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Was it rural populism? Returning to the country, "catching up," and trying to understand the Trump vote

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Abstract

American manufacturing continues its long death spiral. Development policy favors burgeoning, urban, creative classes. A racist, misogynist, Christian and/or heteronormative political class lashes out against the perceived gains of women and minorities. The Democratic Party now privileges urban elites with presumed intellectual superiority. These narratives would be but a few on an over-long list of common diagnoses of a tide of alleged populism across rural America. While these claims may have purchase, they also require urgent interrogation, as many contribute to an Othering discourse that renders the country as backwards, hick, redneck, uneducated or mystified by religion. In this context of toxic and divisive politics, this paper looks for ways to scale what can be understood as a political "empathy wall" (Hochschild 2016). Building upon literatures including rural sociology and political science, this paper details a mixed methods project that began in a quasi-autobiographical fashion: semi-structured and unstructured interviews by a left-progressive researcher among classmates, teachers, churchgoers, farmers and others in his rural Midwestern hometown. This personalized micro-case study is then read through and against multi-decade trends observed in U.S. census and voter data for rural Midwestern counties. These data are complemented by a remote sensing analysis of land use and cropland obtained from 20 years of Landsat imagery. What emerges is a multi-layered story of farming communities where agrarian and neoliberal political economic change (and a lack thereof) have contributed to a kind of "desiccation" in the supposed heartland. This research explicitly looks for what Scoones et al. (2017) have described as emancipatory rural politics. In doing so, this research complicates stark narratives of populism and finds underlying politics and worries in the country that may have resonance in the city. And vice versa.

Introduction

In May 1982, news broke that heavy equipment manufacturer Caterpillar would cut layoff another 8,000 workers, mostly in Illinois. The company blamed a global recession and high interest rates for job cuts that had, by then, totaled 17,500.

The spate of layoffs in the early 1980s reverberated particularly in central Illinois communities, where blue- and white-collar Caterpillar jobs had been one pillar of non-farm economic stability for rural towns like those that dot much of the agricultural, rural Midwest. Losing such jobs in a community only contributed to the sense of collective devastation in areas already in the grips of a national farm crisis (see Dudley 200).

"I was laid off in 1982. That was a big kick in the head," said a former Caterpillar employee and retired part-time teacher, as he, his wife and I sat around his table in Henry, Illinois. "A lot of suicides, a lot of divorces… It's like being castrated to be laid off like that. "

In the course of that two-hour interview, our discussion traversed the happenings (or lack thereof) in this small town in the last two decades — the status of schools, churches, families that everyone knows, businesses that everyone patronizes and so on. In most cases, the conversation would linger on some store, institution or family that had packed up, sometimes to be replaced, sometimes only to leave behind another empty structure.

"That's what you get when you talk to people in Henry," said an elementary school teacher and wife to the laid-off Caterpillar employee. "You hear all the things that used to be there."

This paper interrogates such changes in upper Midwest farming communities; it details a mixed methods project that began in a quasi-autoethnographic fashion: semi-structured and unstructured interviews by a left-progressive researcher returning to his rural Midwestern hometown. My personalized micro-case study is then read through and against trends observed in two decades of U.S. census, voter and land-use data for the region.

The goal of the paper is to investigate, unpack and complicate narratives of nascent populism in the surprise electoral victory of Donald Trump. Rural America generally, and the Midwest specifically, have emerged in popular discourse as "Trump Country," often seen as a regressive place as opposed to the presumed mainstream coasts and cities. The overlong list of common diagnoses for Trump's support in these here parts include, but are not limited to: the long death spiral of American manufacturing; resentment at being "left behind" by burgeoning, urban, creative classes; outright racism, misogyny, religious bigotry and/or heteronormativity that lashes out a diversifying country; and an elite Democratic Party and candidate that presumed superiority over the "country bumpkin."

Initial findings discussed in this paper suggest that while these narratives may have some purchase, any story of populism[1] is a complex one. I find that for decades communities of the rural upper Midwest countryside have confronted interrelated social, economic, and ecological shifts that also have multivariate relationships to the vote for Trump. Such changes may be material or symbolic, and while many are understood as decline, some also seem to result from aspirations and what may be regarded as positive developments both internally and externally.

This paper attends to both broad patterns as well as countervailing descriptions that emerge from both interviews and secondary data. Boosters in the countryside yet see opportunity to revitalize small towns even as many desiccate from stagnation. At least some people in at least some counties are indeed faring well or embracing change, but perceptions of "decline"— social, economic, even moral

[1] Populism, being notorious difficult to define, has occupied many a political theorist. I primarily take my cues from admittedly introductory texts by Muddle and Katlwasser (2017) and Müller (2016), as well as more dense analysis by Laclau (2005).

— also abound. A good education remains imbricated in the so-called American dream, but it seems to routinely undercut social and economic sustainability in the countryside. While ideals of rural community and cohesion remain, social disarray seems ever-present. Farm lands continue to be valuable, but the people to farm them dwindle year on year. Statistically significant correlates of the "Trump vote" include levels of agricultural *and* manufacturing employment, increased racial diversity, youth unemployment, low educational attainment and low income.

Not surprisingly, this research precludes easy answers to common questions about Trump's win — Was it the economy? Was it race? Was it Clinton herself? To return to the titular question, was it rural populism? The answer is, not surprisingly, it's complicated.

In the immediately following sections, this paper expands on methodological and theoretical concerns. The remaining sections focus on empirical findings.

Autoethnography and "Catching Up"

Henry qualifies as a "hometown" for me; my family moved there before I turned 10 and we lived there for six years until my father, an itinerant Methodist minister, was transferred. Indeed, I had not set foot in Henry in 17 years before I returned in June 2016 for this research.

With a population estimated at less than 2,400, Henry also occupies a place in political economic imagination and history — the rural farm town. It sprung up on the Illinois River in the first half of the 19th century, envisioned by present-day residents as an original home of hardy pioneers. The riparian location meant access to markets that would power the conversion of the prairie to plowed fields and the spread of ever-industrializing agriculture (Cronon 1991). Before the railroads, farmers in the countryside around Henry would send corn downstream to Peoria, St. Louis and ultimately New Orleans. Later grain would flow upstream to Chicago. In more recent memory, Henry's farming base was bolstered by the arrival of industry such as a BF Goodrich tire factory and a fertilizer plant and the town's proximity to the urbanizing economy of Peoria — including Caterpillar jobs.

Residents paint a general picture of an idyllic small-town of the '70s — decent work, good education, full church pews, winning school sports teams, local businesses — that offered many people a good life, despite economic ups and downs. "We were self-sufficient," said K. "You didn't have to leave town to buy anything." Between the 1970s and the 1990s, the downtown business district housed two or three grocers, clothing outlets, a Sears Catalogue store, five-and-dime-type general stores, an appliance retailer, a pharmacy, diners, bars, hardware stores, an ag supply, law offices, banks, insurance companies, at least one barber, a florist, a Dairy Queen, an American Legion hall, the town library and a swimming pool. In recent years, some businesses have moved out of downtown to the state highway on the western edge of town but many more have simply shuttered.

I returned to Henry to study what had happened since my family left. I met former classmates, teachers, churchgoers, farmers, family friends and others.[2] Of 22 interviewees, only two had not been in Henry when my family lived there. Though the research dimensions and implications of my visit were always explained, conversations nevertheless adopted an air of "catching up" and reunion. After I made a guest appearance at a Rotary International meeting, the town newspaper noted my visit and offered dual identifiers — my status as a PhD student at the University of California at Berkeley and my late father's former role as a Methodist minister in town.

[2] Interviews and observations from Henry are drawn from a 12-day visit in June 2016. Most interviews were conducted individually wherever the respondent felt comfortable. Some interviews involved family-style sit-downs. Some also would draw in commentary from others who invariably listened in. Such intrusions were not discouraged if the respondent felt comfortable. Many interviews were arranged via social media, which has provided a connection for many years mostly to former classmates and a window into life in the town. Some observations are also drawn from attendance of a city council meeting, a Rotary Club luncheon and a church service.

Autoethnography, autobiographical ethnography, native anthropology, "insider" research and other forms of studying one's own community, geography, social group, "culture," or subject position clearly entail pitfalls such as bias, sympathetic representation and edited memory (see Taylor 2011). Yet in research in closed communities such social and autobiographical ties enable insights that might otherwise be impossible or at best superficial (e.g. Dudley 2000, Garcia 2010). To use the terms of Bourdieu (1977, among others), insider researchers are more likely to share with their respondents habitus (assets, knowledge, tastes), doxa (unspoken social norms and beliefs); and familiarity with the overlapping fields where the researcher and respondent meet (the church, the town meeting, the grocery store). In my own case, my first official job involved detassling corn in the fields around Henry; my second was stocking shelves in what is now the town's only grocery. My babysitter's husband was a manager at the BFGoodrich tire plant. Most important for shaping my enduring connection to Henry of course was my father's role as a pastor. I do not claim to be an autoethnographer, but my still extant community ties have given me both access and sympathy that power this research.

Othering and Defining America

My connections to rural America also motivate this project normatively. In the run-up to the 2016 election, Donald Trump and his supporters presented a caricature of the rural denizen, laughable and condemnable in turns. Rural Americans — the presumed "they" who were backing Trump — routinely encountered condescending late night television hosts, mainstream journalists and pundits. As a Left-progressive scholar, I admit to my share of piling on, even as I was also uncomfortable with the stereotyping of people who live in places like my hometown. While Trump may be a sociopathic, racist oligarch, I believe it remains a mistake to consider the president and his voters as a totality.

When Trump won, protestors marched in cities nationwide, and I joined them. Donations and volunteers have flowed to progressive organizations, and I donated and volunteered more. After a year, I still routinely watch the Trump Presidency dissected humorously by TV comedians. The soapboxes and social media of the American political Left (mine included) still ring with outrage or incredulity. Like others, I find Trump's policy and rhetoric equivalent to veiled support of oligarchy, patriarchy and white supremacy, and I wasn't particularly shy about these politics even in my return to Henry. While I was sometimes challenged politely, to a one, the people I interviewed offered a warm and gracious welcome. My experience of not encountering zealous Trump support among a mostly conservative population likely suffers from a sample bias, but it also may suggest that white-hot populism or ignorance bordering on false consciousness[3] is not as commonplace as external portrayals would suggest.

I have argued elsewhere (Jadhav 2017) that a popular Left-progressive "we" — with which I generally identify — may engage in a process of Othering of the rural conservative "them." This progressive we is shocked or dismayed by the electoral victory of "them." Those people. Out there. In the red counties. The supporters of Donald Trump. This collective identification may be Othering in that it defines what is not included in the "we" as "deviant or non-normative" (Mountz 2009: 328). A description and negation of "them" automatically results from our description of "us" and the "repetition of characteristics about a group of people who are distinguished from the norm in some way" (ibid). "They" are presumed to be racist, misogynist or ignorant. In polite conversation, this Othering uses coded language: Conservative voters love their guns, are Christian or drive big trucks. Importantly, the divide is also spatial: The land of "them" is marginal, sitting outside the centers where "we" live. The Othered Trump voter inhabits the heartland, the flyover states, the countryside. "They" are in the places where "we" are not. To be clear, many of my respondents know well the familiar caricature of

[3] A recent comedic "gotcha" interview with a Trump-supporting golf course owner aired by Comedy Central's *The Daily Show* and resulting commentary (Dessem 2018) demonstrates how durable the caricature of the hoodwinked Trump voter remains.

the hick, redneck or hillbilly, and most chafe at generalized conclusions too often drawn about the oddity or supposed backwardness of rural, conservative "culture" (see also Vance 2016).

Meanwhile, a panoply of intersecting bigotries — enabled by structures, institutions, political economy and often practical politics — has long produced for the rural countryside an urban, black, brown, immigrant, female/feminist, gay or Muslim Other. Such prejudices stalked my family, especially when we first arrived in Henry; my father was an Indian immigrant while my mother is white Euro-American. I didn't understand the term "sand nigger" the first time it was shouted at me from a passing car. Though racist oppression was hardly my daily experience (and in six years much of the community warmly embraced our family), prejudicial stereotypes abounded, from the always assumed "Mexican" who stole farm jobs, to the supposedly crime-riddled, black public housing in Peoria or Chicago. Hochschild, in her study of conservative (though not exclusively rural) territory in Louisiana, identified a long-simmering "deep story" held by conservatives that often features a non-conservative, mostly non-white Other unfairly getting ahead by graft or government assistance (2016).

A full discussion of Othering is beyond the scope of this paper, but such us-vs-them narrative may betray a colonial logic. Said's formulation (1978) of "imaginative geography," suggests places and cultures are construed relationally and normatively through power; for colonizers, Europe was immediate, strong and civilized; the Other of the Orient was distant and inferior. Similarly, Hall (1992) identifies Othering in the specific discourses used to justify and reinforce Euro-Atlantic centrism and domination by "the West" of "the rest." Relying on Said, Gregory (2004) documents how the U.S. "war on terror" again marshalled an us-vs-them narrative of Western civilization against Islam, to justify war and geopolitical domination. In the extreme, the Other becomes Schmitt's political enemy as "the other, the stranger… existentially something different and alien, so that in the extreme case conflicts with him are possible" (1996: 27).

This Othering — baked into rural-urban, country-city problems — clearly predates the Trump campaign, even if he stoked it. Frank (2004) argues that conservatives in his home state of Kansas have for years been catalyzed to vote against their interests because they were also activated against a proponents of abortion, gay or minority rights (e.g. an ideological Other). Nor does Othering exist purely at a discursive level; rather division is reinforced through political practice, including the conservative captures of statehouses, gerrymandering (Nivola and Brady 2008) and the Tea Party's muscular political organization (Rosenthal and Trost 2012; Skockpol and Williamson 2012; Parker and Barreto 2013). Donald Trump's populist rhetoric identifying a version of America to make great and a "people" who *need* his help — nor its opposite Left-progressive disdain that imagines the slack-jawed yokel — should not be understood as novel. If these countervailing discourses construct opposite political Others, we should not be terribly surprised that,

> "[t]he presidential election thus also became a referendum on who Americans believed they were, and how they felt about those who were different from them. Ultimately, the election was a manifestation of the country's broader identity crisis. As the United States changes demographically, socially, and culturally, Americans' political identities are increasingly driven by competing understandings of what their country is and ought to be—a multicultural society that welcomes newcomers and embraces its growing diversity, or a more provincial place that recalls an earlier era of traditional gender roles and white Christian dominance in economic and cultural life" (Sides, Tesler and Vavreck 2017).

My research proceeds on the presupposition that visions of what the U.S. "is and ought to be" — populist or otherwise — cannot be understood purely at the level of ideology. Though Trump may reveal himself a populist when he makes claims to *know* and best represent a version of "the people" (see Müller 2016), the actual politics of such people (e.g. conservative, rural Midwesterners) dialectically mediate and are mediated by material experiences and the social, economic and

ecological conditions.[4] In short, denouncing Trump voters[5] as bigoted, paranoid or hateful dangerously overlooks the possibility that they *also* may have actual, material grievance or need.[6]

This paper now turns to empirical findings regarding social, economic, demographic and ecological patterns in the rural Midwest states of Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Minnesota, Missouri and Wisconsin. This blends my qualitative, quasi-autoethnographic field work with quantitative data analysis.[7]

"A lot of things have changed"

While interviews probed conditions *within* Henry and the immediately surrounding farm land, the paper's complementary quantitative analysis of U.S. Census data, satellite imagery and voting patterns adopts the analytical scale of the county. Henry with a population of just 2,348 (ACS 2017), remains the largest "city" in Marshall County, Illinois,[8] which is dotted like much of the Midwest with small towns, villages and hamlets (see **Figure 1** for a map the study area, highlighting Marshall County). In between, fields and forest may stretch for miles (see **Figure 2** for a regional land-cover classification). Yet seemingly remote, settlements remain geographically interconnected via social, economic and family ties — living in one town, shopping for groceries in another, buying appliances in a third, visiting family in a fourth, watching children play sports against a cross county-rival in a fifth and going to church still somewhere else. To see a movie, you might drive roughly 16 miles south to Chillicothe, a city of 6,000, which also has Pizza Hut and Kroger. But that's also almost halfway to Peoria, a city of more than 110,000, where you can find Best Buy, a large shopping mall, Thai food and robust nightlife. Viewed at night, from space, this Midwestern geography looks like network pulsing capillaries and arteries (see **Figure 3** for a map of night-time light data), where faint hamlets connect to brighter small towns which are hardly isolated from blazing large cities. Notably, increasing internet access has also compressed rural-metro space time. In Henry, for example, a local internet service provider began offering dial-up connections in the mid-1990s; today high-speed broadband companies serve Henry and mobile connections in town are sufficient for even streaming Netflix. "We're not actually that cutoff from the rest of the country," said one retired engineer. A local business owner from my own generation quipped, "We get Amazon Prime, too."

Clearly, a kind of urbanization is clearly at work in the countryside. Areas under the four classes of "developed" land-cover — open space and low-, medium- and high-intensity — increased from 2001

[4] Dudley and Hochschild's work both support this argument even if they don't make it explicitly.

[5] The same must be said of Clinton voters.

[6] I am motivated to take seriously claims people in the countryside and to look for the roots of populism as material and actual, by the work of Scoones et al. (2017).

[7] Quantitative analyses here take as their unit of observation rural counties within the states of Iowa, Illinois, Indiana, Minnesota, Missouri and Wisconsin. I use the county scale because it is the smallest unit for which presidential voter returns are uniformly available. In addition, margins of error for sub-county-scale data from U.S Census sample surveys (the long-form of the decennial census or the American Community Survey) are sufficiently high as to render many estimates meaningless. Presidential voter returns, which provide the key dependent variables in quantitative analysis, come from Dave Leip's Atlas of U.S. Presidential Elections. Independent predictor variables were compiled from dozens of tables of the 1990 and 2010 U.S. Censuses, the 2008-2012 American Community Survey data and environmental summaries of the U.S. Geological Survey's National Land Cover Dataset (NHGIS 2017). Nighttime stable light data, derived from satellite imagery composites comes from the U.S. Air Force Weather Agency and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's National Geophysical Data Center (2017). From approximately 2,100 raw data variables, I calculated the various percentages and percentage point change variables related to core lines of inquiry — voting, social/demographic, economic, development and ecological trends — for more refined analysis. Variables were chosen based on theory, qualitative data from the field and initial correlation tests for significant relationships. As no useful definition of "rural" exists at the county scale, the universe of observations includes those 530 counties where land-cover classified as low-, medium- or high-intensity development in 2001 is below 10 percent. In the six states considered, this threshold excluded excludes the 37 most urbanized (and suburbanized) counties in these six states.

[8] There are also Marshall Counties in Indiana, Iowa and Minnesota. I this paper all references are to Marshall County, Illinois.

to 2011 (see **Table 1**). Mean night-time light in more than 90 percent of counties also rose between 1992 and 2011; simply put, the country has (**Figure 3**) become brighter. However, there remains an unevenness to this trend below the county scale. In 43 counties, median light decreased while in another 234 counties (including Marshall County) it remained flat; mathematically, light increases in these counties are then more likely come from increased intensity rather than distribution; while bright places get brighter, the darkened countryside stays the same or perhaps turns out the lights.

Below, Marshall County provides a comparative lens to read through and against the dataset of rural counties for Illinois, Iowa, Indiana, Minnesota, Missouri and Wisconsin — states which contain a significant swath the Midwestern farming belt (see **Figure 3**). **Table 2** contains basic descriptive statistics for a long list of key variables for both Marshall County and the 530-county study area. While interpreting each statistic individually is beyond the space available for this paper — as one retired high school teacher said, "a lot of things have changed"— I discuss five key trends that arise from the quantitative data and interviews.

First, the rural Midwest is greying and, in some places, drastically so (see **Figure 4**). Median age rise, not surprisingly has a statistically significant correlation with a decline in the 18- to 29-year-old population. This change correlates, statistically and significantly, with college education, demonstrating a particular social fallout of educational aspiration. Multiple teachers and parents of former classmates described how children were pushed, in school and at home, to go off to four-year colleges. Many that could did. And many that did would not return. A retired high school teacher:

> "What does it take to keep 'em here? "Here, if you're a mechanical engineer, you don't have a job. The ones that get higher education, they go elsewhere. Ones that don't go beyond high school, they probably can't leave. When my kids went to college, I wasn't expecting them to come back to Henry."

An important point: While the percentage of people with only a high school diploma has fallen, there has not been an equivalent rise in the population with at least a bachelor's degree. In between, sits a group of people who attended a year or two of university, earned community college credits or received only vocational training. Yet often such training is geared toward the same manufacturing or lower-tech jobs that are in decline.

Second, the social demographics that respondents couched as "traditional community" have also seen widespread change. Though "white alone" is still the dominant racial category, it is falling, some of which can be attributed to a small uptick in international immigrants. Rural counties have seen declines in households headed by the heteronormative husband and wife[9] as well as increases in female-headed households without a husband present. Similarly, non-family households — ones where no two people are related — have also risen. Social change may also follow from even seemingly positive economic shifts. For example, households in the Census' top income category — $150,000 or more — were practically unheard of in 1990 (one in 200); by 2010, one in 25 households fit that description. Similarly, some respondents reported more wealthy people "from Chicago" eyeing real estate around Henry for second homes; town buzz says immigrant intends to build loft apartments and a brewpub in an empty former bank.

A retired teacher and part-time public official suggested, with carefully couched language, that he expects Henry's social changes — and potential social fractures — to increase in any future. "We would not be getting the German or white Protestant base we're used to. I would hope that we would be accepting of that, but it would be change." Henry's mayor, an aggressive town booster, conceded occasional racist backlash in the face of shifting ethnic demographics. Such demographic change takes the form of the owners of a new Mexican restaurant or the Indian family that bought the town's last grocery story or the mayor's own Filipino wife, who attends city council meetings. "I do work to

[9] U.S. Census data holds to heteronormative categories for both spouses as well as traditional gender binaries.

educate people," the mayor added. "I push back a bit. Our culture is blending and in small town America, (community acceptance) has to happen. It's about surviving… and diversity is a key."

Of course, social changes can be deeply personal — perhaps also revelatory — even as it results from wider demographic (or political economic) shifts.[10] In 2016, two different white respondents saw daughters leave for college, settle near Chicago and ultimately marry black men. "When people learn that she married (a black man), they ask whether she met him in Africa on a mission trip," she said, letting me in on an inside joke. "That's ridiculous of course to think that because he's black he must have come from Africa. But this is Henry we're talking about." Another respondent hinted that the experience of having a black son-in-law had provided insight on structural white privilege: "I'll say something and then he'll tell me, 'Well, that's now how I see it.' He'll tell me about how race works from his perspective, and, you know, it's just not something I could ever have understood. Because I can't see things like he does. But he's teaching me."

Third, social changes articulate with economic structural change. More women are joining the work force, and consequently improving their share of jobs compared to men. But the pie of jobs in the rural Midwest is not growing apace and so the ratio of men outside the labor force to inside it has also increased. Higher shares of female employment also statistically, significantly correlate with higher levels of female-only-headed households and non-family households, something multiple respondents complained of and one respondent described negatively as either resulting from or contributing to "different values." Meanwhile, farmers said that decreased agricultural jobs — which may be a sign of good times — still indicates loss of a way of life: that of the small, independent family business.

Fourth, many respondents in Henry painted a picture of generalized rural malaise, a concern to which Trump dogwhistled with his "Make America Great Again" slogan. My experience returning to Marshall County would lend support to their claims as rural counties grapple with problems that might also describe many an urban neighborhood: Many storefronts are shuttered. The popular bowling alley with an attached bar is now just a bar, while the town no longer has a florist, barber or full-time doctor. Once community-run institutions from a bank to the pharmacy have been bought by regional or national chains. Teachers reported smaller classes in school; the inability to offer advanced placement courses; and more low-income students getting free school lunches. Church attendance is down. Food pantries run low. A marketing manager for a rural homeless shelter said demand continued to rise beyond the number of available beds.

During a four-hour interview with Henry's mayor, the sense of urgency for town leaders to stave off decline was palpable. In a kind of sales pitch for what Henry must avoid, we drove to other nearby towns in Marshall County and neighboring ones where population decrease — and with it tax base and spending power — has been more precipitous. After the fourth or fifth small town with too many boarded-up store fronts, the mayor said, "That town… they were thriving. Nice little bedroom community. A fun little town. But now, it's just spooky."

The data, too, tell tale about much of the rural Midwest: more vacant homes; fewer houses owned free and clear; higher unemployment for younger generations; lost jobs in agriculture, forestry, fishing, mining, manufacturing, wholesale and even retail. In central Illinois, periodic layoffs from CAT — as Caterpillar is popularly known — didn't end in the 1980s. Another respondent, a classmate my age, was let go from the company in 2009. Fear that her husband would eventually be laid off by CAT drove another classmate to move her family out state for secure work. The former tire plant in Henry has lost jobs and been carved up by national and international chemical companies. The local fertilizer plant itself is now part of the Koch Industries. As jobs dry up in many counties, commute times have also stretched as people driver farther for work. While general cost of living in towns remains lower that cities, a lack of rental housing penalizes or drives away people who can't buy homes. Many

[10] My own family's experience of racism was not static; by the time we left Henry, I had numerous surrogate grandparents and close friends who had never before met an Indian.

respondents also said increasing healthcare and insurance costs eats away at lower incomes (remember, the countryside is greying).

Even the five-year average estimate of median household income (2008 to 2012), which has risen over 1990 levels, even when accounting for inflation, still lag behind national median household income (ACS 2017). Above-median incomes are also spatially uneven; notably, there is a statistically significant correlation between median household income and the proportion of a county covered in cropland.

Fifth, farming incomes and farming change appears to be a tale of mixed blessings. Farmers interviewed reported good times: high corn prices for those who wished to keep farming and high land values for those looking to sell. Older farmers compared today's political economy favorably to the 1980s farm crisis, when many faced foreclosure sales of their land, often to neighbors, at cut-rate prices (c.f. Dudley 2000). An older farmer, the father of a friend, remembers those hardscrabble days: "There's not the risk that there used to be in the '80s. I was in debt back in the '80s. Had to borrow to put the crop in. Now I'm old and feeble but I don't have any debt." Of course, none of his four children plan to continue the family farm.

For families still in the business, higher fuel prices have boosted demand for ethanol, keeping corn prices rarely below $3 per bushel since 2006, after decades hovering closer to $2. The price even broke $8 a bushel in 2012 before settling down a bit below $4 a year later. A rare classmate who returned to Henry after college and took up farming with his family said, "My generation, we started at a point when farming was doing pretty well — people buying new cars for their wives and putting up shiny new barns. That was my generation, but my dad and my uncle… they got into farming in the 80s and that was a tough time. Prolonged drought, lots of people lost crops, lots of debt. People lost their farms."

Town residents reinforce the picture of a farming boom with sometimes backhanded comments about the number of new pick-up trucks, combines and tractors visible on many farms. These remarks may betray a complicated, conservative disdain for conspicuous consumption (Dudley 200), but they also are evidence of the increased mechanization and capital intensification Midwestern farming. Full interrogation of agrarian development — in line with Kautsky, Chayanov, Brenner and others — is beyond the scope of this paper, but some social implications are worth considering.

As tractors are now GPS-guided, planters quadruple in size every decade and farm service firms handle pesticide, fertilizer and soil management, labor is simply less necessary. As one farmer told me, only half in jest, "I'm really just managing the tractor," as the machine runs its course while he listens to audiobooks. A farmer's heyday, if it is such, then has consequences for rural life. When productivity comes from machinery (and accompanying debt), the children of farmers are freed (even encouraged) to leave for higher education, further depopulating local economies, schools, churches and social institutions — the fairs, carnivals, parades, weddings, sports teams and the like that cement "community." Said one retired educator and business manager, "We see all these things diminishing, and of course that's farm-related. There used to be a lot of kids in the country and there's just aren't today. The farmers that still exist, (mostly) they're wealthy farmers. They're not plain, old farmers." While similar changes may result from the loss of manufacturing or other good jobs locally, the paradox is that such shifts can come from seeming farm success.

The Trump Wave

This paper's findings point to interrelated demographic change, social upheaval and complex economic shifts for many of those in the rural Midwest today. Such changes have been uneven, to be sure, but they are often rendered as decline in a kind of "moral community" (Wuthnow 2018) or a status of being "left behind" (Ulrich-Schad and Duncan 2018). But does any resultant rage or resentment amount a rural populist wave that can explain the Trump vote?

When conversations in Henry turned to politics, most respondents, whether Left- or Right-leaning, prefaced comments with a disclaimer about their distaste for politicians, and specifically those perceived as being of the Chicago or Washington variety. This often included general criticism of "elites" or "the establishment." "I've been so fed up with politicians. I don't think they should be paid anything," said one farmer, even as he criticized the Republican healthcare agenda. The one mild Trump enthusiast I interviewed couched his support in critique of status quo: "Trump does some stupid-ass things, says a lot of stupid-ass things, doesn't keep his mouth shut when he should, (but voting for him) was worth it to try to shake the system."

I frequently heard conservative (and neoliberal) platitudes: faith in the individual and individual competition; policy support for lower taxes and less government regulation; particular disdain for government assistance (though sometimes with a critique of poor, rural whites receiving "food stamps" or "welfare," rather than a remote urban Other). Specific policy demands were less forthcoming. One business owner said high minimum wages were impractical, and while many people suggested healthcare reform was necessary, I heard no consensus on whether the country needed more or less government involvement or Obamacare.

Most respondents said that they saw the strongest support for Trump among a smaller segment of young, underemployed (mostly white) men — "the people who feel most left behind," according to one retired teacher. When a "TRUMP THAT BITCH" sign outside his business for part of the election season, most in town thought "that was unfortunate, and I don't think anybody else approved of that," said Henry's mayor. A local city councilor said Henry's traditionally conservative disagree with the "hate" or "anger" Trump cultivated. Multiple respondents said a Trump vote was a "hold-your-nose" proposition. A former classmate, who moved from Henry but lived in a nearby larger city, said "I heard many people saying, 'Well, you've got to support the party.'"

Does disagreement with Trump's most divisive or controversial planks or style disprove the existence of a populism? Voting for party or platform all the same also may indicate an implicit and continued "investment in white heteropatriarchy" (Strolovitch, Wong and Proctor 2017). Respondents in Henry do offer the critique of something like elite power (i.e. the establishment or the status quo both in Chicago and Washington). I suggest their concerns also posit the idea of a group generally considered to "rural people" or "communities like ours" that under siege or threat. In Henry, this community may cohere in the social demographics, economics, values, status and identity of a past idyll. This remembrance of the past specifically in relation to contemporary change may indeed code an exclusionary definition of former "people," a condition of populist possibility for Müller (2016). Via a populist "logic of equivalence, disparate concerns or demands may become equal and resolve into a kind of popular will (Laclau 2005: 37). If such a popular will on behalf of "rural people" is increasingly left frustrated or ignored —or, I argue, remains illegible to an urbanizing mainstream that sees such changes as inevitable — "a social situation in which demands tend to reaggregate themselves on the negative basis that they all remain unsatisfied" offers fertile ground for "a populist rupture" (ibid, 37-38).

My interviews point to how a sense or fear of generalized change in rural communities might indeed manifest in a populist political turn, but they also suggest that voting for Trump (or simply voting Republican) came with caveats and conditions. In a final turn, this paper makes examines quantitative data to specifically interrogate the material conditions and demographics driving the Trump vote. In the rural counties examined, the county mean Trump vote was 64.6 percent (see **Table 3**), and in many places Trump's support out-performed the average of the four previous successful Republican bids (Reagan in 1984, Bush Sr. in 1988 and Bush Jr. in 2000 and 2004). This "intensity" was highest in the most rural parts of Missouri and Southern Illinois, while Trump performed closer to the recent average or even subpar in northern parts of the region (see **Figure 8**).

Table 4 then details the results of ordinary least squares regression tests run on 16 key variables described above to predict both the overall Trump vote and its intensity at county level. Variables

were chosen for their hypothetical relevance as well as their relative lack of multi-collinearity.[11] The statistical test, in effect, isolates the performance of variables to determine their statistical significance and the strength of their correlation with the variation in the dependent variables (votes and voting intensity for Trump).

In explaining the overall Trump vote (adjusted $R^2 = 63.2\%$), most variables are significant and largely follow the analysis above. Controlling for other variables, the Trump vote correlates with *higher* levels of young people (perhaps, larger families and those left behind), traditional husband-wife households, educational attainment of high school or below, household incomes below $60,000, debt-free home-ownership (think: intergenerational communities with less housing turnover), and farming landscapes. At the same time, Trump support increases in counties with *lower* levels of ethnic diversity, women in the work force, jobs in manufacturing and jobs in agriculture, forestry, fishing and mining (possibly more labor intensive agrarian occupations), controlling for other variables. Intensity of the Trump vote — perhaps measuring the voters most catalyzed my Trump's campaign — correlates with lower ethnic diversity, lower education, lower income, higher debt-free home ownership, fewer jobs and manufacturing and less crop land (likely a geographic factor driven by high votes in rural southern Missouri.

Regression tables, taken as a whole, indicate that Trump vote (and to a more limited extent its intensity) relates with whiter, less educated, less financially comfortable, agrarian, and intergenerational communities. Further, fruitful analysis beyond the space available here could probe the extent to which such counties — perhaps the same "people" — are now most confronting social, economic and even ecological change. These findings and this dataset also deserve more explicitly geographic and sociohistorical interrogation; for example, I suspect the legacies of slavery and the social histories of different counties (think: North vs. South) also relate to voting patterns quite profoundly.

Conclusion: A Picture of Rural Populism

Using mixed methods, this paper has explored the current and changing material conditions, along with some of the sociopolitical imagination of the small towns and farm country of the Midwest. By way of summary and conclusion, I offer a picture of the rural problematique that I suggest matches my empirical findings and shows the complex pathways through which rural populism could emerge in the countryside.

Consider that Midwestern corn farmers enjoy good (or even better) prices for corn for more than a decade. Such security is a far cry from that of the miserable generation past that put many a farmer out of business. Increasing industrialization of agriculture — bolstered by those higher prices — brings bigger tractors and implements and the possibility or producing even more. Such high times offer the chance for many rural daughters and sons to pursue the socioeconomic aspiration of higher education and a life beyond the farm. This of course implies a decline in farm jobs which coincides with a broader de-industrialization of the economy and a new emphasis on urban dynamism. One result is that two economic and demographic pillars of the countryside — farm and factory workers — are diminished along with economic prospects in the hamlets and burgs that dot field and forest between the bright cities. Many of those college-bound former country kids will ultimately find new opportunities and diverse lifestyles in cities. Those who remain in the country — a fractured younger generation and a generally older population — may indeed feel very much left behind. They may even imagine that somewhere else an opposite Other is getting ahead unfairly. This long-simmering and deeply held belief is also a grudge nurtured by politicians of varying political stripes. Yet not all is static or remnant; the countryside also changes as new faces appear, new areas urbanize and the once-remote Other appears closer to home. When confronted with both socioeconomic upheaval and increasing demographic diversity, some change is clearly felt as decline whether in imagination or material reality. Many in the broad conservative rural "community" recoil from establishment politics,

[11] I use a variance inflation factor (VIF) upper limit of 5 for inclusion in the models.

perceived elite snobbery (particularly among Leftists) and blatant dysfunction in the metropole. They suspect leaders are not concerned with "a people like us."

This real-life scenario has required years to materialize, but a brash political champion (himself an elite) arises and claims a maverick mantle tinged with traditionalist or nativist dogwhistling. The populist's own sociopathy — and perhaps that of his organized support — is overlooked represents an option to shake the system in a bid for attention.

That, indeed, it might be populism.

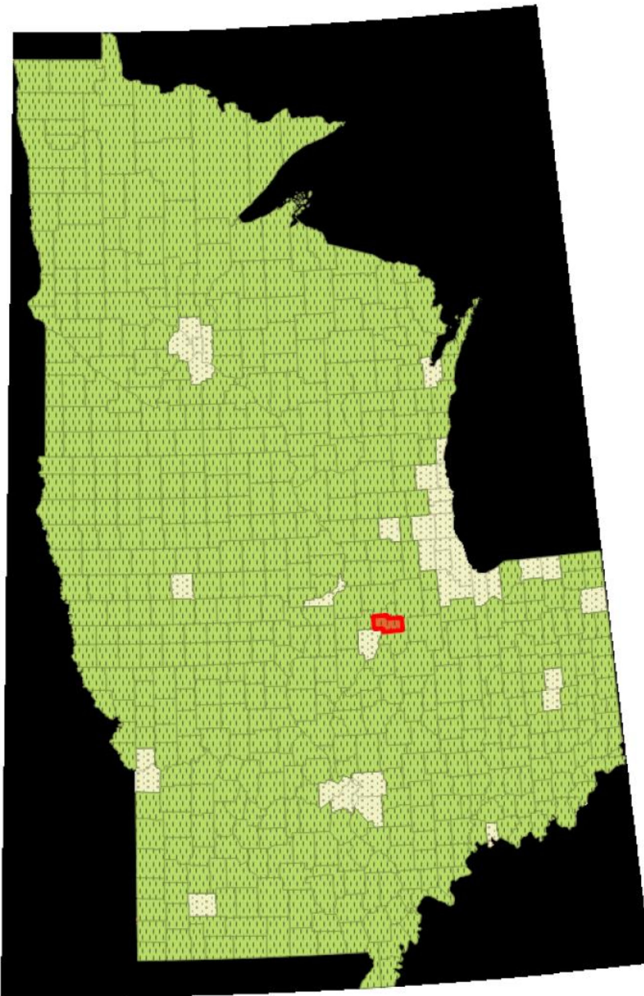
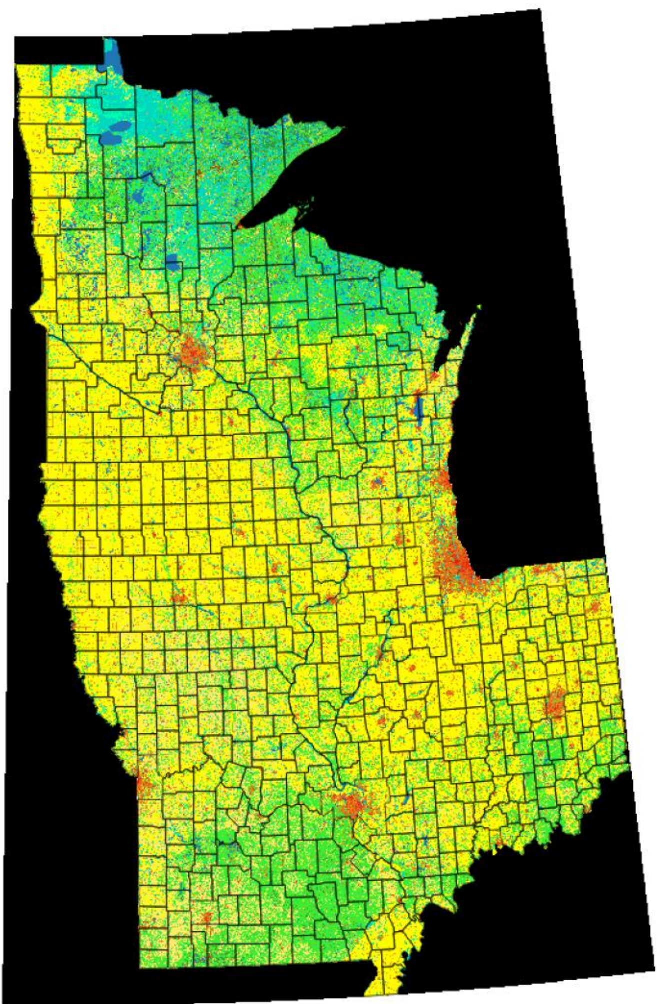
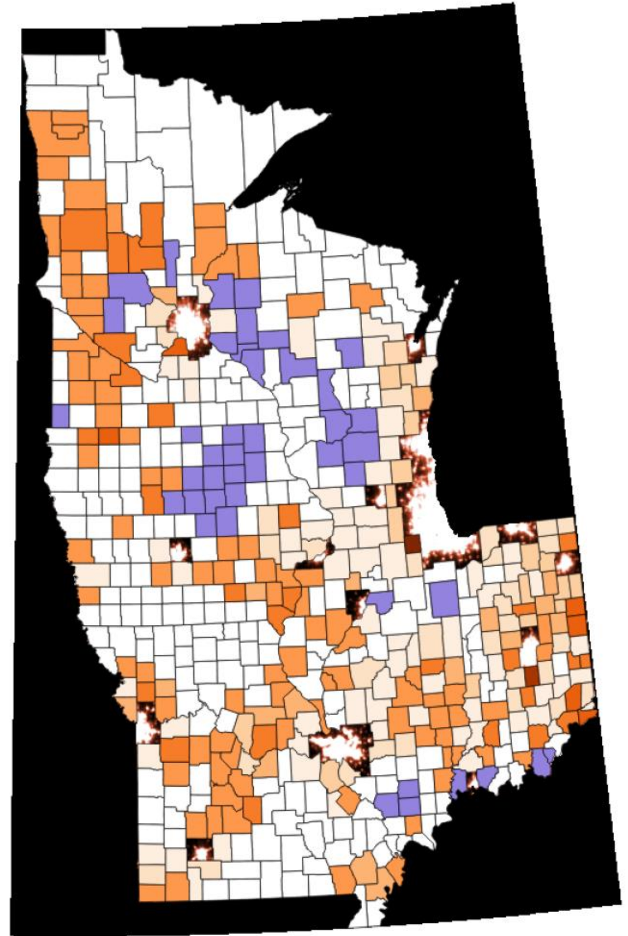
FIGURE 1 — Rural counties within study area, Marshall County highlighted.	**FIGURE 2 — Land-cover classification, 2011**
	
Note: Green counties represent the study area; lighter counties are excluded based on having at least 10 percent of area classified as low, medium or high development. Marshall County is highlighted near the center.	Note: Reds and oranges represent development and urbanization; even the smallest hamlets will appear. Yellows generally represent agricultural lands, including crop and pasture. Shades of green cover various forested lands.

FIGURE 3 — Night time light, 2011.	**FIGURE 4 — Change, median night time light, 1992 to 2011.**
	
Note: White areas represent the brightest night-time lights and correspond with the highest levels of urbanization. For example, large metropolitan areas such as the Chicago-Milwaukee corridor or the St. Louis region are completely lighted.	Note: Purple indicates small declines in median night-time light; white indicates no change while oranges indicate increases in night-time median light.

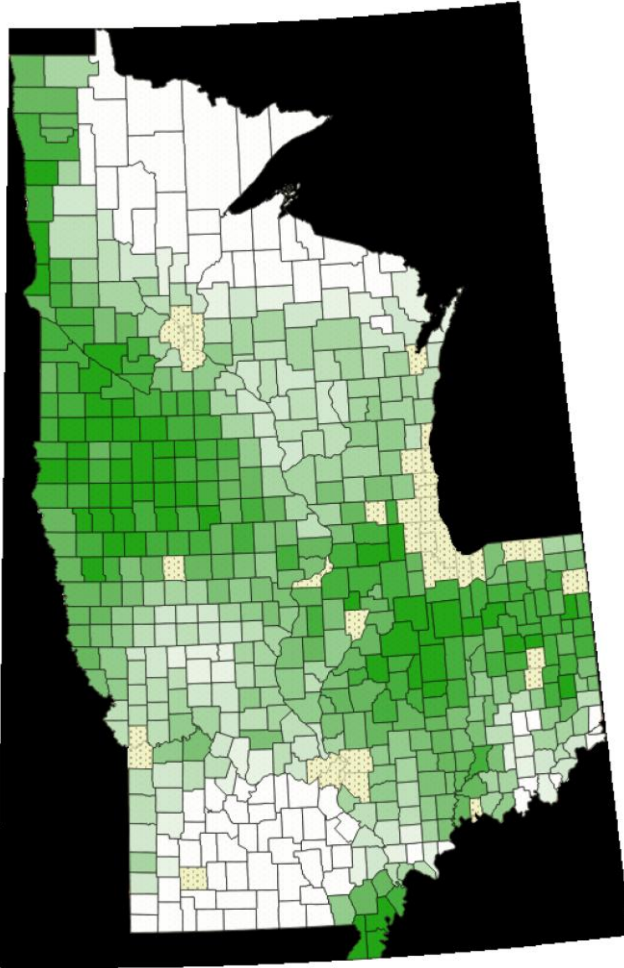
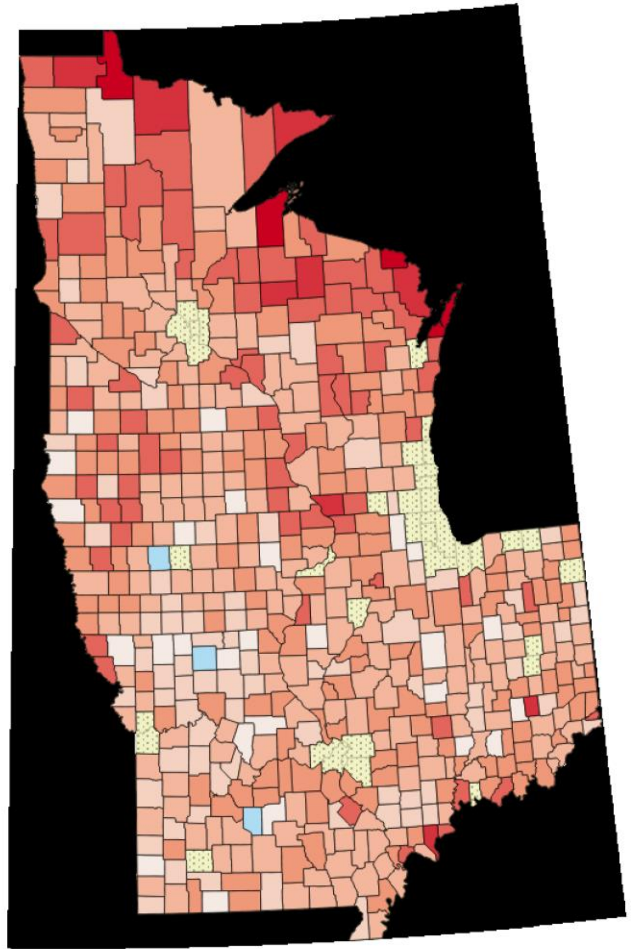
<table>
<tr><th>FIGURE 5 — Percent of land-cover devoted to cultivated crops, 2011.</th><th>FIGURE 6 — Median age (years) change, 1990 to 2010.</th></tr>
<tr><td></td><td></td></tr>
<tr><td>Note: The darkest green represents cultivated crop land-cover between 82 and 92 percent. White represents less than 10 percent cultivated crop land-cover.</td><td>Note: Light blue counties indicate a decrease in median age of not more than two years. Red indicates increase; the darkest red represents an increase in median age between 12 and 14 years.</td></tr>
</table>

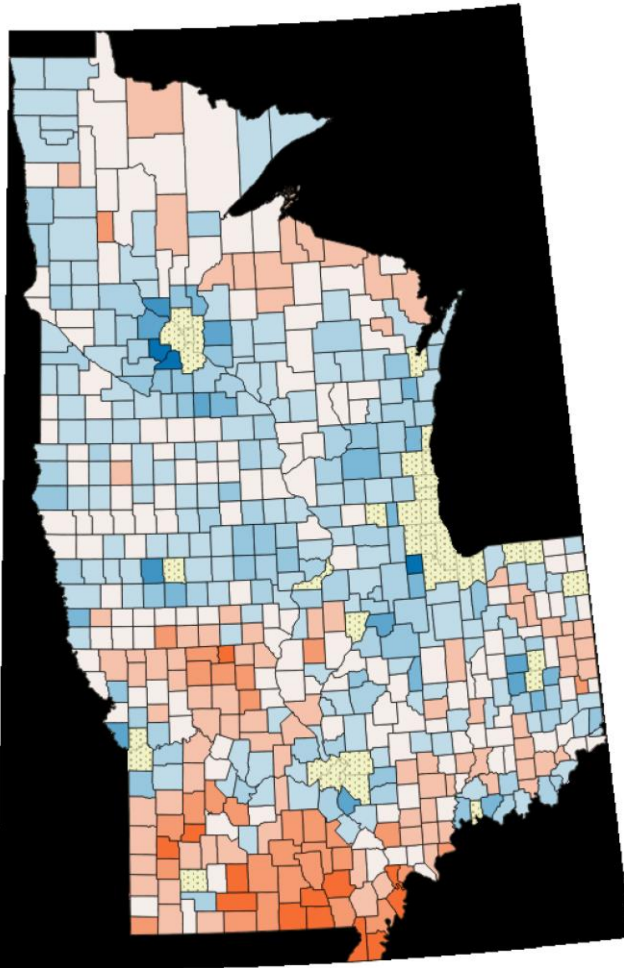
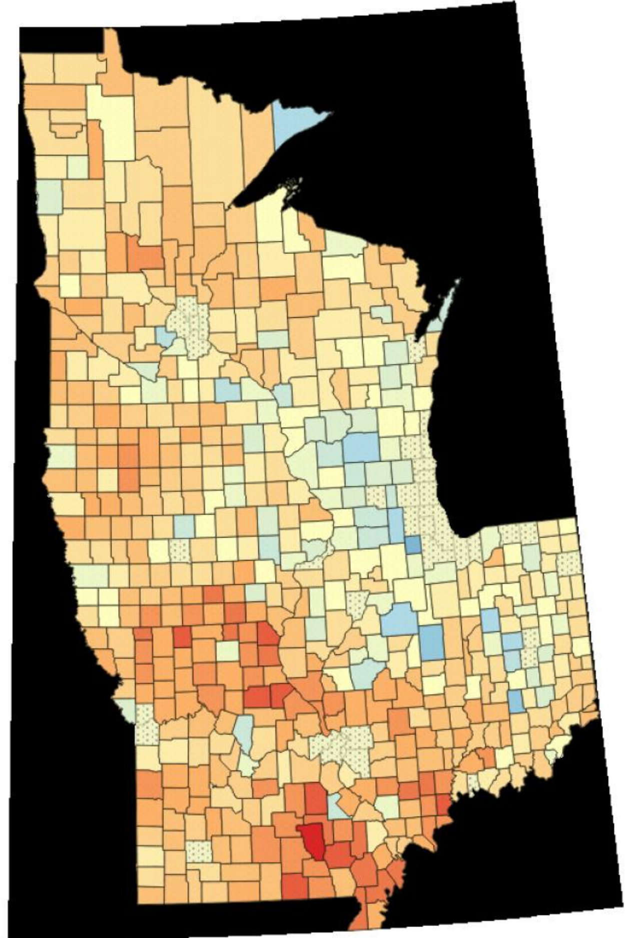
FIGURE 7 — Median income, 2010.	**FIGURE 8 — Difference between Trump voting percentage and average of winning Republican presidential candidates.**
	
Note: Red indicates levels below the regional average median rural household income of $46,726. Blue indicates above average levels.	Note: Red indicates Trump's percentage of the vote was higher than the average received by Republican presidential candidates in 1984, 1988, 200 and 2004. Light yellows indicate the smallest variation from that average. Blues indicate underperformance by Trump relative to the average of GOP winners.

Table 1 — Descriptive statistics, land-cover development.

Land-cover class	*2001 mean*	*2011 mean*
Developed, open space (%)	4.47	4.53
Developed, low-intensity (%)	1.75	2.29
Developed, medium intensity (%)	0.41	0.49
Developed, high intensity (%)	0.13	0.16

Table 2 — Descriptive statistics for Marshall County and the study area.

	Marshall County		**530 Counties**		
Variable	*1990*	*2010*	*1990 mean*	*2010 mean*	*Notes:*
18 to 29 years old (%)	13.67	12.06	15.94	14.12	Percent of population that is 18 to 29.
Median age (years)	37.60	44.8	35.27	41.05	Median age of the population.
Non-white (%)	0.73	2.92	2.73[a]	6.18[a]	Percent of the population that is not "white alone."
Born in another state (%)	11.67	11.89	21.45	24.02	Percent of the population born in another state.
Foreign born (%)	1.19	1.93	0.93	2.28	Percent of the population born in another country (includes citizens and non-citizens).
Husband and wife households (%)	65.41	56.71	62.04	53.67	Percent of households where both a wife and husband are present.
Female-headed household (%)	6.00	7.73	7.48	9.09	Percent of households where a woman is the head without a husband present.
Non-family households (%)	10.83	15	12.19	15.85	Percent of households not containing two people related by birth, marriage or adoption.
Education, up to high school diploma (%)	65.49	51.17	67.02	51.16	Percent of the population, 25 years of age or higher, whose highest educational attainment is a high school diploma or equivalent.
Education, bachelor's degree or higher (%)	10.35	16.45	11.86	17.92	Percent of the population, 25 years of age or higher, whose highest educational attainment is at least a bachelor's degree.
Employed, civilian, female (%)	41.80	46.12	44.75	47.48	Percent of the employed, civilian population, 16 years of age or higher, that is female.
Employed, civilian, male (%)	58.20	53.88	55.25	52.52	Percent of the employed, civilian population, 16 years of age or higher, that is male.
16 to 34 years old, unemployed but in labor force (%)	6.61	9.35	6.30	8.39	Percent of the population that is 16 to 34 years old that is without a job but trying to find one.
Ratio, not in labor force to in labor force, female	1.03	0.84	0.91	0.71	Ratio of the females outside the labor force to those inside (civilian/armed forces, employed/unemployed).
Ratio, not in labor force to in labor force, male	0.35	0.47	0.41	0.49	Ratio of the males outside the labor force to those inside (civilian/armed forces, employed/unemployed).
household income under $30,000 (%)	56.02	27.03	61.85	31.77	Percent of households whose collective nominal income was under $30,000 in the previous

					year.
Household income under $60,000 (%)	82.88	46.52	86.93	53.66	Percent of households whose collective nominal income was under $60,000 in the previous year.
Household income above $150,000 (%)	0.37	3.37	0.50	4.01	Percent of households whose collective nominal income was more than $150,000 in the previous year
Median nominal household income ($)	26,450	52,565	24,042	46,726	Median household income in the previous year denominated in either 1989 dollars or 2012 dollars.
Median inflation-adjusted household income	49,462	–	44,958	–	Median household income in the previous year adjusted for inflation to 2012 dollars (which is the unit of 2010 value).
Commute time, 30 minutes or less (%)	65.51	60.25	76.64[a]	70.85[a]	Percent of commuting workers who commute and have a commute time of 30 minutes or less.
Commute time, 60 minutes or more (%)	4.62	9.34	5.13	6.61	Percent of commuting workers who commute and have a commute time of 60 minutes or less.
Commute by car (%)	93.31	95.48	92.59	94.61	Percent of commuting workers who use a car (alone or carpool but not taxi).
Commute by public transit (%)	0.00	0.00	0.46[a]	0.54[a]	Percent of commuting workers who use public transit (bus, light rail, subway or railroad, but not ferry).
Worked at home (%)	6.45	4.026	7.52	5.04	Percent of workers who work from home.
Housing, vacant (%)	7.84	12.73	12.71	14.45	Percent of housing stock that is vacant.
Housing, vacant, used for seasonal recreation (%)	2.48	5.38	5.67[a]	6.17[a]	Percent of housing stock that is vacant and specifically used for migrants.
Housing, vacant, used for migrants (%)	0.06	0.1	0.03[a]	0.02[a]	Percent of housing stock that is vacant and specifically used seasonal occupation or recreation.
Housing, owner-occupied, mortgage (%)	30.26	39.41	32.17	39.11	Percent of housing stock that is occupied by an owner with a mortgage or loan on the property.
Housing, owner-occupied, no debt (%)	39.87	31.21	32.99	25.21	Percent of housing stock that is occupied by an owner and owned free and clear.
Housing, rented (%)	22.02	16.64	22.12	21.22	Percent of housing stock that is occupied by a renter.
Agriculture, forestry, fishing and mining jobs	11.01	4.82	10.33	5.63	Percent of jobs that are the agricultural, forestry, fishing or

(%)					mining industries.
Construction jobs (%)	5.20	5.94	5.92	7.04	Percent of jobs that are construction industry.
Manufacturing jobs (%)	27.41	20.02	21.00	16.71	Percent of jobs that are in manufacturing of durable or non-durable goods.
Wholesale trade jobs (%)	4.30	4.1	3.72	2.7	Percent of jobs that are in intermediate sales of goods, neither manufacturing or delivering to a final consumer.
Retail trade jobs (%)	15.23	11.02	16.25	11.63	Percent of jobs are in sales of goods to the final consumer, including food and consumables.
Finance, insurance and real estate jobs (%)	4.41	5.3	4.29	4.69	Percent of jobs in financial and insurance industries (including banking) and real estate sales and development (excluding construction).
Land-cover, open water (%)	3.07	3.09	2.05[a]	2.13[a]	Percent of county classified as open water; time series begins in 2001, not 1990; earlier NLCD classifications are not comparable.
Land-cover, cropland, pasture, hay (%)	77.06	77.00	61.70	61.45	Percent of county classified as cultivated crops, pasture or hay; time series begins in 2001, not 1990; earlier NLCD classifications are not comparable.
Land-cover, high-intensity development (%)	0.10	0.10	0.13[a]	0.16[a]	Percent of county classified as highly developed (i.e. urban); time series begins in 2001, not 1990; earlier NLCD classifications are not comparable.
Mean nighttime light	5.77	5.23	6.17	7.90	Average intensity of nighttime, stable lights from an annual composite of cloud-free images measured on a scale of 0 to 63.
Median nighttime light	5.00	5.00	3.79[a]	5.42	Average intensity of nighttime, stable lights from an annual composite of cloud-free images measured on a scale of 0 to 63.

[a] denotes a variable whose standard deviation is greater than its mean, signaling high variability.
Note: Variables that derive from the long-form census survey in 1990 were cut entirely from the 2010 census, and are derived instead from the 5-year average of 2008-2012 generated from the American Community Survey.

Table 3 — Trump vote and intensity

	Marshall County	530 Counties	
		Mean	St. Dev.
2016 Trump vote (%)	63.252	64.59	10.61
Trump vote Intensity (% point)[a]	6.04	8.48	7.99
[a] difference between Trump vote and average of GOP votes in 1984, 1988, 2000 and 2004			

Table 4 — Linear regression of key variables predicting Trump voting

	2016 Trump vote		Trump vote intensity	
Independent variables	*B*	*Sig.*	*B*	*Sig.*
18 to 29 years old (%)	0.115**	0.003	-0.017	0.667
Non-white (%)	-0.107**	0.004	-0.103**	0.006
Foreign born (%)	-0.060	0.081	-0.089*	0.011
Husband and wife households (%)	0.570**	0.000	0.085	0.106
Education, up to high school diploma (%)	0.321**	0.000	0.305**	0.000
16 to 34 years old, unemployed but in labor force (%)	0.010	0.750	-0.016	0.624
Ratio, not in labor force to in labor force, female	0.151**	0.000	0.015	0.726
Household income under $60,000 (%)	0.341**	0.000	0.171**	0.005
Worked at home (%)	-0.072*	0.037	-0.012	0.726
Housing, owner-occupied, no debt (%)	0.134**	0.002	0.381**	0.000
Agriculture, forestry, fishing and mining jobs (%)	-0.163**	0.001	0.016	0.736
Construction jobs (%)	-0.042	0.229	0.056	0.117
Manufacturing jobs (%)	-0.121**	0.003	-0.101*	0.017
Retail trade jobs (%)	0.003	0.920	0.012	0.681
Finance, insurance and real estate jobs (%)	-0.033	0.326	0.009	0.787
Land-cover, cropland, pasture, hay (%)	0.143**	0.000	-0.122**	0.001
	Adjusted R^2 = 63.2%		Adjusted R^2 = 61.6%	
** Significant at the 0.01 level. * Significant at the 0.05 level.				

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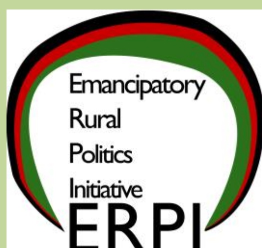

The Emancipatory Rural Politics Initiative (ERPI) is a new initiative focused on understanding the contemporary moment and building alternatives. New exclusionary politics are generating deepening inequalities, jobless 'growth', climate chaos, and social division. The ERPI is focused on the social and political processes in rural spaces that are generating alternatives to regressive, authoritarian politics. We aim to provoke debate and action among scholars, activists, practitioners and policymakers from across the world that are concerned about the current situation, and hopeful about alternatives.

For more information see: http://www.iss.nl/erpi
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