural citizen that effectively launched him through the political conservative ranks. He also centralized Christianity and Christian nationalist ideology by advocating for prayer in public school, denouncing a cultural “war on Christmas,” choice-based vaccination combatting mandates and closures that were seen to violate religious freedom, and spreading Islamophobic rhetoric—something that gained him widespread popularity among evangelical Protestants (Pew Research Center 2021). Promises like the resurrection of coal usage spoke to those in “coal country” who have seen the socioeconomic consequences of the switch to more solar and electric energy dependence largely perceived by the conservative sample as liberally charged along with climate activism. Those in the coal industry—particularly poor miners—faced economic despair as its diminishing eliminated jobs and left laborers with no means of employment and few transferrable skills. Over the years, the
consequences of dying coal contributed to a cycle of poverty in coal regions; in areas of isolation and unique adversity, those in coal country began to stagnate in place while other, more affluent folks led lives evolving with progressive society. Especially in Appalachia and northeastern Pennsylvania (Appendix 8), resentment for progressive groups flourished among the broken legacy of coal country and developed into the discourse as it exists today.

But those disenfranchised by the abandonment of coal were only some of the large fan bases curated by Donald Trump’s platform. With his messages of no-nonsense politics and straightforward approaches to returning America to its reminiscent greatness, those disgusted with previous governmental direction were drawn to promises of “draining the swamp”—ousting the problematic individuals with misaligned agendas and priorities from office—and reclaiming the power of average Americans. In this way, Donald Trump excited rural America, as his emotionally charged messages and blatant disregard for prior professional customs of someone in his position resonated with a group of conservative folks who felt left behind by the liberal wave of “political correctness” and the drive to challenge out-of-touch traditional viewpoints on topics such as race, gender, sexuality, and capitalism. Trump also appealed to rural conservatives because his message of “making America great again” implied for many the resurgence of the American Dream. As previously mentioned, the idea of the American Dream remains important for this rural conservative sample because the belief that hard work pays off, even in the midst of social and economic hardship, is more easily digestible than the reality that climbing the socioeconomic ladder and escaping generational poverty is highly unlikely regardless of one’s personal work ethic. Similarly, when people do fail, this mindset allows them to look outward—blaming and “othering” of immigrants, local people of color, the liberal-driven economy, and other people and systems perceived as threatening to their worldview and, consequently, ways of
life. Opposing the evolving wave of political correctness that discouraged openness about this hostility, Trump publicly affirmed these frustrations and blatantly “sided” with the beholders of this mindset. Feeling more seen, understood, and valued than with any other candidate, rural conservatives flocked to his side, regarding his campaign as more of a movement and a resurgence of America’s lost greatness. “He’s the only one that’s ever actually had our best interest at heart, and that’s why they [his opposers; Republicans in office and political opponents] hated him. He threatened them and the system they rigged against us,” said Kurt, shaking his head. “He believes in us,” followed Andrew, “and we believe in him! He’ll be back, don’t you worry. Trump 2024, baby! No more bullshit!”

For many rural Americans, Donald Trump represents the pieces of themselves previously suffocated by the liberal elite. He does not take great care to present himself with much professionalism and often criticizes “political correctness,” claiming that liberal elites police such expression, attempting to infringe upon one’s constitutional right to free speech in the interest of pushing an anti-conservatist agenda. Today, many Americans are “demanding to be heard by a remote power in Washington that seems to ignore [their] wishes as it thwarts the will of the people with Obamacare, private-sector industry takeovers, a lack of law enforcement on our porous borders, deficit spending, and debt accumulation” (Larson, Sarfatti, and Porpora 2011:771). Trump’s candidacy energized white working-class voters in rural areas and small towns in part because of his proclaimed loyalty to those like them. He, like them, boasted non-politician status. He presented himself as a businessman, first and foremost, and champion of the people because he, too, was an average person sick of out-of-touch career politicians. Their heightened political mobilization helped tip the Electoral College vote in his favor, securing Trump the first term of his presidency. That election cycle, Americans simultaneously secured a
Republican majority in both chambers of the United States Congress. The election results awarded the Republican party the opportunity to pursue the policy goals it has long articulated, including repeal of the Affordable Care Act (which had expanded the ranks of those with health coverage by 20 million), restructuring and choking Medicare and Medicaid, privatizing Social Security, and placing greater restrictions on the use of welfare benefits—all reflections of stripping the “undeserving poor” of their “handouts” and a leveling of a playing field perceived as grossly unequal.

In this vein, Trump was utilized as a pervasive symbol at central Pennsylvania Black Lives Matter counter-protests. As a response to chants like, “Black lives matter,” “no good cops in racist system,” and “say his/her name,” agitators flew Trump’s campaign flags and chanted things like, “drain the swamp”—a phrase popularized by Trump during his politicking. One house in Northumberland County even caught the attention of local news as passersby noticed a fence freshly spray painted to say “wighte [white] lives matter” in a lawn fanned with Trump flags (Appendix 9). Whether the painter’s intention was to spell “white” or to exercise snark (since “wight” is its own word) is speculated throughout the local and online community; either way, its purpose to negate the message that Black lives matter was clear. So, even though the racial justice protests had nothing to do with Trump specifically, his messages and resonance with rural conservatives painted him as the antithesis to advocacy for a fairer, more diverse future in America.

Another major role played by Donald Trump was that of an advocate for oneself; for a population that feels silenced, misrepresented, and underestimated, Trump’s unapologetic nature acts still as a pillar of permission—a beacon to be oneself and to take pride in oneself, even and especially in the face of political reckoning. For many, he was a safe space—ironically a phrase
often mocked among Trump supporters—for white, rural conservative discontentment and its political incorrectness. “He was the only candidate I’ve ever seen who said he didn’t care what other people thought, and actually meant it,” said Vic. “I’ve always admired his ability to say exactly what he means without apologizing or trying to be politically correct. He doesn’t care about people’s feelings. He’s all about the facts… a businessman. He wants to fight for us, and he did. And if he runs [for office] again, I’ll vote for him in a heartbeat.” While displays of political affiliation and personal branding were not uncommon before Trump’s political presence, exhibitions of conservative pride arose majorly in rural areas and remains even after his 2021 loss. While there were some liberal-leaning demonstrations found throughout the sampled counties, most political displays not only reflected the conservative majority, but illustrated the steadfast Trumpian loyalty even following his leave. From bumper stickers and clothing to yard signs and billboards, Donald Trump and his message remains prominent in rural conservative America as those disappointed by his loss continue to showcase proud anti-liberalism (Appendix 10) as they maneuver through another Democratic presidency—this time, armed with more cohesion throughout the conservative community and a mobilized base of fed-up average folks. Now, Trump supporters stand out among the Republican party and differentiate themselves from the more centrist Republicans that have, in their eyes, “bowed down” (Andrew) to the liberal agenda—all thanks to Donald Trump and the faith and confidence he restored. Having this renewed sense of vigilantism, more candidates are beginning to emerge as the 2024 presidential race takes its first breaths. Appearing in a remarkably Trumpian campaign sits television personality and new Pennsylvania Senate hopeful Dr. Oz, who touts regurgitated buzzwords and phrases like, “reignite our divine spark,” “bravely fight for freedom,” and “tell it like it is” (doctoroz.com), appealing to the same successful rhetoric used by Trump as he rallied
groups of underdogs. Similar also to Trump, Dr. Oz uses his non-politician status as his finest and most noteworthy credential; “In our time of need, we want to be surrounded by people of action more than armchair intellectuals, because a great surgeon never censors ideas and never shuts off the light that shines on our wounds…” (doctoroz.com 2022). While Dr. Oz’s senate campaign only begins to unfold, he is appealing to Trump’s agitated base and is already seen by several media outlets (CNN, MSN, and KTVZ, for example) as a rising “Fox primary”—a candidate popular with conservative media outlet Fox News—as Donald Trump did six years ago.

Looking Forward: Hopes and Expectations for America’s Political Future

Overall, this sample of rural Pennsylvania conservatives believe that the United States has a very long way to go before its greatness is fully restored. Especially following Joe Biden’s victorious run for the 2020 presidency, conservative participants were concerned for America’s political future as myths of election fraud and dishonest polling tactics permeate their attitudes toward mainstream media and duplicitous politicians whose best interest lies with elites and other rural enemies. As a group who felt grossly unrepresented in the current political system outside of Trump’s presence, these folks exhibited an uneasy confidence that the country may be headed toward a second civil war wherein the corrupt government will be overthrown by average, fed-up folks—the patriots, the warriors, the lions, the people. While no conservative interviewees expressed much faith in the current administration, many hold out hope that Donald Trump will return to the political sphere and reclaim his rightful position as America’s leader. They believed he is best for the job of leading them in a direction of stronger local communities—a prominent value among these conservatives—and, therefore, a stronger nation. Important to this group moving forward is the creation of jobs and putting Americans back to
work to continue strengthening an economy that diminished reliance on government programs. Regardless of their visions on how exactly to achieve such goals, this sample of rural and small-town Pennsylvania conservatives want what everyone else wants—their version of America’s best interest.

**Rural Pennsylvania Liberals and Conservatives: The Common Ground They Share**

Two of the most prominent aspects of rural identity are the expectation of self-sufficiency and the responsibility to “take care of your own.” While rural Pennsylvania liberals and conservatives differ in their ideological approaches, the care for one’s community shows up at the crossroads of these major facets of the rural experience and mindset.

Despite the wide range of demographics in the sample obtained from Northumberland, Union, Snyder, and Columbia Counties, one major theme emerged: care for and connection to one’s local community. While this may seem obvious—everyone wants what is best for their community, right? —the explosive nature of bipartisan politics often paints opposing sides as wanting just the opposite. Having positive opinions on certain policies and/or candidates rarely leaves room for the idea that anyone holding opposing views finds just as much meaning, purpose, and hope in their views as you do in yours. As a result, opposing political views are not only seen as incorrect or less than, but also as a detriment to the progression of one’s peers (or one’s own—locally, nationally, or internationally). To oppose specific policies or candidates in favor of others is to actively work against a community, country, and people while those being challenged are fighting for the betterment of their opposition. Mindsets like this feed into the cycle of cultural explosivity that further divides political parties; enemies are made this way, and it becomes easier to act defensively and deflect blame for unfavorable politics and conditions on those that appear to fight against one’s values and lifestyle. However, this research finds a
prominent common ground of wanting the best for one’s community (whether community and
ownness are defined more locally, as Pennsylvanians, or as Americans) across all political
affiliations interviewed.

Partisan approach aside, every participant of this research expressed the desire to see
meaningful and tangible positive changes in their local communities. One particularly strong
desire was for more small business investment. Northumberland, Union, Snyder, and Columbia
Counties are all flush with small, independently owned businesses; everyone knows at least one
person who runs one and depends on its profits for their most basic necessities and livelihoods.
Care for one’s community and one’s own has deep roots in small businesses in these rural areas
because of this—small businesses act as the backbone of these communities, and everyone feels
the effects of their suffering. Especially exacerbated by the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic
closures, many people and their loved ones were impacted firsthand by even a few days of slow
business traffic and have since doubled down on their prioritization of supporting locally owned
establishments and services. For example, once the Pennsylvania government allowed for the
gradual reopening of businesses and resumption of services as usual, several business owners
reported elevated numbers. “It was incredible, the way our community showed out for us,” said
the owner of a local pizza and sandwich shop. “All the sudden, our orders were tripled—
sometimes more than that! We were busier than ever before. After weeks of worrying about how
our shop would even survive after this [the pandemic], we felt like we might be okay after all.
Evident even in those who do not own their own business was the joy seeing the positive effects
of the community’s support during this time; Fern, of political liberal affiliation, said, “I always
try to order and shop local when I can. I like knowing that my money supports my neighbors and
the town I live in.”
However, despite this outpouring of community support, some small businesses did suffer to the point of foreclosure. Since the COVID-19 pandemic only further exacerbated the inequalities faced by the rural United States (Parsons 2020), it is inevitable that not every business would survive. Many folks got laid off from work, took temporary pay cuts, and households were forced to dip into financial savings reserves or even take out loans from friends and family to get by. Considering this, members of these communities were able to pitch in some extra support for businesses that require smaller initial investments—takeout, coffee, bars, auto repair shops, and the like. However, businesses requiring more substantial immediate investments were put on the backburner as people were forced to prioritize being in survival mode. Things like home remodeling, catering, and other hospitality industries took a significant hit as their services require more upfront deposits and bigger financial commitments overall. Interviewees spoke of at least seven businesses forced into shutdown within the four counties explored, four of which were from Northumberland County alone. “It’s such a shame, but what are we supposed to do?” said one woman whose husband’s home remodeling business closed in June of 2020, not four months after the United States Center for Disease Control recognized the coronavirus pandemic as a significant enough public threat to warrant the halting of all unnecessary business ventures at the states’ discretions. On March 19th, 2020, Pennsylvania governor Tom Wolf ordered the closure of all non-life sustaining businesses essentially until further notice as the mandate’s length became longer and longer with each passing week. “We can’t exactly lower our prices, and even if we could, deposits for jobs can be thousands of dollars. We need the deposits to secure the job and to get all the materials and stuff...what were we supposed to do? And it’s not like we could go into people’s houses at that time anyway—
what with all the mandates and everything. It became inevitable that we would have to close up and look for work somewhere else.” And that’s what they did.

Of course, closures like these rocked certain members of the community harder than others. But regardless, its effects were noticed by all. In addition to the desire to support small businesses, both liberals and conservatives expressed the need for community-based funding from the government that would support things like the community centers, after school programs, and charitable initiatives that focused on local food insecurity and keeping drugs out of circulation in schools. “I see so many kids walking around so long after school hours and it’s like…I worry where they’re going, some of them. More after school programs would be nice because then kids wouldn’t have so much reason to wander around and get into trouble. But our schools barely have enough money for teachers as it is.” A mother and a supporter of a furloughed support staff union, Dina uttered this with an air of melancholic concern.

This particular quote brings up another interesting bridge between liberals and conservatives. Many people conceptualized local schools as part of their community and reported desire for better educational support funding. One contentious event that demonstrated this was a striking of support staff for a local school district. In May and June, a discussion among this school board and its support staff (office administration, aids to children with behavioral and learning disorders, janitorial staff, and librarians) came to a crossroads amidst a decision to outsource these jobs to an out-of-state temporary employment agency. In response to this years-long discussion, a labor union of support staff had taken to meetings, bargaining deals with the school board, and eventually, to the streets with picket signs and megaphones. Demonstrated by the variety of political bumper stickers among protestors’ cars and the
inconsistency of mask presence in the confined spaces, it was clear the union had community members of different political attitudes and affiliations beside them.

As this effort gained momentum in the local community, I noticed the outpouring of support from liberals and conservatives alike. While there was certainly pushback as well, the union opposers seemed to fall by the wayside as local residents overwhelmingly came together in support of the staff that supports the children and community they love. Intrigued by this crossover, I decided to attend some meetings—both for the union itself, the school board meeting where a decision was met and publicized, and to several union strikes. The strike events were first on my list, as I decided they would provide insight into the attitudes of those in attendance as well as offer me the opportunity to connect more personally with those on the picket line. As we stood outside the school administration office on the side of the road that connected two major residential and commercial areas (and therefore awarded much thru traffic), neon signs emerged from parked cars. Some signs read “We love your kids! Love us back!”, “Kids are not business negotiations,” and “I’ve seen better [school] boards at Lowe’s.” Chants boomed through the neighborhood with honks of support from passersby in their cars at the request of other signs asking for horns to be blown—between the hours of 9am and noon, the strikers effectively provided significant disruption for the school’s board and administrative staff inside the building they surrounded. Here, I met with the union president and other members who thanked me for my support and happily invited me to a few meetings. The meetings were quite well organized and down to businesses right away; agendas were quick but powerful with items relating to negotiations with the school board, plans of action moving forward with the strike, what their legal rights were, and how to volley negotiations from the board should they be fortunate enough to receive any willingness to cooperate. Despite being friends, some of which were lifelong, the
union meetings were all business. Still, on the way out, there existed an air of commiseration and support for one another as the heavy reality of the situation at hand set in week after week. Finally, the school board meeting on everyone’s mind came to the high school cafeteria.

There were over 50 people in attendance of this highly anticipated meeting—more than double the usual crowd. The school board members filed in, checked off the housekeeping items on their agenda, and opened the meeting for public comment. From here, 13 community members made their way from the crowd to a microphoned podium; more were denied comment later because they had not added themselves to their official agenda online preceding the meeting. Over and over again, local liberals and conservatives alike took their place at the podium and told stories highlighting the positive effects of the support staff on their lives and questioning the integrity and goals of the school board. Many declared their political affiliation at the beginning of their comment and followed up with how democracy is lost among this board. Some expressed discontent with the board members they voted for—“I voted for you because I thought you wanted what’s best for my children; after this, I’ll have to consider ever voting Republican again on this board.” To counter the board’s concern for raising local taxes—something that would normally be popular with conservative voters—folks expressed concern of sending local taxpayer money away from the community by outsourcing these jobs and bringing outsiders into their community without having familiarized them with the area or the students and their unique needs. “Why should we trust some random lawyer from the city to come in here and make decisions for our kids? What faith would we have in that? He comes in here, sees nothing, talks to no one, and tells us what’s right for our kids. He’s not in our classrooms day to day, and neither are you.” This comment was made by a father whose son goes to school in the district, in response to the school board hiring a Philadelphia-based attorney to negotiate legal
terms with the support staff union. While public funding allocation proves to be a major point of contention between liberals and conservatives, local commentators of both affiliations expressed discontent for the valuing of a budget over the quality of their children’s educational experience. Themes of contempt for outsiders and the betrayal that comes along with such values in this instance brought Democrats and Republicans to public forum to express their dissatisfaction with the way their elected officials were prioritizing their fates. Perhaps a microcosm of a greater unifier that is apprehension and contempt toward outsiders, this display illustrates an interesting dichotomy of “othering” one another unless a bigger, more common enemy is recognized. This introduction of a mutual threat suddenly re-unified a hostile divide and redefined, however briefly, the concept of one’s community.

Another theme found within the comments at this meeting was the shared desire for more pellucidity from elected officials. People felt like they were too late to really make a difference with their actions because they “never know what the hell’s going on until it’s too late and doesn’t damn matter anymore.” Several comments were made both at the meeting and on the union support’s community Facebook page regarding the school board’s poor use of public outreach and their “piss poor” attempts at keeping the public in the loop; “we elected you—you work for us. Tell us what’s being discussed.” This sentiment is illustrative of another major theme found within both rural Pennsylvania liberals and conservatives—transparency in the government.

While liberals and conservatives approached their media consumption a bit differently, one theme emerged clearly: regardless of what one is looking at, it is difficult to know who to trust because of conflicting information and various agendas at war with one another. Liberals tended to prefer more widely acceptable accredited sources than far right conservatives who
preferred known misleaders, but this challenge of proper source vetting no doubt contributes to the issue of misinformation consumption on both sides of the political aisle. Sources popularly cited by rural liberals included more centrist outlets like National Public Radio, the Wall Street Journal, and USA Today; however, also common were stations like CNN, MSNBC, the New York Times, Washington Post, and Politico—known left-of-center leaners (Atkinson and Berg 2012; Faris et al 2017). It is important to note that both parties fall victim to and actively participate in confirmation bias that contributes to the rural fundamental mistrust of elites.

Confirmation bias, or the act of choosing news that reinforces existing beliefs, contributes to a larger problem of opening oneself up to a variety of worldviews in order to piece together well-informed judgements on other cultures, lifestyles, and policies that later are put in the hands of these (often) one-dimensional stances. In the days of modern technology which boasts maximum adaptability and personalization capabilities, this sought out consumption creates a customized algorithm that learns what viewers like to consume (Mager 2021; Just and Latzer 2016), finds more, and delivers it to users in constantly updating newsfeeds, “for you pages,” and “discover” feeds. Found primarily in social media, these tools create an efficient and interesting user experience; however, this can also happen when folks surround themselves with likeminded individuals and groups (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Cook 2001; Hudson et al 2017). But unfortunately, in the world of politics, this process can also create dangerous filter bubbles and echo chambers that reinforce existing worldviews and biases, therefore strengthening faith in and conviction for certain sources and stances.

In simpler terms, people like to feel correct in their beliefs. Confirmation bias allows them to continue feeling, not only right, but comfortable in the views that dictate their ethical compasses, political behaviors, and life choices. And when people feel validated in their moral
high ground, they feel as though they have leverage against those who oppose them. Examples of this were found on both sides; “People throwing fits about vaccines and mask mandates—as if you and your high school education know better than medical professionals who studied for years? Give me a break.” This line came from a woman, Brenda, who identifies as a Democrat. She reported getting the majority of her pandemic news from posts shared on social media as well as NPR’s daily morning podcast, The Daily. Expressing frustration at the discourse on social media regarding mask mandates in local schools and businesses, she then followed up with, “You think masks do nothing? Do you simpletons know how walls work?”—a prime example of how validation from media consumption fuels judgement that surpasses simple disagreement. The second comment illustrates contempt that comes from feeling as though one moral compass is far superior to another due to outlying principles such as education and class. This woman preferred CNN and NPR as her primary sources for pandemic news, had a bachelor’s degree, and reportedly lived well within the margins of the American middle-class; the line was delivered, after all, over marble countertops, wood paneled flooring, and glasses of pricey wine in a kitchen decorated with display cases of crystal and bottles of collectible spirits. But this elitism was not unique to this demographic. This phenomenon arose similarly for everyone—a trusted source verified and reinforced a held belief, and in turn, delegitimized others. The problem is that some trusted sources are more credible than others. In the same topic of COVID-19 vaccination and mask mandates, one conservative interviewee said, “I just can’t wait till the cases start coming out about enlarged hearts and deformities and [government/privacy] hacking; won’t they [vaccine advocates/receivers] be sorry then. It’s too rushed. It’s too convenient. Doesn’t anyone find it a little suspicious that the biggest pushers of this thing [the vaccine] are people who did everything in their power to make President Trump
look bad any chance they got?” This person, a conservative, reported their most trustworthy pandemic news sources were Fox News and the New York Post—widely regarded as a conservative tabloid. But, despite any empathy or acknowledgement of legitimacy of the other side’s concerns, the mindset was largely the same—my tribe and I are right, opposers are wrong, and they are too stupid to understand what is best for them.

All this understood, it is not difficult to connect the role of selective media consumption and their resulting cyclical and divisive mindsets to the growing sociopolitical gaps in modern American politics. But the root issue remains the same; regardless of political affiliation, education, or background, people found themselves wondering who to trust and leaving their faith up to mechanisms like emotional response, affirmation, and good-enough understandings of information presented. Politician and media agendas were evident to all interviewed parties and made for difficult source vetting. Also evident was sources’ efforts to actively delegitimize other viewpoints while advocating for their own; agendas at war proved a significant barrier to widespread trustworthy sources and were concerning to most everyone. But at the end of the day, folks trusted the sources that reinforced their own personal agendas and were suspicious of those that challenged them, further reinforcing, also, a discordant “us versus them” mindset prevalent in rural identity that spanned all demographics as well.

Ubiquitous in the understanding of rural identity and rural political attitudes is a mindset that prioritizes “one’s own,” however it is conceptualized, over other groups; oftentimes, these “othered” groups are not only deprioritized, they are actively disliked and ostracized. And while this instinct is fairly common among many different groups, it has particularly jarring effects in the realm of rural politics and, therefore, the current sociopolitical system in the United States. This mindset was found in both rural liberals and conservatives; and while there were distinct
and important differences between the two, it is most important to note that a certain essence arose that proves imperative when noting commonalities and postulating political impact. While liberals exhibited more positive (or at the very least, neutral) attitudes toward othered groups such as racial minorities, immigrants, various religious identities, and LGBTQ+ folks than conservatives did, both groups ostracized each other. But even more so, they expressed distaste for a common enemy—“the elite.” The major problem with this is that “the elite” is conceptualized differently past a certain point; but up until then, themes emerged between liberals and conservatives of a general dislike for the mega-rich while almost always favoring “the little guy” or average American citizens. Recalling from the previous chapters’ analysis, it is important to remember that “the little guy” is only advocated for when they fit one’s description of an “us”/insider group. But since these differences of opinion stem from a fundamental misunderstanding of the capitalist systems currently in place, it would be remiss not to mention how deeply rooted the “us versus them” mentality reaches into rural identity and political attitudes.

Even among some significant cognitive dissonance, both liberals and conservatives expressed passionately that, if given the opportunity to pay the same amount in taxes but have total delegation in how their money was distributed, they would want the majority of their money to go toward their communities, the American working-class, and the public school system. Both groups exhibited anti-rich attitudes on the grounds that some people get (and even take) more than their fair share; commonly cited examples of this were career politicians (those representatives who remain in the government sector until retirement), celebrities, CEOs and companies who publicly exploit the working-class, and even local figureheads who have been known to draw inflated salaries at the expense of their employees. “There’s no reason anyone
should have that much money [billions of dollars]; it sickens me that he [Jeff Bezos, CEO of Amazon Inc. and currently the world’s richest person with an approximate $107B net worth according to Forbes Billionaires 2021] chooses every day to let billions of people struggle when he has every opportunity to help and still be richer than anyone else ever could be,” a liberal school teacher offered when asked about what leads her to support policies increasing taxes on those in certain income brackets rather than incrementally raising taxes for everyone. Similarly, a conservative automotive repair shop owner said, “[Nancy] Pelosi (US Democratic House leader since 2003) draws some huge paycheck every year to do far less, I’m sure, than me and my neighbors who are happy enough to barely scrape by.” While discrepancies between wealth are severe in this case (a net worth of several hundred thousand dollars versus hundreds of billions), the notion of deserved and undeserved wealth lie at the center of these sentiments and, in turn, affect political attitudes and voting behaviors. Learned from this important thematic commonality is that, at their core, both liberal and conservative interviewees value fairness and want unmerited wealth to be redistributed to those who deserve more.

In a similar vein, both liberals and conservatives expressed the same process and principles in deciding which politicians and media they can trust. Findings show that rural people value consistency and intention (more importantly for, their perception of someone’s intention); whether assessing those running for office, media sources, or particularly political policies, constancy and predictability reigned supreme in the process of building and maintaining trust. As discussed, people tend to support people and media that echo their existing views; an important part of this is one’s perception of a politician’s or media’s intention and their transparency. For example, multiple people reiterated this statement from a Democrat running for local office in Northumberland County: “Media’s purpose should always be to provide information. Not
gaining ‘clicks,’ (by touting outlandish headlines to catch attention and draw digital traffic to their pages), not blindly supporting any one candidate, not convincing anyone of anything. Just report the objective information.” This same individual went on to explain how his perception of an outlet’s intention is the most important part of how he decides where to get his news. “If it’s obvious to me that a website or [television] channel’s main goal is to push an agenda or gain profit by reporting on crazy or really contentious things in a way that would rile people up, that’s usually a red flag to me. I like to know that my news sources are just that—news. Not entertainment, and not a campaign.” Similarly, both liberals and conservatives approached trusting politicians this way. Gretchen, a conservative leaning high school teacher said, “You can usually tell when politicians are lying to get votes…making huge promises everyone knows they can’t keep. Why lie? Everyone knows the parties get in each other’s way. Everyone knows things get held up in the House and Senate. Just say you’ll do your best! That’s enough for most people. That’s enough for me. When politicians pander to their audiences by changing their stances on things and making promises, I know I probably can’t trust them.” Additionally, people on both sides of the political aisle reported searching for politicians’ track records when deciding who they should support; specifically, they looked for politicians’ stances on their biggest and most important personal/political values and how much these stances have changed throughout the politicians’ political career. This demonstrates reliability that a candidate will continue to uphold what is important to their supporters and signals to voters that they can be confident in their vote and support. While seemingly obvious, it is vital for social and political scientists to remember the commonalities in this process; while values differ, the method of choice is largely the same.
Finally, rural Pennsylvania liberals and conservatives both feel as though something big is on the verge for United States politics. While liberals reported sensing significant progressive and systemic changes, conservatives took a darker approach at the anticipation of a civil war of sorts. Either way, both predictions stem from the idea of a people’s revolution against an unjust government and a system that works primarily for the untouchable elites and enthusiastically marginalizes people who are consistently shorted what they are owed. Again, themes of valuing one’s own and the “little guy” emerge here.

All in all, while liberals and conservatives in rural Pennsylvania differ quite a lot in their political attitudes and the operationalization of their rural identities, they also reconvene in several notable ways. Negative attitudes toward the group of elites that delegate some of the most major sociopolitical processes, the process of trust and support for political candidates and media sources, and a sense of responsibility to protect and advocate for “one’s own” are all major factors that deploy the most intrinsic parts of a rural identity and influence political attitudes. Also noteworthy is the shared notion that Americans have had enough; they have grown tired of being exploited, ignored, and neglected by those in power who are sworn to serve the general public but often serve themselves instead. Despite the slight variation in their approaches to revolution, both liberals and conservatives displayed an aura of unnerved anticipation for some significant systemic rehaul—something also important to remember moving forward in the social sciences and political initiatives as the academic and political elite continue to strive for relatability and informative contextual nuance.
CONCLUSION

Ultimately, this study explores the interaction between mechanisms of rural identity and the formation of political attitudes in rural and small-town central Pennsylvania. Guided by understandings of American rurality and its particular adversities, this research utilizes ethnographic observational data and in-depth participant interviews to better understand political attitudes and expectations of rural Pennsylvanians as well as how these are influenced by and connected to one’s identity as a rural American. By sampling four counties in Appalachian Pennsylvania, this study gains a unique insight into a population undoubtedly affected by its diverse surrounding geography; sandwiched between two major cities and neighboring other non-Appalachian rural areas, folks from these counties are valuable subjects on their own as well as in context with larger-scale sociopolitical pictures. Especially considering the tendency of sociopolitical research to overlook rural folks, this study adds to the existing literature by centering rural narratives in social, personal, and political exploration. By focusing specifically on the attitudes and mechanisms of rural politics, this study aims to provide a clearer picture of what is expected from policy geared toward rural areas. Even in successful urban-rural policy where each relies on and benefits from the other, this study serves to illuminate more clearly what affected rural folks need from such policies in order to feel more seen, heard, and represented by their elected officials. Important not only for scholarship and effective governing, politicians may also benefit from research such as this; by better understanding the wants and needs of rural Pennsylvanians (and perhaps, by extension, rural Americans), political hopefuls can adjust their communicated agendas and campaign reaches to more effectively serve their electorate and foster trust that this study largely finds fractured.
While notable differences were found among rural liberals and rural conservatives in the sampled four Pennsylvania counties, there were also several commonalities found between the two groups that appear to be products of mechanisms informing rural identity. While rural identity seems to influence the political attitudes of these groups in different ways, its traces can be found throughout each group’s values, ethical guidelines, political and peer expectations, and hopes for America’s political future. Nevertheless, this study finds that some aspects of rural identity, however influential, may also contribute to the cyclical adversity and habitual response to such hardship (suggested by Berger and Luckmann 1996) experienced by rural pockets of the United States and underwrite the tones and sentiments expressed in political conjecture by those that live and die there. Such a powerful process calls for deeper, more holistic understandings for those that dictate or inform public policy that impacts these areas. This study begins a small part of this process by exploring one area worthy of research in its own right as the heart of important political factors like coal production, agricultural yield, manufacturing industry, and more are found sandwiched between two major cities in a set of “microstates” home to diverse economies, geography, and politics. Known irreverently as “Pennsyltucky” and “the Alabama in between Pittsburgh and Philadelphia” (by political strategist James Carville), rural and small-town Pennsylvania offer unique insight into the under-extolled parts of a persuasive swing state. Even amongst a perpetually urbanizing society, rurality and rural identity remain significant elements of the American essence and must be paid due attention to best govern and serve the nation as a whole.

**Findings**

While aspects of rurality and rural identity seemed to inform some political attitudes and values of sampled rural liberals, right-leaning ideology seemed more strongly influenced. For example, rural Pennsylvania liberals in this study highly valued their communities by supporting
local businesses and wanting more funding for community infrastructure. This sample of liberals regarded their communities as worthy of government aid and worth fighting for; they believed multiple areas could benefit from addiction rehabilitation centers, programs geared toward youth engagement, and felt generally like the area was a nice place to live that did not deserve the stigma often bestowed upon rural areas or the slander brought on by certain individuals that did not represent the rest of county residents (namely, the “wighte lives matter” fence painter).

Exhibiting Cramer’s (2016) idea of rural consciousness, rural Pennsylvania liberals had an understanding that they were lumped in with negative perceptions of rural people and spaces—backwards, uneducated, derelict, and prejudiced. “It’s a shame because we aren’t all like that. This area has its good parts and its bad parts, just like everywhere else. Once you get to the outskirts a little bit, this place is actually a really nice place to live. Even in town isn’t bad; it’s just not for me, personally.” This popular perspective came from Hilda, a liberal high school teacher and progressive political advocate. “I wouldn’t want to live anywhere else and I’m proud to be from here. [Her school district] made me who I am today, which is something I’m proud of.”

Similarly, sampled rural conservatives also felt pride associated with their rural roots despite the knowledge of negative perception. “I guess they [liberals, urban folks, etc.] think we’re [rural conservatives] just a group a backwoods hillbillies. And maybe we are; I don’t know. I’m proud to be a redneck, and fuck anyone who has a problem with that. Me and my own, we’re doing just fine.” Andrew kicked back in his kitchen chair and clinked bottles with his buddy who smiled and nodded, content with their identities’ associations and their championship within such stigma and adversity—a prideful reclamation. A distinct difference between liberal and conservative rural pride, however, was the ferocity with which it was displayed. While
liberal displays were certainly present, they were less prominent and aggressive than conservative ones. As demonstrated by Andrew’s and Hilda’s quotes, conservatives’ pride often held notes of hostility—likely a mechanism of defense against their perceived negative stereotypes. Displays of conservativism showcased not only confidence and pride in certain held ideologies including strong Christian nationalism, but an apparent eagerness to anger liberals and provoke discomfort among opposers. For example, popular conservative displays featured sayings like “make liberals cry again,” “don’t blame me, I voted for Trump,” and “patriotic Christian Republican female—how else can I piss you off?” Popular liberal displays remarked things like, “we believe Black lives matter; love is love; feminism is for everyone; no human being is illegal; science is real; be kind to all,” “no matter where you are from, we’re glad you’re our neighbor,” and “hate has no home here.” In general, sampled rural Pennsylvania liberals showed more remorse that the area and people they love were perceived so distastefully and made efforts to separate themselves from the archetypes conservatives enthusiastically embraced.

Additionally, rural conservatives in this sample latched onto ideals of stark individualism and independence far stronger than the liberal sample. Conservatives saw these items as characteristics of freedom and their religious liberty (despite these characteristics not having much, if any, inherent religious undertones), therefore scorning anyone or anything they perceived as threats to that liberty. While liberals also liked the ability to exercise independence, they placed higher value on collective contributions to a common good that conservatives saw as suffocating to their own personal potentials. Liberals were happier to contribute tax dollars to government programs and to make personal sacrifices in the name of a common best interest; for example, liberals showed more favorable views toward things like welfare, gun control policy,
Medicaid, and pandemic-driven mask mandates while conservatives viewed such policies as stifling, unfair, and even downright asinine as masks were, sometimes, equated to muzzles. Both groups exhibited reflections of rural identity in these ways, valuing both community and individualism. Conservatives in this example, however, exhibit illustrations of paradoxical thinking in ways that liberals did not.

By valuing more individual contributions to one’s community but being unwilling to contribute to larger-scale initiatives that would positively affect it, conservatives in this sample further illustrate the value of in-groups and personal networks in the deployment and influence of rural identity on political attitudes. To reiterate, in-groups and community within this sample of conservatives seemed to be synonymized with the idea of “one’s own” (further illustrating Berger’s [1996] theory of familiarity/habit and identity formation) and pockets of the “deserving” which excludes large groups of people and, often, entire enclaves in one’s locale. Liberals in this sample seemed to include larger networks of people within their definition of “community,” while conservatives’ definitions changed depending on their willingness to contribute to its best interest. For example, conservatives in this sample were enthusiastic about helping certain people under certain conditions; during these conversations, these people were considered their community. Whether this meant supporting small business by buying local, donating time and/or money to those deemed worthy of assistance, or contributing tax dollars to the military and law enforcement, those benefiting from these efforts were considered part of an in-group or community to which conservatives felt connected in some way. But there were other, closer network connections that did not make this “community” cut and were considered by the conservative sample to be outsiders separate from the communities in which they take pride—neighbors and town residents on welfare, non-patriots, liberals, or other oppositional identities
that were often inadvertently racialized. This also showcases pervasive Christian nationalism with the rural conservative sample, as the idea that the United States should be a God honoring nation (Whitehead 2018, 2020) in all social and legal ways permeated ideas of one’s deservingness of legal aid and social acceptability. The desire for a government who prioritizes in-groups that characterize a laborious white Christian conservative America (Perry and Whitehead 2021) translates to understandings of desirables and undesirables, deservingness and undeservingness, and true Americans and new wave enemies from whom America and its roots must rightfully be reclaimed. And these enemies, while broad and nuanced, translated often into the idea of liberals and liberal ideology. Liberals in this study “othered” conservatives as well, but mostly in ideological and associative ways; they wished not to be associated with the negative stigmas brought to rural areas by conservatives that also live there, as they saw radical conservatives as contaminants of an otherwise excellent place. When speaking of a community, liberals in this sample did not exclude groups deemed undeserving of their support in the way that conservatives did. In general, they were more willing to view their roles in collective societal contributions more favorably than conservatives, who did not appreciate the expectation or mandate to contribute their resources to causes believed unworthy. Conservatives preferred to keep their resources as close as possible, contributing only to people and causes considered familiar enough to be an in-group.

While it is possible that some of the out-group othering coming from this group of conservatives can be attributed to dissonance in beliefs, it may also be that observed dissonance is so because of a contradiction of explanation attributed to social desirability bias—underreporting of socially undesirable actions or attitudes to avoid social judgement (Tappin, Van der Leer, and McKay 2017). Due to the highly racialized associations with anti-rurality (i.e.,
government aid recipience, laziness, conformity, elitism, privilege, non-Christian beliefs, etc.), it could be the case that contradictory beliefs about when government intervention is or is not okay lie more in the understanding of who exactly benefits from such intervention—another important part of Cramer’s (2016) rural consciousness. Such a significant piece of rural political attitudes is another example of the value of reflective literature in this field; these mindsets, habitual identity indicators, and ideological/behavior responses may be observed less empirically and more reflectively as such unfavorable attitudes are difficult to scientifically capture due to social desirability bias and a general aversion to label oneself as prejudiced. Put more simply, perhaps government is less highly favored when its actions are perceived to aid racial minorities who are, by association, intrinsically anti-rural and therefore, unethical in many important ways; oppositely, then, government intervention would be viewed more favorably when its actions are perceived to harm these groups. This can be observed both with reflective and empirical observation through the dissonance regarding disdain for “big government” and fierce trust and support of larger surveillance bodies like the police and military—particularly since the conservative “blue [police] lives matter” mantra arose solely as a response to the Black Lives Matter movement’s mission to address systemic racism primarily in law enforcement and the judicial sphere. Even with such staunch military support, such looming surveillance is seen as protection from and controlling of foreign, ethnic outsiders like those from Middle Eastern and Asian countries. This sample seemed to synonomize these groups not only with strangeness, but also with danger, anti-American agendas, and even poor hygiene (referring specifically to the wet markets in Asia once hypothesized to be the source of the coronavirus and other diseases foreign to the US). Though, of course, few people would be enthusiastic to admit to a stranger, or even to themselves, that their principles are racist; so, a myriad of convoluted justifications for
such a deeply rooted mentality become evident in the form of disjointed, dissonant explanations for when “big government” is acceptable or preferred. However, further research should be conducted to better understand this conjecture with more empirical means rather than the regional reflections that currently serve as the primary source of such observed discourse.

Also worth noting is the difference in how the liberal and conservative samples viewed media and elites. Again, conservatives in the sample exhibited clearer influences of rural identity on attitudes toward academics, scientists, and politicians. These types were considered “elites” by the conservative sample and were viewed unfavorably, in line with parts of rural identity that deem these groups untrustworthy, out of touch, narcissists who wrongfully place rural folks far down on the social pyramid. Many believed also that these elites controlled the mainstream media, making media as an institution as untrustworthy and agenda ridden as those of higher education. This translated to an understanding of media and academic distrust as a key component of the rural conservative identity. Instead, trusted sources were those who outrightly denounce or “expose” mainstream media/academy in the name of spreading real truth instead of, what is believed by this group to be, liberal agendas—those like Fox News, Breitbart, The Blaze, Dr. Simone Gold, and more recently, Dr. Mehmet Oz. Conservatives in this sample liked the idea of the “anti-politician” for the same reasons they liked ideas of “anti-media” and “anti-science/academia.” These elites are viewed by this sample as inherently anti-rural and anti-conservative; therefore, a declaration of “anti-“ institution is also a proclamation of “pro-“ them, “pro-“ their loved ones, and “pro-“ America. Unsurprisingly, this led conservatives in my sample to a great deal of misinformation as they turned to social media, peer narratives, and sources that rejected empirical science. This inevitably led to misinformed attitudes that translated (and likely will continue in the future) to political behavior that contributes to the cyclical adversity faced by
rural areas in the United States. Liberals in this sample, on the other hand, had far more trust in institutions like academia and science, and tended to prefer media outlets that referenced accredited sources they trusted like the Center for Disease Control, the World Health Organization, and specialized experts. However, that is not to say that liberals did not also fall victim to misinformation as they, like the conservative sample, found legitimacy and comfort in narratives that did not call their existing beliefs and ethics into question. Spending time in political and cultural echo chambers like social media and like-minded groups reproduced misinformation (Tappin et al 2017) which cycled through individuals and encouraged even more polarization among those with differing conceptualizations of reality and news (Ribeiro et al 2017); for both groups, differences in opinion became bitter ethical battles as morals and measures of intelligence became the most defining difference between partisan groups. Each group, regardless of empathic displays, saw the other as uninformed, naïve, immoral, and incorrect—detriments to the kind of society in which they most want to live.

However, despite these notable differences, what was expected is clear; liberals and conservatives in rural and small-town Pennsylvania largely want the same things. Both groups want the best for their communities, the best for their country, and the best for themselves. But this is deceptively simple when we remember that visions of what is “best” are not always agreed-upon, nor are the paths by which we achieve it. While sampled rural liberals exhibited traces of rural identity, the conservative sample seemed to more strongly emanate its stout reflections in their political attitudes. Perhaps, in this way, conservatives in the sampled counties are more “uniquely rural” than liberals were, which could be explained by differences in educational attainment and/or more diverse cultural exposure in some way. Regardless, sociopolitical sciences must continue to conduct community-based research in areas like these
(and in other geographic-specific regions) to better understand these differences and their political implications. In-depth community research allows those with power to inform or make political decisions that affect large groups of people to better understand the people whose lives they are changing.

*Understanding Rural Partisanship*

Exploring rural partisanship is imperative to accurate understandings of virtually any part of the United States or American politics. Even though the majority of the US population is concentrated in more urban and suburban areas (USDA), nearly three quarters of American land is considered rural (USDA). Although less crowded, these areas are not desolate or unimportant; rural America is vital to the maintenance of the United States as it provides safe and affordable food, drinking water, sustainable energy, and outdoor recreation. Since rural areas are less densely populated, attention in research, public outreach, and politics has been largely paid to places like big cities and their outskirts. Because of this, rural America and its citizens have fallen by the wayside and the unique needs of their communities are dimly understood and continue to suffer at the hands of a disconnected political elite and a system that often does not work well for them. Rural folks see this disfunction; they feel it every day. The unique adversity shoved on rural America acts cyclically as rural folks, particularly conservatives, fall into patterns of bitter hostility toward their elected officials and those whom they perceive to unjustly reap some of the benefits to which they should also be entitled. Feelings of resentment and volatility fester over decades of generational burnout, poverty, health disparity, and other disenfranchisement as the knowledge of who to trust, who not to trust, and one’s place in the world is inherited from those whose truth this has always been.
Not only do scientists and politicians do Americans a grave disservice by neglecting rural people, they do a disservice to their missions and careers as public servants. Rural areas, though home to fewer people, are home to groups who tend to be fairly politically engaged—probably due to their distrustful outlook toward politicians. Rural Americans seem to be more clued into local politics and smaller-scale elections than those in urban concentrations, likely because the rural demographic is primarily white non-Hispanic and older generations—two of the biggest voter turnout groups (Population Reference Bureau). In this case, people particularly unsatisfied with the current political system may be particularly motivated to exercise their role in its modification, however minute that role may seem. Additionally, neglecting these perspectives may present danger to the pursuit of ethno-racial equity in the US as perpetuation of Christian and white nationalism appear to be significant drivers of rural conservativism. All this being said, rural Americans turned out in big numbers during the 2016 presidential election, effectively propelling Donald Trump into office in the hopes that his uniquely unpolitical status and visions would be the answer to a pervasive, ongoing problem in US politics. He was their voice that had been silenced, their perspective that had been overlooked, and their insider representative among blockades of untrustworthy liberal and political bureaucrats who never had their best interest in mind.

Of course, Donald Trump’s presidency sat equally unwell with other groups, and he was unseated in 2020 as Democrat Joe Biden took over. Rural conservatives took this loss with great heaviness as they mourned the glimmer of hope seen in such an unconventional leader. Allegations of election fraud ran rampant throughout conservative media and echo chambers as a means to cope with the reality of, this time, being outnumbered by the very groups that
effectively threaten their ideal America and, by extension, their opportunity to successfully pursue the potential it promised.

While it has been speculated by many, including this author, that a great deal of understandings informing rural conservatism are fundamentally erroneous, their effects on American politics and socioeconomics are real and apparent. As said by sociological theorists Dorothy and William Thomas (1928), “if men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences.” In other words, human behavior is less dependent on objective reality and more on our subjective interpretations of it. This sentiment is reflected time and time again in rural voting behaviors, as persistent conservatism and its keystones regurgitate perpetuations of the same problematic candidates and harmful systemic policy—a problem that can only be fully understood by deeply exploring the mechanisms of rural partisanship.

Of course, this exploration has its own challenges. Like any other area, rurality has nuance and variety; there is no unified “rural voice” that speaks for all those feeling unrepresented and unsatisfied. In order to best understand the mechanisms of rural partisanship and the needs and expectations of rural areas, administrators must approach rural studies with smaller scopes aimed at piecing together a much larger picture. This research takes a small, yet important, piece of this gargantuan process by studying perhaps a microcosm of larger rural America—rural and small-town Pennsylvania. Although Pennsylvania itself is worthy of its own study due to its unique geography, industry, and demographic, its encompassment of many labels may prove useful in understanding other similar areas throughout the US. Rural and small-town Pennsylvania are home to all kinds of folks—from exurbanites and townies to more isolated Appalachian residences, studying Pennsylvania encompasses a look into a wide variety of perspectives potentially lying elsewhere throughout the less urban United States. So, while this
study only reaches four Pennsylvania counties, it includes those closer to more metropolitan areas like Harrisburg and Philadelphia as well as those in the deep rolling hills of this partly Appalachian state and provides a rich insight into the diverse perspectives that live here. In this way, this study serves as a blueprint for future studies with abilities to reach further throughout the rural state and others like it.

Limitations

As with the majority of studies, the design of this current study is subject to limitations. Among them is the sample size; this study drew from four counties in rural Pennsylvania, producing twenty interviews. While this may provide a useful foundation for similarly conducted research, future research would benefit both from a larger sample of individuals and drawing participants from more counties in a given area. Also beneficial would be additional time for data collection and rapport building. As found in this study, rural conservatives (who make up the majority of this sample) show low levels of trust for academics and researchers; so, while many were willing to participate in the study, many were not. Allotting more time for rapport building and the development of familiarity between researcher and subject may be advantageous for future work centering rural and/or conservative folks. Additionally, as every researcher holds their own biases despite efforts to remain nonpartisan and neutral, it may benefit future work to compare data analysis from researchers with diverse ethical convictions so as to minimize the potential for unintentional bias.

Another interesting addition to this research would be the comparison of Appalachian and non-Appalachian rural political attitudes as well as rural and urban/suburban political attitudes. Integrating a comparative study would allow further insight into political influence most unique to different kinds of rurality and mechanisms of a rural identity by identifying influential aspects
of other geographic identities on residents’ political values, attitudes, and expectations. Studies like these may provide clarification on any notable differences between Appalachia and non-Appalachian rurality in addition to how rural Pennsylvania or rural America compares to more densely populated areas. In this same vein, it may be beneficial to conduct a more empirical study collaborating with multiple social science fields (namely sociology and psychology) to further explore the speculation of rural conservatives’ dissonant beliefs and explanations fueled by racial bias and social desirability that, so far, are largely captured by reflective analyses.

Finally, it may be worthwhile to include an in-depth analysis of religion in rural areas and religious influence on identity, ethics, and political attitudes. This sample of rural Pennsylvanians found a curious amount of religious rhetoric and rampant Christian nationalism in political and ethical discussions that are worthy of their own separate study, as I suspect a notable influence of white nationalist Christian ideology on the formation of rural identity and political attitudes—particularly within conservativism—that transcends just religious affiliation.

**Field Implications**

The findings in this study showcase part of a larger phenomenon at hand—paradoxical political behaviors among rural conservatives influenced by deeply rooted identity mechanisms and cyclical adversity. Even among those interviewed, many participants were skeptical of the research and investigator as parts of a distrusted academy. Illustrating also the portion of Cramer’s (2016) rural consciousness wherein people are aware of how they are perceived by others, many of my conservative participants took defensive tones and shared wary glances between one another as they associated me with liberalism despite my proclaimed neutrality. While this behavior demonstrates the distrust expected from this group, it also demonstrates an expectation of being judged, even by someone whose communicated goals were to give space for
their voices and stories. Not only doubt and hesitation, but suspicion drove the conversations with many conservative participants, at least for a little while. This air is almost unfortunate—it communicates an expectation of being taken advantage of by those whose duty is to seek understanding and work toward societal benefit. Findings of this research further illustrate the fractures between rural conservativism and “elitist” institutions like academia and politics. Findings also show stark variance between rural conservatives and rural liberals. While liberals in this sample showed traces of textbook rural identity in their political attitudes, such identity was not so crucially centered in their political processes the way it was for conservatives. In this way, it seemed that rural liberals had somehow “transcended” the parts of rural identity that influence detrimental political behaviors; some even saw it this way themselves, viewing their conservative peers as devolved and imprudent. This very idea, of course, further funnels into the perceptions in rural consciousness; “they” think “we” are stupid, and therefore, “we” will behave appropriately—defensively and aggressively proud as a challenge to this wrongful and hurtful narrative (recall the difference in conservative and liberal attitudinal displays). Additionally, the idea that rural liberals have “surpassed” rural conservatives ideologically further illustrates the pathways to general liberal elitism in the eyes of right leaners. Their rural consciousness tells them that liberals think they are morally superior, even despite the many commonalities shared between both groups. This may serve to explain why the “elite” is not exclusively conceptualized as non-rurals, academics, or politicians, but also as liberalism—and its affiliates, often racialized—in general. Removing themselves from the more strongly rurally informed conservatives, liberals in this sample did not present quite as uniquely “rural,” but rather more as liberal folks who prefer to live in rural areas. This distinction begs further research into rural partisanship, as it seems that such an idea may apply more directly to conservatives specifically.
Regardless, findings from this study build upon literature centering rural identity and political attitudes by examining partisanship of both rural liberals and conservatives, even if the call to separate the groups for further investigation appears valuable.

This study highlights aspects of American politics not often centered in sociopolitical research. Adding to the literature on rural and political sociology, this study offers insight into how both fields may interact with one another as well as possible interactions with other aspects of policy work such as geography and regional history. Such aspects play crucial roles in the formation of residents’ identities, and therefore also in the formation of their political attitudes. As such a monumental and complex interaction of factors, the process of effective politicking is unlikely to be wholly tackled in any one study. Studies like this help to break down such a process into more digestible pieces, allowing for closer inspection of important informative political mechanisms. That way, research determining policy that reaches and affects large groups of people may work toward being as informed as possible.

This research also draws attention to the importance of identifying deeply rooted systemic influences on political trends. While this study’s ultimate goal is to examine the role of rural identity in political attitude formation, it and others like it may serve to highlight the influential systemic mechanisms at work. There is a complex dialect between the political elite and the rest of the country which can result in the detriment of certain groups—specifically rural conservatives. For example, rural Pennsylvania conservatives in this study have negative opinions and expectations of their elected officials that are informed by their identities as rural folks; yet understandings of one’s rural identity stem largely from politics’ effects on rural areas. In a cyclical regurgitation of animosity toward government and politicians, rural people are understood to lean in more conservative directions due to emotional appeals toward explosive
cultural issues (Frank 2005) that speak to the core of their rural identity. “Liberal” politics, like government programs and public safety operations, oppose certain ethical keystones that often lead rural conservatives to vote against their own self-interests as potential beneficiaries of said programs.

*Future Directions*

If this phenomenon of paradoxical voting among rural conservatives is regarded as a cyclical and systemic problem to be fixed, we must first understand the mechanisms that inform the problem itself; otherwise, any solution will deliver only partially—remedying inconsistently and offering no real resolution as issues’ roots lie festering unaddressed. But perhaps it is less appropriate to view rural partisanship as a problem to be fixed and more, instead, as an opportunity of undoing and unlearning. Rather than labeling such a large group as broken and requiring management, sociopolitical researchers should view the various phenomena of rural partisanship as indicators of their roles and presence (or lack thereof) in big-picture American politics as well as an opportunity to improve public service on grander, more sustainable scales. And since a key informer of rural politics is the notion of being “left behind” and disregarded by politicians and academic elites, it is especially important to elevate rural voices in said sociopolitical research. As former Senior Policy Analyst in the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy Russell Neuman says, “it is easy for the power junkies close to the citadel in Washington to forget that the rest of the country is out there” (Neuman 1986). As the American partisan divide grows, it is especially important to bridge this gap with the transparency, intention, care, and determination of public research that informs political policy. By conducting exploratory research in rural areas like those of this sample, disdained elites may begin to slowly build trust and credibility with populations who largely doubt and scorn them for
their lack in rural engagement. Likewise, academics and politicians have a lot to learn from rural folks; after all, America cannot progress in any direction without working knowledge of, cooperation with, and support from rural people.

Meaningful integration of rural partisanship in public policy research may look like deployment of multiple teams throughout the US with intentions of consulting a variety of communities and areas on issues of interest. For a thorough research effort, rural liberals, conservatives, and other political identities should be studied and consulted on like issues separately as well as examined as whole rural “units.” This may prove valuable in assessing whether rural areas are more influenced by some expansive idea of rural politics or, as this study speculates, plain conservatism which ideologically dominates rural areas. In other words, such a study may further explore the effects of rural identity not on rural partisanship as a whole, but rather on rural liberalism and rural conservatism separately. In terms of policy-based research, however, it may be beneficial to include analyses where these separate examinations are further investigated by intentionally blending the groups together in dialogue to discuss what is perceived necessary and beneficial for a common community/geography. That way, researchers can better contextualize participant responses and interactions as well as guide conversation to a productive and meaningful direction as different partisan groups act as one informative unit—something more or less unavoidable when working toward effective large-scale policy. By better understanding the mechanisms behind certain partisanship and attitudes, researchers can not only adjust methodology and language to more effectively reach their participants, they can help engage and involve participants in giving rurality more of a voice in American politics. For even though rural areas are surely considered in policy efforts, many rural folks in this sample—regardless of political affiliation—felt either misrepresented or unrepresented in the current
political system. Further research into rural consciousness and rural partisanship could help clarify the needs and expectations of rural Americans that feel left out of research and policy efforts that center urbanity as the places with the most people. Including more ethnographic research in rural areas may quell feelings of neglect from people in rural areas, potentially encouraging less political cynicism and less paradoxical voting by extension that would begin to address cyclical root issues.

Understanding and respecting American rurality is imperative in the pursuit for equitable public policy. As it is now, urban and rural areas depend on one another in a myriad of ways as their production and expenditure dually influence each other (Davis et al 2002). To completely separate rural areas from urbanity in any social and political sense would deliver an incomplete understanding of their functionalities and roles in the American sociopolitical ecosystem. However, much public policy both state and federal still rely too heavily on impacts and attitudes in urban areas (Howard 2013). Instead of implementing blanket policies that work only for certain pockets of the country or urban-rural linkage policies where half of this relationship is under-consulted, more regionally based research focused on centering rurality and the rural narrative could inspire better-informed interwoven policies, thereby more efficiently distributing the benefits of such policies throughout society.

By further exploring nuances and mechanisms with rural identity and partisanship, rural sociopolitical ecosystems can be enhanced and nurtured more sustainably through public policy that addresses the needs and expectations of those who actually live there. In turn, this would serve to advance national development as urban-rural linkages work together to lay groundwork for a stronger, more collaborative government. While certainly imperfect, as all public service is, this approach may serve to better address certain systemic inequalities that contribute to
misdirected exasperation in any identity-based political perspective—not just rural—and bridge partisan divides that currently fracture the American experiment. It is my hope that this research can serve as a spark of inspiration for similarly conducted studies informing public policy and sociopolitical work by including sidelined rural perspectives in more collaborative policy-based research.
APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Maps of central Pennsylvania counties with indicated research areas

Map of Pennsylvania by the Urban or Rural Appalachian Regions and the PSCI Catchment Area (Wang et al 2020)
Appendix 2: Map of Appalachia by per capita market income; county rates as percentages of US average

Appalachian Regional Commission 2019

Created by the Appalachian Regional Commission, August 2019
Data Source: U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis, REIS, 2017
Data Classification Scheme: Critical Breaks

U.S. average = $42,861
Appalachian average = $31,311
Appendix 3: Recruitment materials: flier and abridged research pitch accompanying personal business cards

Abridged research pitch accompanying stacks of business cards; printed on small strip of paper and tacked above stack of cards:

Seeking interviewees wanting to discuss living in central PA, their political views, and more. All identities and identifying factors kept confidential. Can meet in person or via phone/video chat.
Appendix 4: Black Lives Matter protests—signs and show-out

Paul Weaver Images
Appendix 5: People for Freedom, Facebook group postings

People for Freedom, group home page posts
I’m frustrated, troubled and heartsick. Anyone who has been to meetings has heard me repeatedly tell everyone where and how to get ivermectin and Hydroxychloroquine. I’ve said it on here many times as well. I have been clear that it is available for preventative care in case you were to get covid.

Yet, some continue to give away their prescriptions to those who have not heeded my advice, when suddenly the dreaded bioweapon strikes and this who are sick have nowhere to turn, because a trip to the hospital has a very high chance of killing you.

Leading doctors like Peter McCollough, Simone Gold, Ryan Cole, Richard Fleming and many more have not lost a single Covid patient because they refuse to subscribe to the protocols of the business side of the medical industry, which suspiciously doesn’t treat Covid patients until they are very ill. Even remdesivir, as deadly as it can be in later stages because it shuts down the kidneys in a third of patients, can be effective if used early on, yet people are left to get so sick that there is typically no way to revive them because they are instructed to wait until they are very ill before treating them.

Sadly, we have also seen some members of and even family members who have died as a result of not having a supply of either of these wonder drugs on hand when the virus struck.

People, please don’t be complacent. This is no time for any kind of complacency, whether protecting ourselves from the bio weapon or fighting for the freedoms that are being swept away from us like a tsunami.

Every one of you needs to take 5000-10000 IU of Vitamin D3 daily, zinc, Vit C, in the very least, and you need to have a prescription for HCQ of Ivermectin on hand. Such protocols are 1000 times more effective than am the jab or a mask.

You can get it from pushhealth.com, americasfrontlinedoctors.com, myfreedoc.com or any of a growing number of sources. If they give you a list of local pharmacies to pick it up at, make sure you call ahead to make sure they will fill the script for you because some will not.

This isn’t hard. You can pick up the vitamins while shopping and it takes about 10 minutes to order the drugs - a very small sacrifice to save your life.

The only reason this virus appears out of hand is because of the gross irresponsibility of the medical community to treat early. Doctors don’t want to take responsibility for anything anymore. It’s easier for them to just pass the buck and follow their employer’s protocol, which doctors like McCollough and others say has led directly to 95% of all Covid deaths. Let that sink in.

Please, be prepared. This lack of attentiveness tells me that if the grid were to go down, or they came for your guns, and to force vaccinate you, you would cave in the drop of a hat.

Take ten minutes right now and go online and order a prescription. It could save your life or the life of a loved one.
Examples of misinformation spread

We just had another couple saved with HCQ. One of my employees, who is a heavy smoker, who no doubt has COPD, judging by how bad his cough is on a good day, got hit with covid a week ago, and was very bad off. His wife called me and I ran some HCQ up to him. Within 3 days, his coughing, congestion, fever and headache were gone, and he was back to work on Monday. His wife tested positive on Saturday, and had all the symptoms. She took the daily dose, and woke up on Sunday completely symptom-free.

We have seen this repeated time and again with employees, family and friends. Anyone who believes that it makes medical sense to not treat this disease early, when so many are dying because it was too far advanced by the time they were treated, is, quite frankly, an idiot. At no point in medical history has a virus ever been treated in this manner. Hard to imagine people so brain washed as to think this is somehow funny when so many have died because of the way it has been handled.

Example of anti-media beliefs

We are getting ready to start moving off of Facebook. It’s time to stop supporting disgraceful businesses like this. They are self destructing. If you’re real people, you know where to go to join the Community. If you don’t ask someone. We’re on a mission and it just got a whole lot bigger.

You can send me a private message for more information. We aren’t going to go public with it. But you can join it and it doesn’t cost anything. But it will be a wealth of information and give you the ability to communicate with other Patriots continuously. It is really pretty amazing.
Example of “sheep” usage
Example of patriotic language and recruitment
Example of “us versus them” othering of liberals and association of BLM with violence/delinquency

...does not have an organized effort in at this point, although many of our members live in Benton and were there on Monday. But I am certain I speak for the overwhelming majority of people in condemning this act of vandalism. This is inexcusable.

That’s the way the left, like Antifa and BLM work, not Patriots.

If you’ve been to our meetings you’ve heard me say time and again, quoting Psalm 127:1, “Unless the Lord builds the house, they labor in vain who build it.” And if we ever needed His help it is now.

Folks, I understand fully that what is being forced upon us by this tyranny that has overcome us is evil beyond anyone’s comprehension. But one thing that we are realizing in our debates with school boards is that we are the ones who have studied the facts about these issues and know the truth. It is OUR children and grandchildren who are effected and we want them safe. The masks are making them quite unsafe on several levels. We need this insanity to stop.
Appendix 6: Black Lives Matter counter-protests

Paul Weaver Images
Appendix 7: Anti-Black Lives Matter on local social media

BLM Central PA, post commentary

Susan
Get out of the park in [redacted] !!! That park has great meaning to that town! And it is certainly not you we don’t need your kind in the park

Tony
i would like to know what pain of his i don't know about?

Keith
Tony Probably not getting enough Public Assistance.

Jay
Got news for you boy, your black life means absolutely nothing to me

Ron
Black lives don’t matter anymore until they stop the BS
Appendix 8: Map of “coal country”—Pennsylvania Coal Resource Map
Pennsylvania Earth Science Teachers’ Association

Appendix 9: Wighte Lives Matter fence in Northumberland County
The Daily Item, 2021
Appendix 10: Examples of conservative identity and pride/expression and fear/paranoia in sampled counties

Paul Weaver Images; Mikaela Zimmerman
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