Political Understanding of Economic Crises: The Shape of Resentment toward Public Employees

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Abstract: How do people make sense of economic crises? They use perspectives that are often a function of how they categorize people as "us" and "them." These divisions become ripe for mobilization when people associate "them" with whom is to blame. Who people blame and the battle lines drawn tell us much about the policies that become possible and the arguments that are likely to bring about the most powerful mobilization in the wake of economic crises. This paper examines the way people talked about economic issues leading up to the recent economic crisis. It uses participant observation with groups of people who meet of their own accord in settings in which they regularly gather. The fieldwork was conducted by repeated visits to 36 groups in 27 communities sampled from across the Midwestern state of Wisconsin, between May 2007 and February 2011. The investigation examines how people use their conceptions of us and them to make sense of economic crises. It reveals the split between public and private employees that erupted in protests in Madison, the state capital, and across the state, in February 2011. The results expose the logic of the perspectives through which public employees are to blame for the recession.

Paper prepared for presentation to the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions, Vanderbilt University, October 20th, 2011. Earlier versions of this paper were presented at the annual meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association, 2011, and the conference on Popular Reactions to the Economic Crisis, Oxford University, June 24-26, 2011. I am sincerely grateful to the people who allowed me to take part in their conversations for this study. I also thank Tim Bagshaw, Emily Erwin-Frank, Valerie Hennings, Ryan Miller, Tricia Olsen, Kerry Ratigan, and especially Sarah Niebler for transcription, translation, and research assistance. I am grateful to the Ira and Ineva Reilly Baldwin Wisconsin Idea Endowment Grant and the University of Wisconsin-Madison Department of Political Science for funding that made this research possible. I sincerely thank Kent Tedin, Alexander Shashko, Nancy Bermeo, Larry Bartels and PREC conference participants for comments on earlier versions.

BLAME WALL STREET

–Protest poster printed by the National Nurses United, state capitol square, Madison, Wisconsin, *U.S.A.,* March 2011

FOUR CORNERS OF DECEIPT AND CORRUPTION: MEDIA, ACADEMIA, SCIENCE, GOVERNMENT

—Handmade protest poster at Tax Day Tea Party rally, state capitol square, Madison, Wisconsin, *U.S.A.*, April 2010

How do people make sense of economic crises? What tools do they rely on, and how do they do so? In the United States, indicators like the unemployment rate and the Dow Jones Industrial Average serve as some points of reference, but people presented with the same facts often interpret the economy in different ways (Herrera 2010).

In particular, whom do people blame for a bad economy? If they see an economic crisis as an act of will, rather than an act of nature, what causal story do they use? When people attribute the cause to a political actor, organization, or social group the conditions are ripe for political mobilization (Stone 1989; see also Iyengar 1994). Thus, understanding the nature of causal stories for economic crises helps us understand the policies and the arguments that become possible in their wake.

This paper examines how people attributed blame for the recent economic crisis by examining the way they talked about it with people in their everyday social networks. That is, it examines processes of understanding, or the act of making sense of public affairs. It examines how people made attributions of blame and how they used perceptions of ingroups and outgroups to interpret their current economic conditions. To examine how people achieve these understandings, the paper uses participant observation with groups of people who meet of their own accord in settings in which they regularly gather. The fieldwork was conducted between May 2007 and February 2011 in 27 communities sampled from across the Midwestern state of Wisconsin. The purpose is not to generalize to the broader population of the United States, nor even Wisconsin. Instead, the investigation enables an examination of how people use their conceptions of us and them to make sense of economic crises. It reveals the split between public employees and private employees that erupted in protests in Madison, the state capital, and across the state in February 2011. The results expose the logic of the perspectives through which public employees are to blame for the recession, and illuminate a geographic component of political perspectives in which some nonmetro residents view the rural vs. urban map as synonymous with public employees vs. other people.

The state of Wisconsin entered the headlines around the world in 2011 as its newly-inaugurated Republican governor, Scott Walker, introduced a budget repair and biennial budget bill. He had taken the place of, Democrat Jim Doyle, who had declined to run again. Instead, Democrats nominated Tom Barrett, mayor of Wisconsin's most populous city, Milwaukee, to run in the general election against Walker. Walker was the Milwaukee County Executive. Walker won with 52% of the vote. He campaigned on a Tea Party platform, vowing to balance the state's budget without raising taxes. In one television advertisement he held up a brown lunch bag that said, "I have to brown bag it so I can pay Wisconsin taxes."

Walker took office on January 3, 2011. On Friday, February 11, 2011, he introduced a budget repair bill that called for an end to collective bargaining rights, except with respect

to wages, for all public employees except police and fire employees. It also required all public employees to increase their payroll contributions for health and pension benefits. Over the following weekend, union leaders began organizing protests at the Capitol. By Tuesday, February 15th, over 10,000 protestors gathered on the Capitol Square, and thousands more packed the inside. Two days later, the 14 Democrats in the state senate fled to Illinois, in an effort to block passage of the bill. The protests continued for weeks, peaking on Saturday, March 12th, when approximately 100,000 protestors packed the Capitol Square. Earlier that week, the legislature passed the collective bargaining provisions by removing fiscal components from it and thereby achieving quorum in the senate (despite the 14 missing Democrats). By mid-March, efforts to recall 16 state senators (8 Republican, 8 Democrat) were already underway, along with a campaign to recall Walker.[1]

The events in Madison in early 2011 constituted the most intense political uproar the state of Wisconsin had seen in decades, perhaps in its history. Reactions to the budget crisis in that state were perhaps among the most intense reactions in the United States to the economic crisis. What can the people of the state of Wisconsin teach us about how people make sense of economic crises? The following analyses examine how people were making sense of the economic crisis before Walker introduced his protest-inducing budget bills. This investigation reveals the way many people attributed blame for the economic crisis on public employees well before Walker and the Republicans in the legislature tapped into this resentment.

Understanding of the economy: self interest as group interest

By focusing on understanding, I am focusing on a process that I consider to be analytically distinct from evaluation. By understanding, I mean the act of interpreting or making sense of information. By evaluation, I mean the act of choosing or forming a preference for a candidate or policy. The two are obviously connected. My intent is to analyze the processes and perspectives that underlie preferences, as opposed to predicting those preferences.

What do people rely on when they *interpret* economic issues? Typically when we think about how people *evaluate* policies that have a fiscal impact, we expect that self-interest ought to matter. However, policy preferences do not always reflect economic self-interest as observers define it according to objective indicators like income, level of education, and type of occupation. For example, those who stand to lose (or at least not gain) from tax cuts nevertheless support them despite rising income inequality (Bartels 2008, chap. 6). This is just one of many examples of a weak link between self-interest and policy preferences (Citrin and Green 1990, Stoker 1994).

One insight from the self-interest literature is that the connection between self-interest and preferences lies in understanding how people define their interests (Stoker 1994). In addition, we have learned that self-interest interacts with symbolic politics in complex ways (Tedin 1994). That is, whether or not objectively determined self-interest affects policy preferences depends on attitudes toward social groups related to the policy. One prominent case is whites' attitudes toward busing to desegregate public schools, and the influence of their attitudes toward African-Americans (Tedin 1994; Sears, Hensler and Speer 1979).

[1] As of June 10, 2011, recall elections had been certified for 3 Democrats, and 6 Republicans.

To put it differently, self-interests are often understood as group interests. We commonly interpret "How does this affect me?" as "How does this affect people like me?" (Walsh 2004). Similarly, we often answer "What do I think about this policy?" by considering "What do I think about the social groups affected by this policy?" (Nelson and Kinder 1996; see also Schneider and Ingram 1993).

In general, social groups serve as a powerful tool for political thinking (Campbell et al. 1960, chaps. 12, 13; Conover 1984, 1988; Sears and Kinder 1985; Huddy 2003), since they act as reference points for social comparison and boundaries of allegiance, help guide notions of appropriate behavior and attitudes, and influence what messages people pay attention to and incorporate into prior beliefs. Part of this is the work of categorizing the world into social groups and developing psychological attachments to some of them (e.g., Tajfel et al. 1971; Tajfel and Turner 1986). The act of viewing politics through the lens of us vs. them is ubiquitous and powerful for policy preferences (Kinder and Kam 2009).

When we turn specifically to understanding—as opposed to evaluation—we should also expect social groups to be powerful tools. Understanding in general (not just about politics) is fundamentally about categorization (Medin and Cooley 1998; Chi, Feltovich and Glaser 1981; Hinsley, Hayes and Simon 1978). Typing events, people, and things as an instance of X simplifies the information environment, and also provides clues about how one ought to respond to the stimuli.

Work on group consciousness teaches us of the mobilizing effects of perspectives that link group identities and blame. This work argues that with respect to political participation, group identity is particularly likely to mobilize individuals when it is connected to a preference for one's ingroup, a sense that one's ingroup is disadvantaged, and a perception that one's position in society is the fault of the political system rather than individual behavior (Miller et al. 1981).

The extensive literature on attribution bias also suggests that people are likely to lean on us/them categorizations when attempting to understand broad economic events. This literature focuses on the causal stories people generate for intergroup interaction—not economic events—but it reveals that people have a tendency to attribute behavior in a way that favors ingroups and denigrates outgroups (e.g. Islam and Hewstone 1993).

Since us/them distinctions are powerful tools for understanding, and for understanding politics in particular, they are likely a central part of the way people make sense of a major event like an economic crisis. Knowing how people are carving up the world into us/them enables us to understand the politics that arise in the wake of economic crises. The sentiments that exist among members of the public form the pool of understandings from which politicians can pick divisions to exploit. Much of the shape of mass opinion is undoubtedly elite driven but predispositions are powerful (Zaller 1992). That is, mobilization is best achieved by sending messages that resonate with individuals' preexisting perspectives and preferences.

To understand the sentiments that are available for elites to tap into, it is most advantageous to listen to what people tell each other. That is, examining the perspectives that political entrepreneurs later cultivate into policy preferences requires watching how groups of people make sense of public affairs together in casual conversation. This is admittedly an unusual conception of public opinion. It assumes that public opinion is not just the aggregation of opinions expressed by individuals via mass sample scientific surveys. Instead, it harkens back to a somewhat forgotten conception in which public opinion is the product of groups of people competing with one another (Blumer 1948) or the product of people reacting to each others' communications (Bryce 1913).

Methods

The fieldwork analyzed for this study began as an investigation of the role of social class identity on political understanding. The purpose of this study is not to generalize to a population in the statistical sense. Therefore, the question driving my case selection was not whether the state was more or less typical of all U.S. states. Instead, since the generalizable contributions of this study are explanatory and conceptual, I chose a state for this study that has a good deal of economic heterogeneity across communities and therefore was likely to provide variety in the way people conceptualized their social class.

I chose the sites to study within this state by sampling particular communities using a stratified purposeful approach (Miles and Huberman 1994, 28). I categorized the counties in the state into 8 distinct regions, based on partisan leaning, median household income, population density, size of community, racial and ethnic heterogeneity, local industry, and agricultural background. I then purposively chose the city or population center in each region, and also randomly chose a smaller municipality. I included several additional municipalities to provide additional variation. The result was a sample of 27 communities.

To identify groups to study in each of these communities, I asked university county extension offices and local newspaper editors for advice regarding where I might find a group of people who met regularly and casually of their own accord in a gathering place to which I could gain access. The groups my informants suggested were typically informal groups that met in local restaurants, cafes or gas stations early on weekday mornings, or periodically in a local place of worship, or through a club such as a 4H group. (See Appendix A for descriptions of these groups and communities.) When possible, I spent time with multiple groups in a given municipality to provide greater socioeconomic and gender variation. I visited each of the groups between 1 and 5 times between May 2007 and June 2011.[2] To protect the confidentiality of the people I studied, I use pseudonyms and do not identify the communities by name except for Milwaukee and Madison, which are sufficiently large to obscure the identity of the people with whom I spent time.

My visits took the following form. When I first spent time with a group, I arrived at the location at the time an informant suggested the members would be meeting. Once I arrived, I greeted the members and asked for permission to sit with them. I explained that I was a public opinion researcher from the University of Wisconsin-Madison (the state's flagship public university), traveling around the state to become aware of which issues people were concerned with and their ideas for ways in which the university could better serve the people of the state. I asked for their permission to record our conversation, and passed out "small tokens of my appreciation" for their time—incentives, such as football schedules, donated from the university alumni association. I then asked, "What are the big concerns for people in this community?" and continued with other questions on my protocol [see Appendix B], adjusting the order and number of questions asked when necessary.[3] All of the conversations were recorded and transcribed, except for two groups, which permitted me to take handwritten notes instead.

My strategy for finding groups to study meant that the people I spent time with were predominantly male, non-Hispanic white and of retirement age. Of the 36 groups I studied, 12 were composed of only men, 3 were exclusively female, and the rest were of mixed

[2] The size of the morning coffee klatch groups varied from about 4 and 10 members. I re-visited seven groups after the February 2011 protests began.

[3] The questions in Appendix B were tailored to be relevant for the 4H groups.

gender, but predominantly male. Six of the groups were composed solely of retirees, 5 of people currently employed or unemployed, and 4 of high school students. The rest were composed of a mix of retirees and currently employed people, though the majority of the members in these mixed groups were retirees. Each of the 36 groups was composed of people of a similar occupational and educational background, although almost all groups contained some variety in that respect (e.g., one group of loggers included a real estate agent). My strategy resulted in a good deal of socioeconomic variation across groups, from people who were "one step from homelessness" to wealthy business owners. I call the groups in this study into lower-income and upper-income based on levels of income inferred from their stated occupations. (Asking group members directly about income in a pilot test not surprisingly insulted people and threatened my chances of maintaining access.)

Because this sample includes people who were spending time in groups of their own accord, they may be more attentive to current events, more social, and have larger social networks than the average person. Many of the groups contained local leaders either in politics or in their occupational community. In other words, many of these people were opinion leaders in their community (Lazarsfeld et al. 1944; Katz and Lazarsfeld 1955). Their perceptions and preferences may not be representative, but they are likely consequential for the way others in their community think about many public issues. This slice of opinion leaders varied across the municipalities I sampled, since I had chosen the communities to vary by key community characteristics. For example, although the groups often contained local business leaders, in some places these people included executives of multi-national corporations, in others, the owners of the businesses on Main Street.

The within-group homogeneity along racial, gender, and socioeconomic lines may have fostered more unity in their perspectives and preferences than might have been expressed had I interviewed each member of the group individually. As noted above, this paper conceptualizes public opinion as something that people create together through interpersonal interaction. That is, I am intentionally not attempting to describe opinions that would be offered to pollsters by solitary individuals, but rather am focusing on the understandings that groups of people generate and articulate when talking together.

Of course, my presence altered these conversations. I intentionally steered the conversations, and the participants likely altered what they said somewhat because of my presence. When I sat in the restaurant, café, or other venue before joining a group, I glimpsed what their talk was like when they were not aware I was observing them. The members of these groups appeared to swear less and talk about public affairs slightly more when they knew I was listening. More importantly, my presence as an outsider, urbanite, and university faculty member likely raised the salience of the public employees vs. other employees and rural vs. urban divides. Because the purpose of this study is primarily to investigate how people use perceptions of ingroups and outgroups—not whether—drawing attention to these divides facilitated the following investigation.

I designed my interview protocol to generate talk about topics that pilot studies suggested were likely to invoke economic considerations and references to social class: tax policy, immigration, higher education, and health care. To analyze my data, I used data displays and adjusted my collection as I proceeded to test the conclusions I was reaching (Miles and Huberman 1994). That is, as I collected transcripts from the conversations, I read through them, looking for patterns across groups with respect to the kinds of considerations people brought to bear in talking about public affairs, and whether and how they mentioned social class identity in these conversations.

As I proceeded, I wrote memos detailing the patterns I perceived (Feldman 1995). I analyzed what additional evidence I would need to observe in order to validate my conclusions, and used the visual displays to test whether the patterns were as pervasive as I had first concluded and whether they varied across type of group (Miles and Huberman 1994, chap. 10). For example, after the first round of investigations, it became clear that a key consideration in these discussions was geographic identity (i.e., rural vs. urban). I thus adjusted the protocol to include questions that probed the balance of power and the distribution of resources in the state. To further verify my conclusions, I considered how the conversations might have been affected by my presence, re-examined conversations that were not consistent with the patterns I identified, considered spurious relations, added additional groups to the study to investigate whether conversations among people of different demographic backgrounds exhibited patterns similar to the groups already in my study, and sent reports of my results to the groups I had visited and gave them brief verbal reports on subsequent visits so that they could comment on the conclusions I was reaching (Miles and Huberman 1994, pages 262-277).

Results

The economic crisis intensified during the latter stages of my fieldwork.[4] I first visited 23 of the sampled communities in May and June of 2007. At that time, the Dow Jones was still rising (it hit its peak of 14164.53 on October 9, 2007). By most accounts, the recession did not begin until August, 2007, when news of the subprime mortgage backed securities first came to light and the credit markets froze.

During my first visits to the sampled communities, no group talked about the "recession," but when I asked "what are the big concerns in your community?" the top 3 responses were the cost of health care, lack of jobs, and high taxes. Also, in May 2007 gas prices in the Midwest soared to over $3.00 per gallon,[5] and many people mentioned this. In other words, during this first round, financial issues were on the minds of people in all of the communities I studied, even though the recession had not yet occurred. This was especially the case in nonmetro areas, in which people described their communities as enduring a long-term economic decline. They said their communities were dying, and lamented the lack of jobs with decent wages and benefits. In their narratives, family-supporting jobs had been draining out of their communities for decades.

I conducted my second round of fieldwork in January and February of 2008. By that time, several major events in the recession had occurred. Gas prices continued to rise, but more significantly, the U.S. Federal Reserve had injected over $80 billion for banks to borrow at a low rate in November and December, and lowered the interest rate several times to 3.50 by January 11, 2008. In the first months of 2008, the main concerns in the groups I studied continued to be health care and jobs. Occasionally, a group member would mention "recession," but some would also argue a recession was not occurring.

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[4] For national and international timelines of the financial crisis, see http://www.mint.com/blog/trends/recession-timeline-11042010/?display=wide and http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/business/8242825.stm, respectively.

[5] See http://www.eia.gov/dnav/pet/hist/LeafHandler.ashx?n=PET&s=EMM_EPMR_PTE_R20_DPG&f=W for details.

Then in March 2008, Bear Stearns collapsed. When I returned to many of the communities in April and May of 2008, the reality of the economic crisis was setting in. In one logging community in northwestern Wisconsin, one group of men on their way to work explained it to me this way:

> Randall: Well, the company my brother works for, last summer they had 86 guys working. This winter they had 43 or something. Now they're down to 12, and they're having a hard enough time finding part-time work for 12 guys.

And then in April 2009:

> KCW: So my big question is what are, What are the big concerns in [this town] or in the area these days?
> Jim: Probably more jobs to lose. [The mill in town was about to lay off 80 people.] […][6]
> Fred: The only good thing is we don't have enough money to leave town.

By May of 2009, difficult economic times were assumed by all of the groups, even if the members avoided the term "recession." One visible impact was the size of a morning coffee klatch of professionals in a central Wisconsin city: When I first met the group in June 2007, it was difficult to find a chair at the table amongst the 10 or so regulars. When I visited on a May 2009 morning, the group had dwindled to 3. The rest had been fired or laid off (therefore were not making their usual stops on their way to work, or were too busy seeking employment to meet with the other members).

Who is to blame?

In this glum context, it is not surprising that people were groping for answers and attributing blame. Whose fault was it? Given the milestone events of the financial crisis, one might expect that Wall Street and financial institutions generally were main targets. Instead, I heard very little discussion of banks or financiers. Several groups blamed corporations and wealthy CEOs. However, the majority of blame was placed on government largesse and spoiled public employees. This pattern did not change over time (people were no more likely to blame the private sector after Bear Stearns collapsed.) The prominence of public employees in their comments may have been partly generated by my presence as a faculty member of a public university. However, as I show in the following analyses, the resentment toward public employees was ubiquitous, many-layered, and intense. This suggests that although my presence may have brought the public employee vs. other workers divide to the fore, it certainly did not manufacture it. As the results will show, the attribution of blame toward the public sector and public sector employees ran wide and deep, and helps explain why Republicans and Tea Party activists were able to win electoral gains in the 2010 elections by focusing on oversized government and generous benefits for public employees, rather than on missteps in the private sector.

[6] This denotes several comments have been omitted for brevity.

Blaming the private sector

A few of the groups that I spent time with did blame the private sector for the economic crisis. One group of retired public school teachers in a hamlet in central Wisconsin argued General Motors undercut the autoworkers unions by agreeing to pay benefits they could not afford. A group of African-Americans meeting in their church in Milwaukee talked about the health care crisis as the fault of greedy corporations taking away benefits from their workers. In a farming community in southwest Wisconsin, people eating breakfast at the counter in a diner complained that corporate farms put family farms out of business. But these were just three mentions of corporate blame in 80 visits to 27 different groups.

Related to this was the rare mention of income inequality. Only 5 groups mentioned inequality as a possible culprit of contemporary economic woes. For example, the group of former public school teachers in central Wisconsin complained about CEOs earning too much compared to workers. A self-proclaimed near-homeless man in a central Wisconsin city talked about the unfairness of the tax system and the injustice of low tax rates on wealthy people. "Frankly, I got nothing against anybody who makes money, you know. They're just doing better than me, that's all. I do have a problem with the taxes. It's set to screw us, is what it is. The more you got, the less you pay."

For the small number of groups who pointed to corporate greed, there were just as many groups who blamed other entities such as unions, immigrants, and women's rights in the same conversation in which they blamed corporations. For example, people meeting for coffee on their way to work in a north central tourist town in February 2009 wondered why stimulus money had to go to corporations rather than directly to the American people. But then someone said the unions were at fault for not making concessions and the group agreed that unions deserved some blame.

In another group, people meeting in a church basement in hamlet in northwestern Wisconsin complained about excess administrators and bloated administrator salaries in the local public school systems. When one person mentioned large CEO salaries, no one responded and she then chimed in with the others complaining about excessive public school salaries.

Another group of professionals, small business owners, and corporate retirees in the Minneapolis suburbs blamed insurance corporations during a discussion of health care, but then shifted toward blaming the American Medical Association.

In other words, for many of these groups, corporations were not regarded as an appropriate target. Even a Democratic-leaning group in a logging town in central Wisconsin nodded in agreement to this: "Well, on the other hand, you can't blame the corporations, they're responsible to their, to their, to their uh stock holders." A group of former union members (retirees from a large factory) meeting in a gas station in a medium-sized city in central Wisconsin were clearly sympathetic to unions, and critical of the corporations they had worked for, but spent more time blaming immigrants and social norms.

> Ronnie: But I, I've seen, because I worked at [the local manufacturing plant], before I retired, but I've seen a lot of young kids come into management there that are extremely intelligent, but there's no job security there.
>
> KCW: Oh.
>
> Ronnie: [The corporation we worked for] will put you out to dry and it don't matter to them.
>
> KCW: Really?

Ronnie: This is not a family thing. And that's what I think for us guys which is hard because when we were way back when this was family stuff [the company treated you like family]. I know my dad--my mother said, she was married to two people: my dad's work and him. 'Cause it was family.

John: Oh yeah.

Ronnie: This isn't anymore. There's none of this stuff anymore.

KCW: Why is it then? Globalization and change in ownership and just…?

Ronnie: The mother had to go out of the house and go to work. That's why. You keep the mother in the house, this would be a different world. That's my belief.

KCW: It would. Yeah.

Ronnie: And that happened in 1965. When the price of homes went from the twelve thousand dollar home to the twenty, twenty-five thousand dollar one.

KCW: Yeah, it's a different world.

Ronnie: And people thought maybe we want to have a little bit better, the mother had to go work to get that, and that's the whole reason. *I* think.

Blaming the public sector

The public sector, not the private sector, was the clear target of blame for most of the groups I spent time with, throughout the years of my fieldwork. This often started as complaints about the government, which then led to resentful comments toward public employees.

One group of retirees meeting in a coffee shop in Madison often talked about the lack of manufacturing in the United States as the cause of tough economic conditions. On one occasion, in February 2008, they followed such comments with a conversation about health care and claims that the high price of care is the result of costly malpractice insurance and the greed of drug companies. Nevertheless, they did not express warm feelings toward the government.

KCW: So is there no solution?

Stu: Tell me what's working, works in places where the government's involved, what do they, what do they do well?

Marvin: Corruption.

KCW: So keep the government out of it?

Stu: Well that's worked pretty good for a long time.

KCW: Yeah, yeah?

Stu: After it got ----

Luther: Our government ---- congressmen and senators a bunch of crooked lawyers.

Similarly, other groups viewed government as corrupt and conspiring with the rich to leach off of taxpayers. For example one man in a city in western Wisconsin said, "My problem is that the people that run this country seem to be more interested in providing tax relief for dead people than in providing health care for young people."

A group of loggers in northwestern Wisconsin complained that the 2008 presidential race was all about money:

Sam: Well those outfits donate all that money and the congressmen vote to let them steal out of our 401k's for all kinds of fees and, and just the people with all the money control everything. (Pause.) Whoever makes the big donations gets their way.

Fred: It's kinda hard to trust politicians to put it that way, no matter what side you're on. You know.

KCW: Yeah. You think it's different today than it used to be?

Fred: No, it's just on a bigger scale.

Sam: More money involved.

[…]

Randall: Well yeah then you get this economist: "When them oil prices start going more than 4 dollars, boy that isn't gonna bother the economy." Well how can it not bother the economy?! Jeez, how much b.s. do you think we can swallow?

Another claim that the government and the private sector were conspiring came from the group meeting on their way to work in a diner in the north central tourist town. They lumped Wall Street and the Secretary of the Treasury together as enemies of the public.

Corey: My whole point of that thing is that they're just throwing this money to Wall Street and the banks right away, no questions asked. AIG goes and has a hunting party in England, they go to a party down there and Henry Paulson is gonna take care of the whole thing. But you haven't even seen that guy, they gave him control of 300 billion dollars but you haven't seen nothing. "I'll take care of this whole matter." And where's he at now? No one can account for anything until today. Everybody from state banks is gonna be in front of there today.

KCW: Are they? Today?

Corey: Yeah, in Congress today.

Dave: Well the Secretary of the Treasury. Just think, wow that guy didn't pay his taxes. If he'd have been Republican and trying to get that job Obama was pushing him, he wouldn't have got in if he was a-- the Democrats said, "Oh, look at--he didn't pay his taxes." But they voted him a hundred percent on the party line to put him in and he didn't pay his taxes. Well you're putting a guy in there that cheated the government, that's stealing. How can he be the Treasury Secretary? Just ridiculous.

Sometimes groups lumped government officials together with wealthy people not through concern with corruption but through concern that officials failed to understand ordinary people. For example, in April 2008, in the logging community in central Wisconsin, the regulars meeting in the back room of a diner blamed the mortgage crisis on government deregulation:

Mark: Nobody has any idea what real life is like. None of them work for a living. They're legislators. They don't have outside jobs. And they, they lose touch, they don't have to deal with it.

KCW: Uh hunh.

Henry: I mean I laugh now, you listen to all this thing now over the mortgage crisis. You could see this train wreck coming years ago.

Many of these anti-government comments conceptualized government officials as "haves" with too close an association with business. However, other anti-government sentiments focused on inefficiency and largesse and suggested government did not resemble business *enough*.[7] For example, one small business owner in the group of loggers in a northwestern town lamented the lack of accountability in government spending:

> I mean, [laughs incredulously] everybody you talk to, budgets are deficit this, deficit that… and it seems like it was just in the last four or five years, all the sudden everybody blew them all at once. Where's all the accountability, you know? That's what I do. I do this for a living. I gotta keep track, you know, I just can't understand why everything is so slipshod all the sudden.

A group of people on their way to work in a south central hamlet suggested that unlike the private sector, the structure of government meant it was unable to trim excess:

Dan: It's like have you ever seen a politician ever cut out a program? No, because the more programs you have the more politicians and government employees it takes to run them. So they want as many programs as possible, whether they're any good or not.
KCW: (laughs)
Randy: So are you, you go right there. Right there. You know the legislature used to be part time in Wisconsin.
KCW: I know. Very different isn't it?
Dan: It's no different than all the programs that are mandated in the schools. They're never gonna back off in those programs because it takes that many more state employees to administer them. So they want as many programs as possible. And the health care is no different. The more programs they have, the more government controlled programs, the more government employees it takes to run them. So they never talk themselves out of a job.
Larry: I remember when the schools were paid for by our local taxes. The state of Wisconsin said well you know you small schools here you're not giving the number of different classes that these kids could take. We want the kids in [your town] to receive the same classes as the kids in Madison. So the state of Wisconsin took it over. And we still are not getting the same classes that they do in Madison and they're not paying to run our schools.
Dan: But we're helping pay for the Milwaukee programs.
Larry: That's right. Our schools are going into debt every year.

According to most of the groups, the institution most out of step with the American people was government, not corporations or other private sector entities. Some also treated

[7] See Gangl 2007 on intrapersonal ambivalence over whether democratic government should operate like a business.

government, not financial institutions, as "the big money." Take for example, these comments among the group of professionals meeting in the central Wisconsin city:

> Jackson: You know, you know, I think in any community now, the big money is still government. So I think you know once upon a time I think that maybe the publisher of the newspaper and the head of the large manufacturing company ran the show in a town. But I think today much more of the show in any town is run at the governmental level and the reason is they've got all the money.
>
> […]
>
> Jackson: But I'm saying if something's going to, if something's going to occur in [the] downtown [of our city], you're gonna build a park, you're gonna build a new building, you're gonna build a parking ramp, you build a demo office, it is it's still nowadays government gives an infusion of money to make it happen. But it does! That's how it happens!
>
> Ed: Not in, not in many counties, communities.
>
> Jackson: But in this community it does
>
> Ed: Well and as a result we're paying for it. We're paying for it with some of the highest taxes. It's amazing
>
> Jackson: I'm just telling you how it happens.
>
> Ed: Which people can't afford. Our community is totally, is totally cosmetically changed in the past 10 years.
>
> KCW: And how so?
>
> Carl: Because of the giveaway programs.

According to this group, the big money was not banks, but instead government. This group leaned Republican, and like other Republican-leaning groups, as the mortgage crisis gained prominence in the 2008 presidential campaign, they blamed it on former President Clinton and the Democrats, not banks or lending institutions.

> Ed: And people were buying in speculation and everything. I mean every, the place down in Myrtle Beach they bought places. Well, people bought five of them and they're now taking a bath, you know.
>
> Carl: The Clinton administration they forced them to make money so easy that people did this.
>
> Ed: Yeah.
>
> Carl: And banks had to give, you want a home, build a home, the bank had to give you money.

In general, people of a wide range of political leanings viewed the government in general as the source of blame for the economic crisis. Those on the left saw it as conspiring with the wealthy and big business. Those on the right saw it as bloated by social programs and a desire to sustain itself.

Complaints of the governments' desire to self-perpetuate were often accompanied by complaints about public employees. People often communicated their ire toward the public employees by contrasting them with private employees. They complained that public workers had health care and other benefits (particularly pensions) that were extremely

generous compared to the benefits private sector workers received. And who was paying for these benefits? "Taxpayers," and they were angry about it.

The group of professionals meeting in the central Wisconsin city can again illustrate. In April 2008, this group was incredulous that state workers could be getting benefits "for free" while so many people in the private sector were hurting. In a conversation about the high cost of health care, one small business owner talked about the difficulty of paying for his employees' insurance.

> Ed: And we had, and we had to drop our, we had to increase our deductible we had to go more on uh you know, employees have to basically pay more. And I, and to keep our premiums, we took a good plan at 18 percent had to drop our benefits of the plans to get it down to like 16 percent increase. But everyone's paying, paying more out of their pocket. And I mean, you tell me how exactly--how particularly state employees uh city employees, teachers they don't have to pay hardly one iota more for their benefits. And the rest of us out here in the private sector are just [voice trails off]...
>
> Paul: Well there's a lot of people too that have insurance and don't have to pay much for it, and as soon as they hear that they might have to pay for it, they don't like it, they don't like that idea.
>
> KCW: Yeah.
>
> Paul: They can well afford to pay more, but they don't want to.

The conversation in this group that morning continued on as the men talked about the difficulties of running a business, and the injustice of exorbitant benefits for public employees. During my next visit, several men expressed their anger not only about public employee benefits, but about their perception that the public teachers' union in the state (Wisconsin Education Association Council or WEAC) and the UW-Madison try to avoid paying taxes.

> Ed: Tell me, why this WEAC, WEAC--the teachers' union-- why do they advertise--what do they-- why do they put on their WEAC web site: tell teachers where to move to avoid Wisconsin taxes?
>
> KCW: Seriously?
>
> Ed: They tell, right on their website, maybe they've taken it off, but it was there a year ago and I asked the department of commerce if you know, I says, "Do you know WEAC has, on their website, which states teachers should move to to avoid Wisconsin taxes?" I mean isn't that…
>
> KCW: Hunh. Were they just trying to make a point that…
>
> Ed: They get their wages and they get everything out of Wisconsin for life and then they're told where to move.
>
> KCW: Oh dear, oh dear.
>
> Ed: I mean, I think they ought to live here and pay the taxes we've got to pay, too. And I and I believe any department head in [our city] or any city should have to live within the city and pay the taxes of the city, rather than [move to adjoining municipalities and pay lower taxes there] and not having to pay the taxes within the city.

Jackson: What do you think about the university system taking 3 blocks off the tax roll to extend their campus? In excess of a million dollars in property would go off the tax rolls, for parking lots.

Groups that blamed public employees and the government often did not restrict their blame to just the public sector. This group, like many others, also accused lobbyists and the influence of money on elections for tough economic conditions. However, the resentment toward public employees was ubiquitous and well-developed. That is, there were multiple aspects of the resentment, and people talked freely about how these various aspects fit together. The following section dissects this resentment.

Dissecting resentment toward public employees

Looking across the conversations from all of these 36 groups, the resentment toward public employees had 5 central elements. Public employees were perceived as (1) lazy, (2) inefficient bureaucrats who get (3) exorbitant benefits paid by hard-earned taxpayer money, (4) are guilty by association with the government (which they perceived ignored their concerns), and (5) are often represented by greedy unions. For many people in rural areas, the resentment of public workers often had an additional layer: they were perceived as members of another outgroup, urbanites. The following section will briefly explain each of these elements, and then will illustrate how people wove them together, by referencing the conversations of several groups.

First, people viewed public employees as lazy by stating that they do not work with their hands, and could not possibly work as hard as private sector employees. Teachers and university professors "only work 9 months out of the year!" Also, they can retire early, a group of loggers in northwest Wisconsin noted:

Sam: If somebody can retire at 50 years old but then the government wants the rest of us to work 'til we're 65 or 67, I mean--
Randall: Yeah.
Sam: I'd have a better chance working 'til 67 being a teacher and not doing any physical work than being out in the woods working. You know or somebody working at the mill or the lumber yard.
KCW: Right, right.
Sam: At 65 years old you're wore out. You should be able to retire.

Second, people also conceptualized public employees as an outgroup and target of blame by claiming that they routinely wasted taxpayer money. People claimed that public employees were out of touch with the lives of real people, and were more focused on their own salaries, benefits and continuation of their jobs than on the public good.

Third, people perceived that public employees had benefits that were way out of step with the benefits of private sector workers. They asked, why should they enjoy such a cushion—at taxpayer expense—when the rest of the population had to make cuts? The loggers quoted above remarked, "The people that do have health insurance don't realize." A farmer in the central part of the state argued it was not fair that public employees did not have to pay income tax on the benefits they receive. And the group of professionals in the central Wisconsin city remarked sarcastically that, to public employees, health care is not a

benefit, "It is a God-given right!" The group ran with this comment, and teased me that as a state university employee, I would enjoy a luxurious retirement:

> Ed: [Nodding at another man in the group]: You and I would love to retire at 70% of our income.
> KCW: I am very fortunate.
> Ed: You are one of the few that appreciate it. I'm just saying that the majority of 'em sit there and say it is an expectation, it's a right.
> Stanley: God given right.
> Ed: But I am saying, ask most people here if they are going to retire anywhere close to that. They won't be anywhere close to that.

The fourth main element of resentment toward public employees was that people occasionally recognized that such employees are part of the government, and the widespread resentment toward government and resentment toward public employees fed each other. People in many communities felt that government ignored and failed to understand their concerns and had no interest in learning about them. In addition, especially with respect to health care, people perceived that public officials were out of touch with their concerns because they were economically in a different (higher income) class.

Fifth, this resentment toward public employees was intertwined with resentment toward unions. This took the following general form: Unions were the reason public employees did not have to work hard, had exorbitant benefits and salaries that were busting the public budget. In addition, unions prevented school districts, universities, or other parts of the government from firing inefficient or ineffective workers.

Finally, in rural areas, geography provided an additional layer to the resentment toward public employees. There are two main urban areas in Wisconsin: (1) the largest and most industrial city, Milwaukee, and its surrounding suburbs, and (2) the state capital, Madison, and surrounding communities. The rest of the state is predominantly rural and is commonly referred to as "outstate" Wisconsin.

For many people in rural Wisconsin, this urban vs. rural distinction represented the distribution of political power, the location of people who worked hard, and the distribution of wealth and resources. That is, many rural residents perceived that:

- all of the political decisions were made in the cities and communicated out to rural areas without taking into account rural concerns,
- people in the cities were generally lazy bureaucrats who did not know how to work with their hands, and
- all of the good jobs, wealth, and taxpayer money were located or diverted to the cities (Walsh n.d.).

When discussions of public workers arose in rural areas, these conversations generally entailed talking about public employees from Madison or Milwaukee who displayed a lack of common sense when descending upon the residents' community, or local public workers such as public school teachers who displayed laziness and inappropriate expenditures of tax dollars that was enabled by decision makers in the urban areas. That is to say, there was not a perception that all public employees were themselves urbanites, but that the values and priorities which public employees pursued were themselves the products of urban areas.

To illustrate how groups wove these various elements of resentment toward public employees together when talking about the economy, I turn to conversations among the members of three example groups. The first is the group of people who meet on their way

to work in the rural tourist community in north central Wisconsin. The second is a group of loggers who meet in the grocery store/gas station/tackle shop/hardware store/liquor store in a rural northwestern town, and the third is the group of retirees who meet in a coffee shop in Madison. Each of these groups leaned toward the Democratic Party. (Affiliation with the Democratic Party is not unusual in rural Wisconsin.)

The group members that met in a diner in the rural tourist community supported Democratic candidates, especially Hilary Clinton and then Barack Obama during the 2008 presidential election. One of them had held local public office as a Democrat. They portrayed their community as poor and complained that urbanites with summer homes in their area were driving up property taxes. During my first visit in June 2007, one man complained that "all of our money goes to Madison, gets distributed back down to us…the bureaucracy gets bigger and bigger. Their secretaries have to have secretaries!" By April 2008, they were worrying about the fact that the state was in debt, and that they were each in debt as well. They complained about the high cost of health care, and talked about how even a middle class salary—even $125,000/ year—was not enough to cover basic expenses. "How in the heck can you afford to do anything? Can't even afford to live," one main said.

Another member complained about the lack of manufacturing in the United States, and then complained that the government ought to be run more like a business (i.e., a reference to inefficiency). Another disagreed, saying that all government *is* is big business. And then another piped in (with a laugh), "I think those people that work for the UW should take a pay cut" and at least one other nodded in agreement, adding, "professors—professors have student teachers" (implying professors are lazy).

During my fourth visit in February 2009, I asked the group, "What do you think they ought to do to jumpstart the economy? Or is it just kinda, nothing you can do?" After a few comments about the small size of federal stimulus checks sent out the previous summer, a younger man said:

> Corey: But if they took all this money that you're giving away now [to financial institutions and car companies], and if they would use it, just give it to the American people. You know? Divide it up and give it to the American people you'd have a lot of cash to spend, you know? And you know of course a lot of people are gonna just do stupid stuff with it. Drink, buy their drugs, whatever, but I think other people--
>
> Dave: They'll still--
>
> Corey: Pay some mortgages, uh, you know.
>
> Dave: They're always gonna do that—
>
> [And then anti-union thoughts come in:]
>
> Corey: And then we'll be broke in a year anyways, all of us would be, but you know, you know what I'm saying? Like, like I said earlier you give it to the car companies, you know, and you got the person making 12 bucks an hour, 16 bucks an hour, 20 bucks an hour, "OK, I'm gonna pay my taxes so you can give it to them so they can make 40 and 60 dollars an hour." Wait a second. That does not make sense. It doesn't compute.
>
> Dave: Well that's where the union-------- makes the concessions. The unions have to make the concessions and they're not doing it.
>
> Corey: Right. And it's terrible.

Later on in this conversation, the group mentioned their perception that the government is corrupt like the financial industry, citing as evidence Henry Paulson's failure

to pay appropriate income tax. And then their conversation turned back to public employees and the state bureaucracy in (urban) Madison:

> Pat: Well you gotta think how many people that you got down in Madison--secretaries, with secretaries, with secretaries.
>
> Corey: It's Madison's schools, it's everything, it's just getting pathetic you know. No, I can know one thing, there was a chart this morning on there, you know showing the Republican stimulus package and what they wanted, the 780 billion and it was Democratic had 838 billion and Republicans had nothing for schools. In their graphics, they wanted like I think it was 1.6 billion to refurbish some schools in some of the lower districts in the country or whatever. And they went, just zeroed it right out. "We don't need to do that." Well it's just--I don't know what the hell the answer is. I've never blamed any president you know because it's the same thing about the war: the Democrats have been bitching about the war but when Bush always asked for another 400 million dollars, if the Democrats hadn't voted otherwise they wouldn't never have had it you know? Every month it's a scapegoat for somebody, you know, I mean, they just turn shit around all the time. We're just the laughing stock of this world, as far as I'm concerned. Being such a powerful country…
>
> Pat: I'd still rather live in the United States.
>
> Corey: It's terrible, it really is, it's just terrible…
>
> Pat: I'd rather be here though.

This last conversation illustrates how resentment toward public employees was not a given for many people. That is, they struggled to make sense of what the American public should pay for different aspects of government, and what they ought to pay in taxes. In the conversation above, Corey tried to balance his concern that Republicans wanted to allocate too little for schools, but Democrats were willing to allocate too much for war. Nevertheless, when one or more people wavered in their portrayals of public employees as a target of blame, others (like Pat, above) stepped in to reinforce resentment toward public employees.

In the second group, the group of loggers meeting before work around the coffee urns in the multi-purpose store in the rural logging town in northwestern Wisconsin, the regulars joked about the fact that they leaned Democratic. They laughed that rural America was supposed to vote Republican, and that as loggers it was strange that they were "voting with the tree huggers." But this part of the state has leaned Democratic for decades, due in part to the left-leaning Finnish immigrants who settled there in the late 19th century (Fowler 2008). They did express some left-leaning sentiments occasionally, such as claims that everyone ought to have decent wages and benefits. But even in this group, with its potential for support for the public sector, the seeds of resentment toward public employees were still evident.

During my first visit, in June 2007, I asked the group whether they thought they paid their fair share in taxes and their perception that government is wasteful and government workers are lazy was quickly evident:

> Jim: Who doesn't think they pay their fair share? We're all paying too much, the way they waste money. They should have to run the state like you do your own business. If they had to, they'd all go broke. Every government agency.
>
> KCW: What do you see them wasting money on?

Fred: Well we get road jobs out here and they come up 2 years ahead of time, to survey the sucker, and they are getting 50 dollars an hour and extra to resurvey it again, and the next year to resurvey – to me it is a waste of money.
Jim: Too many studies.
Fred: Not enough work.
Jim: Too much bureaucracy in the system.
Fred: They do waste a lot of money on surveying roads.
Sam: All those state employees we look at 'em and we don't think they do much.
KCW: What kind of state employees do you get through here? Like DNR [Department of Natural Resources] folks and stuff?
Sam: Oh yeah.
Frank: They are the worst! They are the worst. DNR is the worst!
KCW: And how so? My [relative] says the same thing.
Frank: All they do is create a big mess for everybody. A person doesn't mind rules and regulations but they are tying ya up so bad you can't do anything. Like logging or anything. They've just got you… with all their environmental studies and everything….
[...]
Charlie: They keep raising the prices of everything, hunting license, fishing license, and your wardens and stuff—[Explaining the detailed regulations the DNR asks them to abide by]: You're on this side of the river then the trout has gotta be 12 inches long, and you go down here, 100 yards underneath the bridge and its gotta be 14 inches long and then you get picked up and the warden don't even know what kind of fish they are!
KCW: Oh gosh!
Charlie: You know, it's – I haven't bought a fishing license in--
KCW: Do they keep close track of you, keep track of what you fish?
Charlie: I used to love to fish but I quit buying a license.
Jim: Yeah I quit buying a license.
Charlie: I won't even fish anymore because they don't know what they're doing, and I'm not going to go out there and get caught. As far as I'm concerned, the DNR thinks they are God. You know? We drop a half quart of oil out there or break a little [inaudible] or whatever and you gotta spend 6 months out there cleaning it up. It's good, but their good can go overboard. I can't walk out into a federal forest and go behind a tree and take a leak.
KCW: You can't?
Charlie: No! It's that bad. Really.
KCW: [laughing] Good grief!

Later in the conversation, I ask the group about hard work:

KCW: Sometimes people say--survey researchers ask about different occupations and they ask people which one they think works the hardest. Tell me what you think—if you compare a professor, a public school teacher, a waitress, a farmer, and a construction worker, which ones do you think work the hardest?
Sam: The last 3.
Steve: Yeah.

Sam: And for no benefits.
KCW: Yeah? How about those first 2—like—
Sam: I think a school teacher—I know it can be hard. But they got great benefits. Tremendous benefits. And if you've been there for 15, 20 years, you're making 50 grand a year. There's nobody in town other than them making 50 grand a year. The guys in the [local] mill make 20 thousand.
KCW: Really? How many teachers does the school employ here? How many classrooms do you think there are?
Sam: Smartest thing our superintendent did was when somebody retired, since the population going down, in schools and all that, he didn't replace them. He just let it go by attrition and that's why—like I said we are the only school district that is solvent in our area.

The resentment toward public employees in this group was not extreme. However, in their conversations, one can notice the connection between government inefficiency and laziness, and also the construction of public employees (teachers) as an outgroup on the basis of their good salaries and benefits. When talking about DNR employees they state outright, "We don't think they do much." Their comments convey the following reasoning: government workers do not work hard; therefore, they are an expense those of us in this community can not afford.

Their conversations also were illustrative of the way rural residents intertwined resentment toward public employees with resentment toward the metro areas. When they talked about the current difficult economic times, they explained that unlike the urban areas, their community's economic circumstances were not a temporary downturn or recession, but rather a long-term decline and death. During my first visit to their group in June 2007, they described their town this way:

Louis: [It's a great place to live] if you like poverty.
Frank: Yeah, it *is* poverty [describing their town]. [chuckles]. There ain't no businesses going in up here.
KCW: Yeah, a lot of folks leaving?
Louis: No, most of us can't afford to leave.
Frank: Yeah.
Charlie: Well I stayed here all my life, I never made enough money to leave.
KCW: Gosh.
Frank: No industry *up here* [emphasis added].
Jim: Only thing we have up here is lumbering, trees or logs or what have you. Every one of us here—
Fred: We're all a bunch of sawdust heads.

And in April 2008, when I asked them what they thought about the presidential race, they said the outcome did not matter to people so far removed from the urban centers.

Steve: I can't see the difference it's gonna make up here anyway. We've been in a recession up here for 30 years, 40 years. We don't know any different. People talk about recession, you oughta come up here.
KCW: Yeah?
Steve: Doesn't get any different.

These comments exemplify the way people in rural areas conveyed a sense of being ignored by people making policy decisions, who were perceived as simultaneously "government" and also urban.

Notice how the two groups just discussed both leaned toward the Democratic Party, but nevertheless expressed anti-public worker attitudes. Both of these groups met in rural areas. When Governor Walker proposed eliminating most collective bargaining for most public workers, support and opposition was not organized cleanly by rural vs. urban (or nonmetro vs. nonmetro). That is, there were people living in rural areas who opposed the measure. The point here is not to argue that all rural residents opposed collective bargaining for public workers. Instead, it is to show the shape of resentment toward public workers, and its many facets, especially among rural residents, to reveal why attempts to deal with economic crises by restricting rights and decreasing pay to public employees are feasible and gain traction.

These policies gained support among some people in urban areas as well. In these places, resentment toward public workers in metro areas sounded similar to the way it sounded in nonmetro areas, except it was not intertwined with geography. The seeds of this resentment existed even among union sympathizers, as the group of retirees meeting in a coffee shop in Madison will serve to illustrate. Most of the members of this group had been union members during their working life, as electricians and other tradesmen. Several of them used insulated coffee mugs and wore jackets that displayed their union emblems.

They frequently talked about the lack of manufacturing in the United States, and worried openly about the cost of health care. They placed some blame on drug companies and malpractice insurance, but did not believe in government as a solution to the health care crisis because they believed it was corrupt and bloated.

In February 2008, one man brought up wages during a meandering conversation about health care and a statewide smoking ban. As the conversation wound on, they compared public and private workers, considered immigrants as a scapegoat, all while emphasizing the value of hard work.

> Bill: How about wages for people? Ya educated people get all the money.
> KCW: Thank you for bringing that up.
> Bill: (Laughs.)
> KCW: No, because--
> (Laughter)
> Bill: I worked, we worked in the trades, we don't get anywhere that kind of money that they get, and all the benefits they get.
> KCW: And it used to be different, right? I mean, correct me if I'm wrong, but it used to be the case that if you got out of high school and did a trade, you made a pretty decent living. Right? And that's just not the case anymore.
> Luther: Now you got the firemen, the policemen, school teachers--ridiculous.
> Harold: [Looking at KCW.] That includes you, too. They bleed the rest of us to death.
> KCW: You think?
> Bill: The schoolteachers, what they used to make 100 years ago. And now my daughter makes 64 thousand dollars a year plus all the benefits.
> KCW: That's a good deal.
> Bill: That's education.

Harold: The university. And they're telling us we got to pay more money for them smart guys to come here and stay here [referring to pleas from the university for more money to retain faculty]. Well I'll tell ya what, if they let that smart guy go, there's another smart guy looking for the job and he'll be here tomorrow…

[…]

Harold: My wife worked 33 years over there [in the university administration]. Every time they'd hire somebody and she was, she was pretty well up there. But every time they'd hire somebody, who didn't know anything, they'd pay them 10% more than they paid her.

KCW: And that's really frustrating.

Harold: And three years later they still didn't know anything. See?

KCW: Yeah, that's really frustrating.

Harold: So, anyway.

KCW: Yeah, I hear what you're saying. I thank you for bringing it up because--

Harold: I think that they can get, let's put it this way, we don't have a corner on the market on smart people at the University of Wisconsin. [Chuckling in the background.] We probably got -----but overall, I still say, it's just like the Mexicans, they can tell me with all these Mexicans coming in here. And this is the biggest problem we got, really. See? Oh sure!

Luther: Him and I don't agree on that [referring to immigration], I'm the other way around.

Harold: See, that's because you sell cars to them! [Others laugh.] See he, he's the guy that's put more unlicensed, uninsured drivers on the road than anybody in the state. [Laughter, "that's true" from others in the group.] But anyway, the long and short of it is they're working for a little less money, now. But we're paying for the education, the hospitalization, the food stamps, the whole 10 yards. Not 9 yards. 10 yards. On the other side that we are ignoring, see?

Luther: But you know why we have all the Mexicans here?

Stu: Because nobody wants to work!

Harold: Well they have never proved if, if--

Luther: Cheap labor so they can [inaudible] in the market.

Harold: But wait a second, hold it. They have never--

Luther: --the American labor rate for the job but then they'll get Mexicans to do the work so the margin of profit…

Harold: I don't care about that. They've never proven to me that a German standing in Ellis Island in New York, or a Norwegian, or a Frenchman, won't come in here and work. And not only that, they can speak English…I don't care. Like I said, wherever they're coming in.

Marvin: When my dad come from Sweden and my mom come from Finland they go round putting Finnish or Swedish on stuff so they can read it. They adapted to the American society.

Harold: Damn right.

Marvin: So the American society is putting the Spanish in everything so the Mexicans--and I think that's dead wrong. When you come to America, adapt to our way of life.

Harold: Now they're starting in school.

Bill: Waving the flag.

Marvin: My wife was the same way when she worked in group health. They had to get a translator and every time the Mexican people come in, they have to hire a translator so these people could get medical.

Harold: Now they're gonna start kindergarten, first, second grade with Spanish teachers! The teacher--

Marvin: Well that's why, if they want to come here and take our jobs, get with the program. Be an American. Learn English.

[Chuckles from the group.]

Harold: Only wished I was having free health care, free education, free everything. But we didn't have that 120 years ago, nobody cared, because you didn't get anything for free. But now that they're getting something for free, we're upset with them. Before 1900 they came back and hundreds of years and nobody cared. Think about it. Back and forth, nobody noticed. Now that the government's involved they're giving out freebies for everything. Now you're noticing a whole lot. I'm right. [To KCW:] Think about it. Am I right or am I right?

KCW: [silence]

Luther: That's what Ron Paul says. That's why I'm voting for Ron Paul. I mean, he, he's a libertarian. He'd get away from all this government-sponsored-- It's all wrong. Everything's been wrong for years. Including with the (inaudible) Mexicans. [Inaudible] can't do that. The rest of it's just a bunch of [inaudible] on the cake.

Stu: I remember years ago we had to start working real young to get a few dollars.

Harold: You don't dare hire a kid less than 16, now. I was swinging a sledge hammer, a 14 pounder when I was 12. We all been here working since we were 12…[Nodding toward Stu] I bet he was moving refrigerators when he was 12.

Luther: It's a different--nowadays they don't start working.

In this conversation, Harold is the most outspoken critic of Mexican immigrants, but he gets support from the others for his resentment of people whom he perceives get something for free as well as his perception that people do not work as hard for a living as they used to.

The consideration of immigrants and professors and the manner in which this group considers them underscores that when people make sense of government benefits, they often consider deservingness, and deservingness centers on the value of hard work (Soss and Schram 2006). This was the case with the group above, and for many others in the study. Many remarked that only those workers who truly work hard are deserving of good pay and benefits.[8]

I returned to this group shortly after the protests erupted in Madison in February 2011. There were 6 men present, 4 of whom were current or former union members. One other owned a used-car dealership, and the final member had been a member of the United Autoworkers, and also a union steward, for a few years before quitting because he believed the union was corrupt. ("[T]hey asked me to mail 100 one dollar bills to a P.O. box in Flint

[8] This resonates with findings in Williamson, Skocpol, and Coggins (2011) that Tea Party activists are not opposed to government handouts per se, just opposed to handouts to groups they perceive as not working hard.

[Michigan.]") All of the members except this man were highly critical of Governor Walker's attempts to eliminate most collective bargaining for most public employees through the recently proposed budget repair bill. They asserted that collective bargaining is a democratic right, and that the governor had gone too far by trying to take it away. But Harold strongly dissented:

> The teachers' union—they been in there—they were in there like the cat at the bowl of milk. Then they turned it to cream. And then they turned it to *ice* cream. And finally it's *gonna melt*!

And then one of the pro-union members of the group said:

> Stu: Oh no it's not only the teachers' union, it's all the unions—state employees.
> Harold: You name me one thing that they've given up in the past 45 years. It's nothing, nothing, nothing.
> Stu: It's not a matter of what they are giving up. It's taking away collective bargaining.
> Harold: I'm sick of collective bargaining. And I'm a tax payer. And you are too! And you sit here bellyaching about paying taxes and you don't want to…
> Stu: No no no no!
> ["Time outs!" from some members. KCW: "I don't mean to start a fight here."]
> Harold: Let me tell you something. There is nobody that had a rougher childhood and place to stay than I did.
> Stu: I'm not—
> Harold: Now wait a second (wagging his finger). I used to work and swing a 16-pound mall. I built the first pier in front of The Edgewater (a lakeside hotel in town), see, and I was about 12, 13 years old and swinging a 16 pound sledge from the minute I got out of school until the sun went down…and I got a quarter a week *if* the guy got paid by the sorority house/fraternity house [behind which he also built piers]…I used to have to catch 100 fish before breakfast if the whole family was going to eat that day. Clean 'em and skin 'em and sell them for a quarter a dozen or 2 cents a piece. *So I know what it is to be on the bottom.* And I would do it all over again. But the people at the top, they are just milking us dry on taxes. That's what it is. And 90% of 'em, up in that state office building or wherever the hell they are working, if they lost the job they got, they would lay down in the gutter outside here and die, since they don't know how to do anything else. There ain't very many of 'em that sweat…I still know how to work. I'm 82 years old and I'm driving a semi!
> KCW: So let me ask you this. You mentioned the people at the top milking the rest of us dry.
> Harold: Yeah!
> KCW: Is it the people at the top versus the rest of us, or is it the public employees versus the workers who aren't public employees? (pause) You know what I mean?
> Harold: Hey—Can you tell me why Lizard Doyle [Jim Doyle, the former governor, a Democrat] gave the guy the two hundred and fifty thousand dollar a year job and he just walked in the door and got it? Can anybody back that up and

> apologize for it with one word even if it means anything? Hell no! See it's just—on and on and on.

In these comments, and the rest of the conversation that day, several group members agreed with Harold that state workers were overcompensated for their level of work, but argued with him about whether or not workers should have collective bargaining rights. In the last portion of the excerpt above, I tried to clarify whether Harold perceived the greatest division was between the haves and the have-nots, or between public and private employees. His answer, an allegation of government corruption, suggested that in his mind, public employees *are* among the haves.

His comments suggest the following understanding of the world:

People like me=hard-working people=non-public employees
vs.
People who don't work hard (but are nevertheless relatively wealthy)=public employees=corrupt government

His pro-union friends disagreed that public employees do not deserve collective bargaining rights, but in this and other visits, they, too, complained about lack of work and the level of benefits public employees receive.

SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

This paper has investigated the way people understand economic crises, and focused specifically on the assignment of blame and designations of ingroups and outgroups. It used participant observation of conversations of 36 regularly meeting small groups in 27 municipalities sampled across the state of Wisconsin. In the conversations observed, from May 2007 to June 2011, few people blamed actors in the private sector, such as corporations or financial institutions, for the economic crisis, but instead located the cause mainly with the government, unions, and public employees. The conversations reveal that underlying these attributions is resentment toward public employees that consists of 5 main elements: a perception that public employees are (1) lazy, (2) inefficient bureaucrats who get (3) exorbitant benefits paid by hard-earned taxpayer money, (4) are guilty by association because they are part of government, which ignores their concerns, and (5) are often represented by greedy unions. In rural areas, many people expressed yet another layer to this us vs. them categorization: public employees were also guilty by association because they were perceived as largely urbanites or enabled by urban decision makers.[9]

This last result is incentive to pay attention to geography as an element of public opinion. For many rural residents, the rural vs. urban divide was an important part of the animosity toward public workers. Predispositions like partisanship and attitudes toward limited government clearly mattered for the way people talked about the economic crisis, but

[9] This perception is challenged by empirical evidence that over three-quarters of Wisconsin's 283,000 public workers are employees of local governments and school districts and thus a majority are not urbanites (Wisconsin Taxpayer Alliance report, March 2010, www.wistax.org/news_releases/2010/1002.html). However, the mismatch between those perceptions and the employment data underscores that people base their evaluations on perceptions, not hard facts.

the framework of place mattered as well. This geographic element of the attribution of blame means that politicians had the potential to mobilize rural voters against public employees if they could convincingly portray that target as urban. Rural groups in this study that expressed support for public employee unions (such as groups of retired teachers) showed a willingness to demonize urban entities like the decision makers in Madison and Milwaukee who designed school funding formulas, administrators of corporate farms, and Walmarts. Perhaps Walker's campaign was able to win the support of people inclined to side with public employees by framing those workers as urbanites who were out of touch with hardworking small town Americans. His success in rural areas of the state in the 2010 election[10] suggests he was able to tap into anti-Madison sentiment in particular (see Fanlund 2010) as well as anti-Milwaukee sentiment (Fanlund 2011).

This study was designed to examine in depth the causal stories people in Wisconsin used to understand the economic crisis. The data are best suited to understanding *how* people make sense of the crisis, rather than *what* a broad cross section think about the crisis. The insight this study provides is the way many people interpreted the crisis through a multi-layered resentment of public workers. What insights might have emerged had the people I studied not been predominantly older, white men?

First, if I had studied primarily women, it is likely that I would have heard less resentment toward public workers, or that this resentment would have taken a different form. In the spring of 2011, after the protests in Madison, I revisited seven groups. In many of these groups, men who were in favor of Walker's budget proposals told me that female family members (wives, sisters), were strongly opposed to these proposals. Many of these women were reportedly themselves public school teachers.[11] Whether anti-public employee resentment is correlated with gender, specifically in Wisconsin, is a question I hope to pursue with data that I am gathering through a survey currently in the field.

Another dimension I wish to address here is that of age. Are the comments here about the loss of a work ethic and the loss of pensions a product of intergenerational conflict or change? Would a study of primarily younger people show less emphasis on the value of hard work or lack of benefits as elements of understanding of the economic crisis? My conversations with 4 4-H groups suggest that might have been the case.

These variations across population groups do not erase the broader points of this study, however, that when people make sense of economic crises, their causal stories are less a product of facts than of social categorizations and social identities. These causal stories involve more than simply claims that "it's their fault." They build on perceptions of who does and does not share their values, who is listening to (or ignoring) their concerns, and who is deserving of the assistance of people like themselves.

The resentment voiced in these groups toward public employees in the 3.5 years of this study leading up to the state's 2011 budget crisis is also a lesson in the way issues bubble

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[10] In the 2006 gubernatorial election, the Democratic incumbent Jim Doyle won 40 of the 64 counties outside the Milwaukee Combined Statistical Area or the Madison Metropolitan Statistical Area. In 2010 the Democratic candidate for governor lost all but 8 of the non-metro counties to Walker.

[11] See Vargas-Cooper 2011 for an intriguing commentary on the gender component of contemporary opinion towards unions, including the controversies in Wisconsin. The one women's-only group that I visited, in northwest Wisconsin, was almost unanimously opposed to Walker's budget.

up when elite-driven and bottom-up forces collide. Some critics of Governor Walker have reflected on the events in Wisconsin and argued that it was his proposed budget legislation that created a divide in Wisconsin between public workers and the rest of the public (Lueders 2011). However, the discussions in this study show that the seeds of this divide predated the 2011 legislation, and even the 2010 election that brought Walker to power. It is the bottom-up process of people teaching ingroup/outgroup categorizations to each other, including the many layers and associations that those distinctions contain, which lays the groundwork of resentments that politicians can then nourish and reap. As people made sense of economic crises they tried out various scapegoats. However, Walker's budget bills (like the budget bills offered by Republican governors in numerous other states in 2011 such as Ohio, Indiana, New Jersey, and Florida) put two particular targets of blame front and center: public employees and the unions through which they organize. In other words, this study suggests that public opinion and the political process are driven by elites *or* driven from the bottom-up: politics occurs at the confluence of these forces.

In a similar vein, this study also suggests that elite-driven and bottom-up forces influence each other. When people talk with each other about ingroups and outgroups they rely partly on understandings that they have learned from elite communication via mass media. Indeed, the current animosity toward public unions is arguably part of a decades-long battle against unions among conservative and Republican elites (Zernike 2011). Unions in general are often portrayed in policy and by policy-makers as undeserving (Schneider and Ingram 1993). But again, these divisions are clarified, reinforced, and kept alive through interpersonal communication. In order to fully understand the origins of the shape of mass opinion at a given point in time, we need to acknowledge processes taking place among members of the mass public as well as among political elites.

The events of early 2011 combined with the results conveyed in this paper suggest both that there are limits on how much power elites have to pit citizen against citizen *and* that their power to do so is quite extensive. First, with respect to the limits of this power, it is helpful to revisit the concept of stereotypes. The best scapegoats are those that are easy to dislike and are readily understood via negative stereotypes. But stereotypes, we know, are best disabled by conditions that encourage people to view members of outgroups as something other than "them": as unique individuals (Miller 2002), or people like themselves (Gaertner and Dovidio 2000). The intensive attention placed on the protestors in Madison may have complicated the ease with which some members of the public viewed public employees as an outgroup. News coverage often portrayed the protestors as ordinary people—teachers, nurses, police officers, firefighters—not just radical UW-Madison students with nothing better to do. The arguments that Walker overreached may have drawn attention away from the public employee vs. the rest-of-us division and onto a new one: Governor Walker vs. the rest-of-us.[12]

However, the events of early 2011 and the fieldwork I conducted in the wake of the budget crises also suggest that elites nevertheless have a great deal of power to foment divides. Each of the groups that I revisited after the protests reported a divide in their opinions on Walker's handling of the budget with respect to public employees. Most said

[12] Identical survey questions fielded by the Wisconsin Policy Research Institute, Inc., a conservative think tank, in November 2010 and then in late February- early March 2011 suggested that after several weeks of the protests, support for teachers' unions increased, while support for Walker dropped. http://www.wpri.org/polls/March2011/poll0311.html

they had decided, as a group, to not talk about the issue in order to not damage their friendships. Many members of these groups reported that their personal relationships had been affected, especially along gender lines, as noted above. In several cases, the tension was so intense that the family members were not speaking to one another, at least for the time being.

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

Municipality Description	Group Type	Municipality Population (2000)	Median Household Income (1999)
Central hamlet	Daily morning coffee klatch, local gas station (men)	500	38000
Northern tourist location	Weekly morning breakfast group, local restaurant (women, primarily retired)	500	32,000
North western hamlet	Weekly morning coffee klatch, local church (mixed gender, primarily retirees)	500	35,000
North central village	Group of library volunteers at local library (mixed gender, retirees); also, daily coffee klatch of male local leaders meeting in the local municipal building	500	34,000
North eastern resort village	Group of congregants after a Saturday evening service at a Lutheran church (mixed gender)	1,000	41,000
North western village	Daily morning coffee klatch, local gas station (men)	1,000	32,000
Northern American Indian reservation	Group of family members, during a Friday fish fry at a local gas station/restaurant (mixed gender)	1,000	35,000
South central village	Daily morning coffee klatch, local gas station (mixed gender, working and retired	1,500	31,000
North central village	Daily morning breakfast group, local diner (men)	2,000	38,000
South central village	Women's weekly morning coffee klatch at local diner; also group of male professionals, construction workers, retirees meeting later there	3,000	43,000
Central west village	Two daily morning coffee klatches, one at a local gas station, the other at a local diner (men)	3,000	30,000
Central east village	Kiwanis meeting (mixed gender, primarily retirees); also daily morning coffee klatch of male retirees at local fast food restaurant	3,000	45,000
Suburb of a city located in adjacent state	Daily morning coffee klatch, local diner (male local business owners, lawyers, retirees)	9,000	51,000
Southeastern city on northern edge of one of the two main metropolitan areas	Daily morning coffee klatch, local diner (men)	10,000	54,000
South central city	Middle-aged man and woman taking a mid-morning break at a local café	10,000	36,000
Central city	Daily morning coffee klatch, local café (middle-aged professionals, mixed gender)	38,000	37,000

Table is continued on next page.

Appendix A, continued

Municipality Description	Group Type	Municipality Population (2000)	Median Household Income (1999)
East central city	Daily morning coffee klatch, local gas station (retired men)	42,000	41,000
Suburb of one of the two main cities	Group of teachers and administrators at local high school (mixed gender); Daily lunch group of middle-aged men; Mixed gender breakfast group of retirees	47,000	55,000
Western city	Daily morning coffee klatch, local café (middle-aged professionals, retirees, mixed gender)	52,000	31,000
South eastern city	Weekly morning breakfast group, local diner (mixed gender, retirees and currently employed)	82,000	37,000
North eastern city	Daily morning breakfast group, local diner (men)	100,000	39,000
State capital (Major city 1)	Middle-aged, female professionals' book club; also, daily morning coffee klatch of male retirees at bakery; female resident volunteers in food pantry in low income neighborhood	200,000	42,000
Major city 2, northern neighborhood	AIDS/HIV activism group meeting after services in a Baptist church (mixed gender)	600,000	32,000
Major city 2, southern neighborhood	Group of Mexican immigrants, waiting at a pro bono health clinic (mixed gender)	600,000	32,000
South western village	4H group (mixed gender)	4,000	42,000
Central village	4H group (mixed gender)	10,000	33,000
South eastern city	4H group (mixed gender)	28,000	48,000
Central east village	4H group (mixed gender)	4,000	38,000

Note: Population and income figures have been rounded to preserve anonymity of groups observed.

APPENDIX B: LISTENING INVESTIGATIONS PROTOCOL

INITIAL VISIT PROTOCOL

Most important issues:
What do you think are the major issues facing people in [name of municipality] these days? Which of these issues are of special concern to you all personally?
[*If issues include taxes, health care, or immigration, skip to relevant questions below.*]
What do you think should be done about this?
Why do you think this has been overlooked?
Whom does the current policy benefit?

Taxes [if not addressed above]:
With respect to property and income taxes, do you think people similar to yourself currently pay a fair share?
Whom do you think benefits from our current tax policies?

Health care [if not addressed above]:
Now I would like to talk about health care for a few moments. Do you feel that you have been able to obtain adequate health care for you and your families?
Are there people in your community who don't/do have adequate health care? Why do you think that is the case?

Immigration [if not addressed above]:
Is immigration an issue in this community? How does it affect you? How do you think immigration is affecting life in [this state] in general?

Self-description (identity and occupation):
How would you describe the kind of people that are a part of your group, to outsiders like me?
Do any of you work outside the home? What kind of work do you do?

Children, activities, and education:
Do you have children? How old are they?
What kinds of activities are they involved in after school?
For those of you with kids still in school, do you think they will go on to obtain some kind of post-high school education?
Would you want them to attend the [state's flagship public university]? Why/why not?
Did any of you attend school after high school? Did any of you attend the [state's flagship public university], or another state public university system school? [If the latter:] Which one?

State's Flagship Public University
What, in your opinion, does [the state's flagship public university] currently do well?
What, in your opinion, can [the state's flagship public university] do better?
What *should* [the state's flagship public university] be doing in your community?
Whom do you think the [state's flagship public university] currently benefits?
When you think about the students who attend [the state's flagship public university], and the faculty and staff who work there, what comes to mind?

Financial security:
Thinking about your overall situation here in [name of municipality], would you say that you struggle to make ends meet, or do you live comfortably?

Success and deservingness:

In America today, some people have better jobs and higher incomes than others do. Why do you think that is — that some Americans have better jobs and higher incomes than others do?
[Here are some reasons other folks have stated—how important do you think these reasons are?
'Because some people have more in-born ability to learn.'
'Because discrimination holds some people back.'
'Because some people don't get a chance to get a good education.'
'Because some people just choose low-paying jobs.'
'Because government policies have helped high-income workers more.'
'Because God made people different from one another.'
'Because some people just don't work as hard.'

What does the term "hard work" mean to you?
I'm going to give you a list of occupations. Tell me which of these folks work hard for a living, and why you think that's the case: lawyers, construction workers, waitresses, public school teachers.

Anything else you want to add?
May I come back sometime?
[End by thanking the participants, reiterate contact information.]

SECOND VISIT PROTOCOL
During my last round of visits with groups like this around the state, I found that many people were concerned about health care, higher education, and issues related to water. I would like to ask more about your thoughts on these topics.

Health care:
What ARE your concerns about health care?
Do you think people here in your community are better or worse off with respect to health care than people in other parts of the state? Why? The country? Why?
[The last statewide public opinion poll conducted by the state's flagship university] asked people which of four health care reform solutions they support. Let me describe these and then ask for your opinions. [Describe four alternatives, based on following question wording.]
A number of proposals have been made about ways to change the health care system in [this state]. I am going to read some of these proposals and for each please tell me whether you strongly oppose it, somewhat oppose it, somewhat favor it, or strongly favor it.
[In the poll, the four questions below were randomized]
A. What about consolidating all the money and resources now being spent by employers, individuals, the state government, and insurance companies to operate the current health insurance system and replace it with a new system, administered entirely by state government and covering all residents of [the state]?
B. How about expanding the eligibility of existing state government health insurance programs for low-income people, such as [...] Medicaid, to provide coverage for more people without health insurance?
C. What about requiring every resident of [the state] to have health insurance, either from their employer or another source, and offer government subsidies to low-income residents to help them pay for it?
D. How about encouraging individuals to put money into a tax-free health savings account that they would use to pay for their regular health care bills and accompany this with a catastrophic insurance plan they must also purchase to help pay for major medical bills?

Higher education:
In what ways is higher education a big issue for people here in your community?
Is higher education more of a pressing concern for people here than in other parts of the state?

In general, whom do you think the [state's flagship public university] benefits? Whom do you think higher education in general benefits in this country?
Do you have children? Do/did you want your kids to go to college? Why/ why not?

Water:
Taking care of [name issue related to water mentioned in previous visit] will likely require broad support in the state legislature. Do you think it's possible to get that support? Why/ why not?
Is this an issue that all [people in the state] should be concerned about? How would you sell that to the broader [...] public?

Presidential race:
Which of the candidates would be most attentive to the concerns of people here in your community. Why? Most attentive to concerns of people in [this state]? Why?
What are your hopes for this presidential race?

Higher education:
[Repeat questions from first round]

Social class identity:
People talk about social classes such as the poor, the working class, the middle class, the upper-middle class, and the upper class. Which of these classes would you say you belong to?

THIRD AND ADDITIONAL VISITS PROTOCOL
Most important issues:
What are the major issues facing people in this community?
What do you think should be done about this?
Why do you think this has been overlooked?
Whom does the current policy benefit?

Power and authority:
How would you describe your group to an outsider like me? How do you think you compare to the rest of the community?
Who do you think has power in your community? In the state? The nation?
Do you tend to feel or not feel that most people with power try to take advantage of people like yourself?
How has this community changed over time?

Political parties:
Which party do you feel is more attentive to the concerns of people like you. Why?
Is it fair to say that Republicans are for the rich, and Democrats are for the lower income?
Which party do you trust to handle the economy? Why?

Attitudes toward government:
How much attention do you feel the government pays to what the people think when it decides what to do -- a good deal, some, or not much?"
Would you say the government is pretty much run by a few big interests looking out for themselves or that it is run for the benefit of all the people?
[Agree/disagree:] People like me don't have any say about what the government does.
[Agree/disagree:] Public officials don't care much what people like me think.

News use:
Over the past seven days, which of the following have you used to obtain news?

A) Read a newspaper
B) Read magazines like Newsweek, Time, or U.S. News and World Report
C) Watched the national news on television
D) Watched the local news on television
E) Listened to the news on radio
F) Read news on the Internet

Higher education:
[Repeat questions from first round]
Where do you usually get your news about the [state's flagship public university]?