Kathy Cramer traveled the state to research her book, which has taken on added relevance since the 2016 election.

ALLEN FREDRICKSON PHOTO

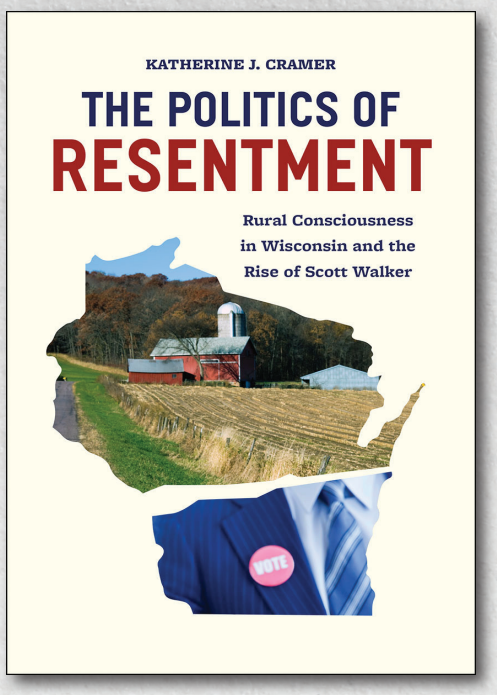
UW professor spent six years listening to rural Wisconsin residents express their frustrations

Rural resentment laid bare

Madison — If all of us learned to listen to each other the way Kathy Cramer does, it would go a long way toward healing the political wounds and shutting off the hateful language that both liberals and conservatives claim to abhor.

ON THE FRONTLINES OF REFORM

by Sunny Schubert



Or, everybody could just read Cramer's 2016 book *The Politics of Resentment: Rural Consciousness in Wisconsin and the Rise of Scott Walker.*

Do not be put off by the title. The book is not an anti-Walker polemic, though one might expect that given that the author is a University of Wisconsin-Madison political science professor.

Instead, the book is Cramer's search to discover not just what residents of rural Wisconsin think about politics but how they reach their conclusions.

Her work gained even more relevance after many of those residents turned Wisconsin into a red state for the first time since 1984 and helped elect President Donald Trump.

Cramer's study eschewed the use of so-called scientific polling data. Given how inaccurate the 2016 presidential polls proved to be, it was a wise choice.

As she writes in the book: "Politicians with small constituencies or limited budgets figure out what their constituents think and feel — public opinion — based on things other than polls. They talk to people. They do 'polling by walking around.' I am trying to revive this definition of public opinion as more than just what polls measure. It is also the understandings that emerge from communication among people."

So in 2007, instead of mailing questionnaires or hiring a telephone polling firm, Cramer began traveling repeatedly to talk with 39 groups of people in 27 communities across Wisconsin, most of them in rural areas. She continued those visits for about six years.

"I was very interested in social class identity: where people perceive themselves to be in the pecking order and how that affects their politics," Cramer, who grew up in Grafton, explains in an interview. "Also, I love Wisconsin, and I'm always looking for a good excuse to drive around this fabulous state."

The result of her "walking around" research is a book that is profoundly respectful of the rural residents.

Cramer writes almost nothing about politicians and right-wing media stars, the groups Thomas Frank's *What's the Matter With Kansas?* (2004) blames for turning Kansas into a red state.

Instead, she focuses on actual voters. She does not see rural Wisconsinites as

*From **The Politics of Resentment:***

So on this particular glorious morning, I am in Henry's dairy barn while the cows are getting milked. I am in what I call my "nondescript fieldwork clothes," an outfit that is intentionally professional but not too fancy — nice pants and a button-down short-sleeved shirt, with decent sandals, all in darkish but not black colors (navy blue, basically). Like I said, it is not too fancy, and yet I am mindful that cow poop is splattering up from the cement onto my toes. The farmers and the others in the barn chuckle a little as they notice me grimace.

Henry introduces me to several family members working in the barn. I have told Henry and his brother I am a faculty member at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and given them my business card each of the four other times I have visited with their dice group over the past five years. But they have a different interpretation. "Here's a politician, up from Madison," Henry says as he introduces me. "Oh I am not a politician," I say as I laugh. "I'm here to get the wisdom of people around here on recent events in the state."

A man working with the milking machines looks around the back of the cow at me and says, "I'm glad Walker did what he did. It's about time someone takes something away from those bastards."

The bastards, in this case, are public employees. I am one of them.

> ***"I did not find them to be racist, homophobic, anti-immigrant, misogynistic or whatever other labels are being thrown around these days. These are good people."***
> – Kathy Cramer, referring to rural residents

"a population that needs to be 'fixed.' "

"I did not find them to be racist, homophobic, anti-immigrant, misogynistic or whatever other labels are being thrown around these days," she says.

"These are good people. I don't buy into (Frank's concept that) people are voting against their interests or that people are stupid."

The divide manifested

When Cramer began her research, she had no idea that Scott Walker, then Milwaukee County executive, would become governor in 2010, nor that just weeks into his first term he would propose the politically polarizing Act 10.

That legislation dramatically reduced the political power of public employees, including teachers, throughout the state. It also forced many of them to contribute more to their health insurance premiums and retirement plans.

In liberal enclaves like Madison and Milwaukee, the outrage was palpable. But in rural communities, Cramer reports, yard signs and bumper stickers supporting the governor were prevalent.

And that's where the resentment comes in. The rural residents Cramer talked with want smaller government because they resent big government.

They believe the tax dollars they send to Madison rarely return to benefit their own communities. They believe that public employees make too much money and don't work as hard as rural people do. "They shower before work, not afterwards," she recounts in the book about rural residents' views of university employees.

The residents also believe their values and opinions are ignored or disrespected. When these feelings combine, they lead to a simmering resentment very similar to simple class-consciousness but rooted in geography — in a sense of place.

As Cramer writes:

"I had to contend with the common perception that visitors from Madison usually parachute in and pronounce what is right and good and then leave without respecting local wisdom, wants or needs. …

"The complaints I heard in rural areas were not simply distrust of government — people in rural areas often perceived that government was particularly dismissive of the concerns of people in rural communities …

"Many people talked about this as part and parcel of a fundamental aspect of the rural-versus-urban divide: City people just don't seem to get it. They don't understand rural life or pay attention to it.

"When pundits look at low-income residents in Republican areas and exclaim that they are voting against their interests, they are often assuming that somehow the Republican Party has fooled people into not noticing that they are opposing the very kind of government programs that might help them out.

"But those kinds of claims neglect that a 'safety net' may not translate as 'help' to everyone. In rural areas, there is a great deal of pride in the idea that 'help' is about letting people work hard enough so that they can make it on their own.

"The sense I got from these conversations is that help, for many, is about providing jobs, not welfare. When (one man) told me he had never missed a day of work, and he did it 'working in the woods,' he said it with pride.

"To him, rural life is tough, but he drew a good deal of esteem from claiming that he was a person who was living that life."

Lessons for both parties

Cramer does not spare criticism of politicians, particularly Republicans, who tap into rural resentment. She noted that during his 2010 gubernatorial campaign, Walker demonized proposed high-speed rail between Madison and Milwaukee as something most residents of the state would never ride.

From ***The Politics of Resentment:***

I heard people in rural areas say many times that all of the major decisions are made in the urban areas, by urban people, and dictated outward. They complained that authority flowed out from Madison and Milwaukee but never in reverse. They felt that they did not have the power to get people to listen to their concerns.

While the inability to get their concerns heard is a subtle instance of feeling powerless, it is nonetheless important. Power is partly about respect, recognition and listening. People whose voices are never heard by decision-makers have no power. When those in power listen to some group, they convey that they are worthy of attention and, implicitly, that they share their power.

Many of the people I spent time with in rural areas felt like their towns were drying up and blowing away because the spigot of resources had been turned off. In addition, though, there was also a sense that these more subtle forms of power had been denied them as well.

She also says: "To be blunt, conservative politicians encourage people to focus on the undeserving as a way to achieve their goal of limiting government without harming the interests of the wealthy."

But she also worries that Democratic politicians continue to miss the point. Since last November's election, she says, she has been asked about her findings many times, mostly by Democrats.

"In my turn, as a UW-Madison professor and as director of the Morgridge Center for Public Service, I am very consciously not a political consultant. I have reached out to Republicans to say the Democrats want this meeting. My job is to help us all to better connect with the people we're representing.

"Democrats asking for advice on how to connect with rural voters — well, there's various ways you can take it," she says. "Why do they think they need to learn from me? Haven't they been hanging out in coffee shops and gas stations, actually talking to people? And if not, why not?"

Cramer worries that some Democratic politicians at both the state and national levels with whom she has spoken think too little about how to actually solve the problems facing rural residents and think too much about how to simply "rework" their message to assuage or attract rural voters.

So instead of pondering ways to improve the jobs situation, for example, or to keep gas prices low (rural residents drive an average of 40 percent more than city dwellers), some Democrats' only takeaway from Cramer's work is that Hillary Clinton should have campaigned more in Wisconsin.

For the average audience, *The Politics of Resentment* is no beach-chair book. Both the introductory chapters and the conclusion will strike some readers as filled with academic jargon. In Cramer's defense, her book is meant as a work of scholarship, not an appeal to armchair observers.

But the middle of the book is lively, filled with verbatim conversations, joking, friendly banter and amusing anecdotes. Readers can picture themselves hanging out in the gas stations, corner stores, diners and church basements of the North Woods, drinking coffee, playing dice and eavesdropping.

"Why do (Democrats) think they need to learn from me? Haven't they been hanging out in coffee shops and gas stations, actually talking to people? And if not, why not?" – Kathy Cramer

Academic researchers, including Cramer herself, "could always do better as public servants in connecting with the people," she says.

"Some of us need to learn that people who don't have Ph.D.s can still teach us a lot. Maybe people on campus aren't aware of just how much people (in rural areas) would like it if we said, 'Here's what I'm up to in your community.' Given that we don't know each other, we don't know how much we could learn from each other," she adds.

Since the book came out, Cramer has been busy breaking down her conclusions for the mainstream media, writing for publications ranging from *Scientific American* to *USA Today*.

She has spoken to dozens of campus groups, in addition to fielding questions from politicians and journalists here and abroad.

Many "coastal elites," she says, acknowledge that they have no idea what people here in flyover country are thinking.

She also has been following up with some of the rural residents who helped her write the book to ask what they think of President Trump.

"A lot of people whom I genuinely admire and think of as intelligent, caring, compassionate people really didn't like Hillary Clinton," she says.

"They also didn't like some of the things Trump said or the way he behaved, but they really, really wanted change."

Realistically, however, "They're not actually expecting him to change their lives," she adds. "They're hoping he will cut back on the flow of resources to groups they see as undeserving, like immigrants, but they're actually not expecting anyone to bring a higher standard of life to their communities," she says.

"They do express some sense that if the economy picks up, their lives might improve. A lot of these folks are really struggling," she says, adding that many urban residents, too, are challenged economically.

On this front anyway, low-income people, both urban and rural, share a belief, she says: " 'Government is not paying attention to people like me. Our political system doesn't work for me.' " WI

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From ***The Politics of Resentment:***

When people perceived that rural life was economically tough, this carried with it many complaints: about the injustice in the distribution of public dollars, unfair taxation and more. Those complaints were intertwined with other aspects of rural consciousness, in particular, with their sense of being ignored and disrespected and of having fundamentally different values and lifestyles than city dwellers.

Here is a common narrative for how people wove these perceptions together: Rural life was a source of pride for many because it was different from urban living — it involved different lifestyles and values, including a special emphasis on hard work. That rural hard work ethic was a point of pride, but for many, it was a problem because in order to work hard, you needed a job, and rural communities were on the short end of the stick in terms of jobs. Why? Because rural communities had no power. Politicians and others with the ability to make the decisions to bring good-paying jobs to their communities paid no attention to their places.

In the rural communities I visited, I often heard people stating, as though a matter of fact, that jobs, wealth and taxpayer dollars are in the "the M&Ms," as people sometimes referred to Madison and Milwaukee. They complained that rural areas are being left on their own to fight a losing battle. Conversations in 17 of the 25 groups outside the Madison and Milwaukee areas included statements conveying that their communities did not receive their fair share of resources and that metro residents did not understand this. Their comments conveyed that the rural-versus-urban distinction was the main way to characterize the distribution of taxation, wealth and the cost of goods and services in the state. In short, many people in small towns perceived that their tax dollars are "sucked in" by Madison and spent on that city or Milwaukee, never to be seen again.