

“Populism and Identity Politics in the U.S. Heartland”

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The rise of populism on the political right in the U.S. and Europe in recent decades reflects a significant shift in political culture. This populism has been associated with the rejection of mainstream politics and increased hostility toward immigrants, racialized minorities, and other marginalized groups who are seen as threats to economic security and hegemonic social identities. In the U.S. Heartland, several key states flipped from Democrat to Republican in 2016, sealing Trump’s win and leading to widespread debates about populist political attitudes in this region. This analysis draws from focus group discussions with community leaders in rural and micropolitan Iowa to understand how local discourses about economic and social change intersects with rising populist politics. Three characteristics of community life emerged as areas of concern among these groups; economic destabilization associated with neoliberalism, changes in social composition, and a profound sense of rurality. Our findings reveal how populism and identity movements on the political right are integrated with Heartland political culture, contributing to the recent electoral success of right-wing populist candidates. The discussion concludes with recommendations to promote a progressive and inclusive agenda for the Heartland and the U.S. as a whole.

Introduction

The recent electoral success of populist leaders and parties in the United States and Europe signals an underlying shift in political culture. Some scholars refer to this period as the fourth wave of populism (Mudde 2019) that portends a new political moment in rural areas (Scoones et al. 2018). Effects of these right-wing political shifts became increasingly evident in events surrounding the 2016 and 2020 U.S. presidential elections, culminating in insurrectionist violence against the U.S. capitol in early 2021. Of note are the six Midwestern states that flipped from Obama in 2008 and 2012 to Trump in 2016, and the close race with a narrow victory by Biden in 2020. These trends have contributed to widespread debates about shifting political attitudes in this region (Berlet and Sunshine 2019; Cramer 2016; Agnew and Shin 2020) and what Johnston et al (2020) claim is increased polarization of the American electorate with nonmetropolitan areas dominated by Republican party candidates.

We define populism as a political movement based on the division of society into separate and opposing groups that stem from a discursive weaving of imaginary representations and ideological concepts along specific social, economic, and political dimensions (Mudde 2007; Brubaker 2017). The recent wave of populism has not only impacted the U.S. but also the European Union, leading to the UK Brexit vote to leave the European Union, and the rise of right-wing nationalist parties in Austria, Switzerland, the Netherlands, Italy, Germany, France, and many other European countries (Mudde 2019; Rooduijn 2018). Right-wing populism has generally been explained as a reactionary response to either economic stresses or cultural resentments (Mudde 2007), however, recent research has revealed that such structural factors are not able to fully account for the rise and fall of populism among the electorate (Amengay and Stockemer 2018). These accounts have prompted scholars to argue for the importance of studying localized and place-based politics (Agnew and Shin 2020; Johnston et al. 2020; Jacobs and Munis 2018) and to comprehend struggles for cultural recognition within populist and white identity appeals (Lamont 2019).

This article contributes to the literature by revealing how the language and discursive framing of populism and identity movements on the political right are integrated into the political culture of rural America. Our study addresses three areas of community life: economic change related to neoliberalism that includes globalization, labor, and trade; changes in social composition due to immigration, increased racial diversity, and gender; and the political implications of a deeply-felt rural identity. While mild in tone, and often with considerable ambivalence, our respondents, representing community leaders, expressed their political concerns in terms consistent with broader populist movements. These concerns included the failure of mainstream politics, stressors associated with the immigration of racialized others, and challenges to long-standing Heartland identities. The identity politics that surfaced in this analysis provide insights into local dimensions of contested political cultures (Melcher 2021; Mudde and Kaltwasser 2012; Silva 2019).

We selected the U.S. Heartland as a focus of our study for several reasons. First, the flip of this region from Blue to Red between 2008 and 2016 is particularly significant. Iowa, Ohio, Michigan, Wisconsin, and Pennsylvania provided important victories for Trump in 2016 (Oberhauser, Krier, and Kusow 2019; Scala and Johnson 2017). Two of these states in the Midwest, Iowa and Ohio, were held by Trump in 2020. Second, the U.S. Heartland embodies the cultural location and core of Americana and U.S. values (Hoganson 2019). This area has been heralded as a regional imaginary with a somewhat contradictory ethos of emerging nativist attitudes that supported Trump's political culture of 'Make America Great Again' (Silva 2019; Monnat and Brown 2017; Oberhauser, Krier, and Kusow 2019) and the historical foundation of egalitarianism, inclusiveness, and tolerance of non-traditional ways of life (Elazar 1980). Third, Iowa, a state that is centrally located in the U.S. Heartland, is home to the first presidential caucus or primary leading up to the general election. Finally, recent studies on rurality and political culture in this region underscore the magnitude and essence of Heartland, or Midwestern, social and economic identities that shape the wider political landscape (Cramer 2016; Metzl 2019; Hoganson 2019).

The empirical focus of this paper draws from the conceptual framework outlined above to examine key socio-economic and geographic characteristics that are related to shifting political attitudes in the Heartland. Previous analyses of political culture in Iowa found that education, whiteness, and rurality were significant indicators in explaining why this state flipped in the 2016 election and retained a Republican strong-hold in 2020 (Oberhauser, Krier, and Kusow 2019). The current study draws from an investigation of selected communities in rural Iowa to better understand how populism and identity movements on the political right interacted with the Heartland's political landscape and social identities. County-level data are examined alongside qualitative analyses of their political attitudes and experiences that highlight the political culture in the U.S. and elsewhere. This research is especially relevant to public policy and social movements that seek to curb the destructive elements of populism and divisiveness that are all too apparent in current political discourse and policies.

The article is divided into six sections. Following the introduction, we review theoretical approaches that have shaped debates about populism and dynamic political landscapes in the U.S. and Europe in recent decades. The focus on economic, social, and geographic issues in this section builds a case for the rise of populism and nativist attitudes in the American Heartland and elsewhere. The methodology and research design are explained in the third section of the paper. Our mostly qualitative approach focuses on data that helps to understand the context of socio-economic and political shifts in the Heartland. The fourth section analyzes the complex, yet increasingly evident aspects of these shifts since the early 2000s. We discuss the rurality and spatial dimensions of populism in the fifth section using results from regional and local studies and conceptualization of these themes. The conclusion provides a summary of our findings and recommendations for moving forward to promote a progressive and inclusive agenda for U.S. society and politics.

Theorizing social identities and spatial dimensions of populism

Extensive scholarship has analyzed how social identities, economic status, and geography influence political behavior, including the rise of populism and white identity politics in contemporary society (Cramer 2016; Monnat 2016; Lamont 2019; Agnew and Shin 2020; Embrick et al. 2020; Giroux 2021). The rise of Neo-fascist and white-nationalist groups has raised concerns about relationships between growing social polarization and right-wing populism in Europe and the U.S. (Rooduijn 2018; Schaffner, MacWilliams, and Nteta 2018). At its core, populism is a political movement based on the division of society into two opposed groups, 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite,' often expanded in a tight discursive weaving of imagery and concepts along two dimensions, vertical and horizontal (Mudde 2007; Brubaker 2017). Vertically, populism valorizes 'the people' as hard-working, respectable citizens threatened from above by rich, predatory elites and from below by parasitic loafers. Horizontally, populism valorizes 'the people' as natives whose heritage is threatened by impure, alien outsiders. Scholars argue that right-wing populism is driven by a backlash to progressive political and cultural gains, opposition to foreign influences and particularly immigrants (Agnew and Shin 2020), and the defense of hard-working producers of society against lazy, immoral elites and "subordinate" groups (Berlet and Lyons 2000).

Populism has flourished amidst increasing political polarization in recent decades. Electorally non-competitive landslide counties have spread across large portions of the U.S., especially in rural areas. Election outcomes depend upon voter swings in a dwindling number of purple counties that are closely divided among Democrats and Republicans (Johnston, Manley, and Jones 2016). The ideological divergence and geographic sorting of political parties has been accompanied by a polarization of partisan affect that is linked to redistricting with extensive gerrymandering (Johnston, Manley, and Jones 2016). Party membership has become a core identity to voters who attach strong positive affect to members of their own party and project increasingly negative affect upon opposing party members (Iyengar and Krupenkin 2018). Affective polarization poses difficulties for purple counties, especially rural counties with small communities that depend upon moderation and cooperation across party lines (Jacobs and Munis 2018). These conditions fuel the spread of right-wing populism and white identity.

In the U.S., shifting socio-demographics, including those linked to immigration, play an important role in shaping the constituencies, organizations, and geographies of the two major political parties (Abramowitz 2018; Morrill, Knopp, and Brown 2011) and polarization among political elites and party activists (McAdam and Kloos 2014). The surprising flip of several midwestern states that Obama had previously won was crucial to Trump's electoral victory in 2016 and the narrow victory of Biden in 2020. As noted above, two midwestern states, Iowa and Ohio, were held by Trump in 2020, with Iowa's percentage win almost unchanged (52 percent Republican to 42 percent Democrat in 2016 and 53 percent (R) to 45 percent (D) in 2020) (Ballotpedia 2016 and 2020). Of the states that were held by Trump, only Iowa had an unchanged electoral map. In other words, all counties that Trump won in 2016 were held by him in 2020, and all counties won by Clinton in 2016 were held by Biden in 2020. The 2020 Iowa election results also reveal increasing partisan polarization: Biden won the six counties that voted Democratic by a larger percentage than Clinton (average of 3 percent gain for Biden) and Trump won a larger share of the counties that he won in 2020 than he did in 2016 (average of 1 percent gain) (Ballotpedia 2020; MIT 2018). These patterns highlight the persistent shifts toward polarization in America's political landscape.

Recent scholarship on how race, whiteness, gender, and other social identities affect political attitudes offers extensive analyses of current controversies and tensions surrounding growing social and ethnic diversity and tensions in the U.S. and Europe (Gimpel and Lay 2008; Gusterson 2017; Lichter, Parisi, and Taquino 2018). Populist political movements frequently adopt xenophobic attitudes in order to keep privileged racial groups in positions of dominance (Jardina 2019; Melcher 2021). Growing demographic diversity in the U.S. includes shifts to more non-white majority regions with an influx of immigration and refugees from Latin America, the Middle East, and Africa. These trends contribute to what Jardina (2019) refers to as white identity politics. We continue these debates with a nuanced analysis of how economics, social identities, and rurality impact and co-produce the contemporary political climate of a

divided electorate with highly contested opinions about the state of our country. These identities and characteristics overlap and are fluid, but help decipher the complex nature of our contemporary political landscape.

Economic status and class dynamics have generated a considerable amount of attention in explaining the rise of populism and nativism in recent elections. Some scholars have focused upon the ‘white working class’ as a crucial cohort of voters that shifted from Democrat (Obama) to Republican (Trump) in the 2016 presidential election (Morgan and Lee 2018). Other scholars refer to the ‘landscapes of despair’ narrative that resulted in historically working-class areas such as the Industrial Midwest to shift their support to Republicans in 2016 (Monnat and Brown 2017; Hochschild 2016). These studies indicate that working-class people felt abandoned by a Democratic party whose agenda emphasized policies and programs to help the poor, but largely ignored the values of blue-collar workers. Lamont (2019) theorizes right-wing populist support by white, male, working-class voters as a result of perceived ‘recognition gaps.’ These voters believe that they were overlooked and disadvantaged by decades of policy changes and emergent cultural practices that favored immigrants, racial minorities, women, members of the LGBTQ+ community, and coastal elites.

Another factor in the rise of right-wing populism among the electorate are identity issues that include the perceived racial polarization of society. Racial diversity within communities is one aspect of how scholars explain voting preferences in areas within the U.S. Heartland (Lay 2017). In several cases, understandings of racial diversity are examined in relation to the influx of immigrants to rural areas. For example, Lichter, Parisi, and Tazuino (2018) analyze the impact of racially diverse nonmetropolitan areas that lead to rural white exposure to minority populations. The overall increase in ethno-racial diversity tends to change local demographic and economic conditions and thus political attitudes as a way to justify protecting the interests of the dominant (white) majority.

In both the United States and Europe, politics have polarized around attitudes towards immigrants and racially diverse populations in general (Gimpel and Lay 2008; Melcher 2021). According to Alba and Foner (2017), the intensification of negative attitudes towards ethnic or racial minorities, however, tends to be in places with few immigrants and low ethno-racial diversity. Similarly, regions and places with the largest immigrant populations are often those where the native majority holds the most positive attitudes towards diversity. Hainmueller and Hopkins (2014) found that voters’ anti-immigration sentiment was not strongly correlated with the economic impact of migration, but was instead shaped by “sociotropic” concerns with culture and identity. In recent years, right-wing populism and white identity movements center ideological concerns with “White Genocide” and the “Great Replacement” of native ethno-European populations by racially, culturally, and religiously-diverse immigrants (Davey and Ebner 2019). The overtly-racist ideology of these claims called for remigration, or forced deportation of immigrant populations, and the return of communities, property, and opportunities to the native whites who had been disinherited and displaced. Populist politicians representing several of the Heartland communities we studied echoed these white identity themes.

Finally, geography and specifically rural-urban divisions are linked to political attitudes and behavior in the empirical focus of this paper, the Heartland state of Iowa where approximately 40 percent of the population lives in non-metropolitan areas (U.S. Census Bureau 2019). This context reflects not only material or physical aspects of space, but representations of rurality that are linked to racial constructions of place and the predominance of whiteness (Holloway 2007; Kelly and Lobao 2018; Davy and Ebner 2019). Cramer (2016) refers to the ‘politics of resentment’ in describing the attitudes, or rural consciousness, of voters in the upper Midwest, leading to regressive rural politics. Political polarization along rural-urban geographic divides grew in the 2016 election while electoral systems tend to give rural voters disproportionate power over their urban counterparts (Badger, Bui, and Pearce 2016; Emont 2017).

In sum, right-wing populist movements and white identity have been linked in the literature to socially homogenous, economically declining, and rural areas. Results from the 2016 and 2020 U.S. presidential election reflect these socio-economic and rural-urban divides as Trump fared poorly in economically stable, socially diverse, and suburban American cities, while Clinton and Biden did not gain a lot of support among economically distressed,

socially homogenous, and rural voters (Johnston et al. 2020). Growing economic resentment, increasing demographic diversity, and deepening chasms between rural and urban areas are instrumental in explaining the rise of right-wing populism (Scala and Johnson 2017; Badger, Bui, and Pearce 2016; Smith and Hanley 2018). This study documents these relationships in the U.S. Heartland.

Researching political identities in the U.S. rural heartland: Methods and background

This research employs methods that combine analyses of socio-economic and demographic data and results from focus groups with business and community leaders in two rural regions of Iowa. The project builds on 2018 research that consolidated county-level data from a variety of sources to develop measures of economic stress, threats to social identities, rurality, and voting patterns in Iowa (Oberhauser, Krier, and Kusow 2019). Our analysis focuses on data from both primary and secondary sources to examine relationships among these measures based on individual and regional dimensions of rural voters.

Fieldwork and focus groups in rural Iowa

Qualitative methods such as focus groups allow for a deeper understanding of and interaction with participants in research studies. As noted by Macnaghten and Myers (2007: 65), these discussions give researchers the opportunity to uncover "shared and tacit beliefs, and the way these beliefs emerge in interaction with others in a local setting. ... (They are) used in an exploratory way, when researchers are not entirely sure what categories, links, and perspectives are relevant." Focus groups also facilitate the generation of knowledge and understanding among participants through their interaction and give researchers the ability to analyze their social context. As noted by Holstein and Gubrium (2007: 269), "context is never a settled matter, so we must look at how participants in interaction continue to co-produce that very context they inhabit through that very interaction." We selected this approach because it allowed us to explore the social dynamics and experiences of the participants in their communities.

The primary data gathered through qualitative fieldwork allowed us to better understand the context and lived experiences of individuals and communities in rural Iowa. We visited, observed, and interacted with these participants in their geographic and socio-economic contexts as a way of learning more about this topic (Caretta and Vacchelli 2015). Our focus groups took place in four rural counties of Iowa, and drew from a convenience selection sampling method based on our contacts, location, and time (Figure 1). As relative outsiders, we encountered some difficulties in developing contacts with people in rural Iowa to participate in our research. The sample was intentionally focused on participants who had leadership roles in their communities as a way of gaining broader insights into economic and social trends and political attitudes in the community. Our main entre to these business and community leaders was the university extension service. The research participants represented leaders in Chambers of Commerce, agricultural groups such as the Iowa Corn Growers Association, local industry, and business managers and owners, non-profit groups, economic development organizations, county boards, tourism offices, and city managers. This sampling technique proved to be effective in selecting groups of participants "that offer variety in regard to a particular phenomenon, ... allowing the comparison of subgroups" (Aurini, Heath, and Howells 2016: 57).

Each focus group took two to three hours with six to eight participants. We recorded each of the four focus group discussions with permission from the participants (Aurini, Heath, and Howells 2016). The human subject protocol was explained at the beginning of each group and participants were given consent forms to read and sign. This project was submitted to and approved by the Institutional Review Board at our institution. The discussions were organized according to the topics and themes of our research, beginning with an introduction of the participants, followed by open-ended questions about major issues in the community, the economy and how people are 'getting by,' the sense of community among residents, and political tendencies and behavior. These topics address the connection between economic and social conditions in these locales and trade and immigrant policies of the Republican administration at the time of the fieldwork. We also raised questions about the rise of populism and nativism in rural Iowa communities,

and how these shifts translate to political beliefs and behavior.

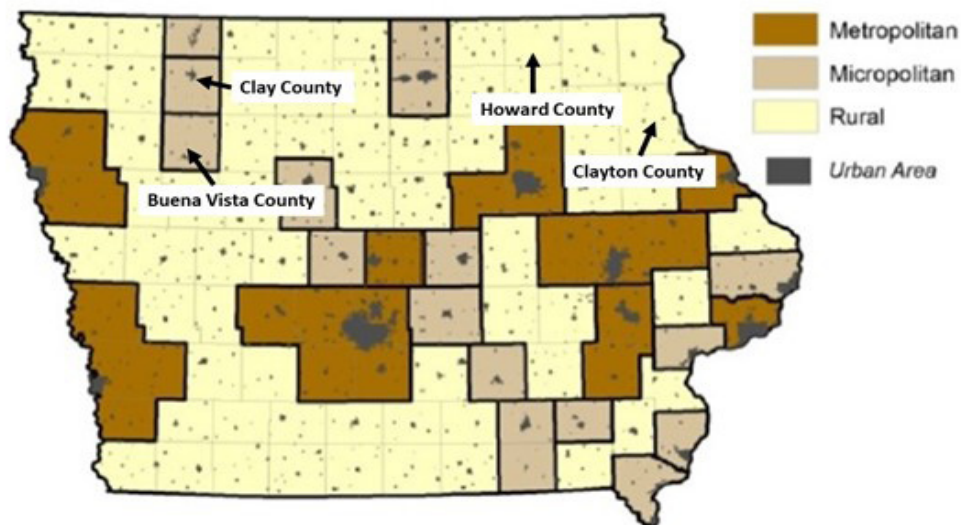
The focus group discussions were transcribed verbatim and coded using NVivo12, a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis (CAQDAS) program. The coding was conducted first with pre-coding schemes, then with first and second cycle coding schemes. Aurini et al. (2016:189) present this approach as an effective way to organize data in an “iterative process that evolves as the data collection and analysis progresses.” This approach also allows researchers to assign preliminary codes, develop a more descriptive characteristic of the data, and finally, capture the overall essence of the data in the second cycle of coding. We reviewed the codes and organization of our data at different stages of the research analysis to triangulate and critically compare and review the data and coding scheme (Seale et al. 2007).

Background to case study regions

We conducted the focus groups in Clayton, Howard, Clay, and Buena Vista Counties in the state of Iowa (Figure 1). These counties reflect different levels of rurality, social diversity, economic activities, and political background in the northeast (Clayton and Howard Counties) and the northwest (Clay and Buena Vista Counties) regions of the state. The northeast region has relatively low economic stress, changing demographics, and a rural and diversifying economy. The northwest region also has low to moderate economic stress, a relatively diverse population, and a fairly strong agricultural and industrial economy.

Figure 1.

Rural and Urban Counties in Iowa with Research Sites



Source: ISU Extension and Outreach 2019

At the time of our fieldwork, the economy in these areas was fairly strong, but beginning to show stress in the areas of agricultural production and services from recent tariffs and trade barriers imposed by the Trump administration. Economic data reports relatively high labor force participation rates (LFPR) between nearly 66 and 71 percent in these four counties compared to Iowa’s rate of nearly 67.4 percent (Table 1). The manufacturing sector employs a significant proportion of labor with nearly 25 percent in Howard County and nearly 30 percent in Buena Vista County. The other counties were lower with 13.1 percent manufacturing employment in Clay County and nearly 20

percent in Clayton County. In addition, low unemployment and labor shortages were apparent in some areas, yet many communities are still struggling to recover from jobs lost during the 2008-09 Great Recession (Iowa State University Extension and Outreach 2019).

Table 1. Case Study Counties in Iowa

County	Population (2019)	65years & over (%)	White, non-Latino (%)	Labor Force Participation Rate (% 16 or over in workforce)	Manufacturing employment (%) (2017)	Agriculture, forestry, fishing employment (%) (2017)	Median household income (\$)	BA or higher (25 years old or higher) (%)	Foreign born (%)
Iowa	3,155,070	17.5	85.0	67.4	14.9	3.8	58,580	28.2	5.2
Clayton	17,549	24.4	95.8	65.8	19.6	10.2	52,828	17.2	2.2
Howard	9,158	20.9	96.1	68.2	24.8	8.2	52,742	14.9	0.2
Clay	16,016	21.1	92.9	65.9	13.1	9.1	47,874	22.6	2.4
Buena Vista	19,620	16.7	58.0 (25% Latino)	71.1	29.8	5.9	54,556	19.6	18.5

Source: U.S. Census Bureau 2019

The agricultural sector in these areas of Iowa is comprised of both large-scale commercial and smaller family farms that grow corn and soybeans, along with livestock and hog production. Commercial farms experienced the largest losses and rising debt compared to family or residence farms that increasingly depend on off-farm incomes (ISU Extension and Outreach 2019). Off-farm employment in these counties is largely based on agricultural-based manufacturing, seed and chemical production, and farm support services. In addition, services, including health care, retail, public agencies, and education make up a growing share of this region’s employment (U.S. Census Bureau 2019).

Population declines in these regions have impacted the employment situation and other social issues in rural Iowa. The outmigration of young people to urban locations with more job opportunities and amenities has affected the demographics of these counties (Lay 2017; Lichter and Brown 2011). These shifts are linked to an aging population with 21.1 percent of the population 65 years or older in Clay County, 20.9 percent in Howard County, 24.4 percent in Clayton, and only 16.7 percent in Buena Vista Counties (U.S. Census Bureau 2019) (Table 1). Overall, these areas of Iowa have low population densities and fall within the micropolitan and rural areas of northeast and northwest Iowa (Figure 1).

In the past several decades, many rural areas in Iowa experienced an influx of immigrants, especially Latinos. This trend has led to growing racial and ethnic diversity in Buena Vista County (home of Storm Lake) where approximately 25 percent of the population is Latino/a (U.S. Census Bureau 2019). Many of these immigrants originally came to work in the meat processing industry, construction, agricultural production, and other manufacturing activities (Lay 2017). Junod’s (2014) research on immigration in northwest Iowa’s 4th District explores the impact of and reception among local groups to the increase in predominantly Latino, but also Middle Eastern, and North and East African immigrants in this rural area. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2019), two of our case study counties in northeast Iowa had over 95 percent White population and 2.4 percent or less were foreign-born in three counties (Table 1). In contrast, only 58.0 percent of Buena Vista County residents are White and 18.5 percent were born outside of the U.S. (U.S. Census Bureau 2019). These contrasts in racial diversity present important contexts to this study of populism and white identity.

The economic dynamics, demographic shifts, and social identities noted here influence and are shaped by political values and behavior in rural Iowa and the U.S. Heartland more broadly. Our analysis of rising populism and white identity politics focuses on how the sense of community, strong family ties, and sense of pride in rural-agricultural traditions are reflected in these political attitudes and voting behavior. Rural Iowa is historically conservative and Republican, although as one participant noted, “back then, it was a different kind of Republican,” less ideologically conservative and more tolerant of compromise. The analysis below expands on the tensions among these political values that range from libertarian and individualistic to communitarianism. We also examine how voting patterns were shaped by these socio-economic and geographic characteristics in recent general elections.

The expansion and deepening of populism in rural Iowa

Populism, or the rejection of mainstream or status quo politics, appeals directly to people who are invested in efforts to restore the political system to a place that valorizes hard-working, respectable citizens whose heritage is threatened by impure, alien outsiders (Agnew and Shin 2020). This section addresses the consequences of these sentiments through an analysis of political identities and behavior in rural Iowa. The discussion centers on economic dynamics, social identities, and rurality as ways to explain the sentiments that provided the basis for the flipped 2016 and recent 2020 U.S. Heartland vote. This analysis also serves to better understand ongoing and forecast future political trends in this region.

The economy, labor, and trade issues

Employment opportunities, labor issues, and trade policies are some of the key economic themes that relate to populism and white identity politics (Cramer 2016; Hochschild 2016; Monnat and Brown 2017). For the most part, the economy and employment have been relatively strong in rural Iowa during the period leading up to and after recent elections. Manufacturing, agricultural, and service-based economic activities provided good jobs, however, employers reported labor shortages among some local businesses. Respondents across the four rural counties also described the need for more economic diversification in these areas to prevent dependency on a few economic sectors.

The labor shortage in this region was evident in several of the small towns we visited with widespread help wanted signs. As one participant from an Iowa farm advocate association stated, “You probably noticed it. There’s help wanted signs that are like bolted to the building, not just a temporary little sign. . . . People don’t want to take that sign down. They’re constantly looking for help.” Given this labor shortage, wages have risen in order to attract workers. For example, the local meat packing plant in Storm Lake has three shifts that operate twenty-four hours a day with bonuses to laborers who work night shifts.

Given the high demand for labor, local employers have turned to recruitment and hiring of immigrant labor through both private and government channels. An economic development person explained how this process worked.

Well, it’s got to do with how, how the employers recruit workers using, uh immigration programs that prioritize people from war-torn countries. Uh, areas of high-risk are, there’s an advantage to recruiting there because it’s, it’s easier to bring in workers. And so large corporations--JVS, Tyson--are quite adept at those programs and that’s how they build their workforce.

The seasonal aspect of labor in rural areas also affects the demand for migrant labor. According to one community leader, “The elevator board that I’m on struggles with labor, especially at fall at times. So, it’s seasonal, so they’ve gone to a migrant worker program. Um, so we will get Hispanic workers out of, um, Texas, Mexico area. They’ll come up and work. Um, that doesn’t help full-time people here you know as far as influx.” Thus, immigrant labor fulfills a demand for local agriculture and businesses as a permanent labor force, as well as seasonal employment during

periods of high labor demand.

In many respects, immigrants and refugees serve important labor needs in rural Midwest communities that have experienced the demographic shifts described above (Cohen 2017; Junod 2014). This situation often reinforces stereotypes of immigrant labor as well-suited for physical and low-skilled employment. For example, the owner of a local manufacturer referred to immigrant laborers in their community as

outdoor people. ... They all want to be – they want to be working on these farms. From my understanding they love it. They like being outside working. And, I never have them apply in my business. Um, you know, they just seem to be the outdoor jobs. You know. And that's all I hear. ... Agricultural labor. And the farmers love 'em. They are so loyal.

Racialized stereotypes of immigrant labor were evident in this description of innate loyalty to employers and strong work ethic.

Another local farmer in Iowa talked about the benefits of attracting immigrant labor to rural areas.

I would say that immigration has been a positive because we have more people in our small towns. ... And we have, uh, actually a more stable workforce for those agriculture enterprises than we had prior. I talked to a friend who ran a large poultry operation and twenty years ago when he first started hiring immigrant workers. And I asked him how he liked it. He said, "I love it." He said, "Our previous workforce, I didn't know who was going to show up. And whether or not they were going to be in a state to actually do that day's work." He said, "These folks show up, they work hard, they spend time with their families. We love it."

This statement underscores the claim that immigrants fulfill the demand for labor based on what is perceived as their consistent and reliable work ethic. They also contribute to repopulating rural areas that have lost people due to the outmigration of young people in particular (Johnson and Lichter 2019). Some of the respondents in our study claimed that these demographic trends undermined some of the anti-immigrant sentiment in rural communities.

We also encountered narratives about immigrant labor that were sympathetic to the precarious legal status of these workers and their families (Lay 2012). One respondent worked for a local non-profit organization that supports the Latino population in their community, noting that

a number of people are not able to work because they don't have the proper paperwork. And whether that's just a matter of time, or whether um, how that's resolved I don't know. But I do know that that happens and then they become dependent on their, their broader family. And so then that, those two wage earners, let's say mom and dad if they're working, are probably also taking care of in-laws or whatever. So, I don't know, I don't know those numbers, ... but I know they're significant here.

Similarly, Nelson, Trautman, and Nelson (2015) describe the precarious nature of immigrant labor recruited in many rural areas of the U.S. to work in services and construction that are stimulated by gentrification. This example, and the need for labor in agriculture and meatpacking, are a way of decentering the urban focus of immigrant labor.

Another dimension of rising populism is the rejection of trade and tariff policies that supposedly decreased markets for agricultural goods and lowered commodity prices. Several participants observed that despite the negative economic impact of these policies that cut off markets to China and greatly reduced the price of corn, soybeans, hogs, and other livestock, people were willing to support Trump (Kurtzleben 2016). Some of the participants in our study accepted this market volatility, claiming, "There's no guarantees in agriculture. I mean that, ... the market's not for sissies and because there's nothing we have control over." One local farmer commented, "Well, we were going to hit

that wall anyway because the ethanol, we're just too damn good at what we do." Up to one-third of corn grown in Iowa goes toward ethanol production, which was also negatively impacted by the sharp drop in price for corn during the period of high trade barriers.

These market shifts also affect local businesses that rely on the agricultural sector. An economic development person in a northwest Iowa community stated,

We have a business that declared bankruptcy this year and shut down. They bought their facility at a time of high commodity prices because their demand for their equipment they sold in the ag industry was so high. Then commodity prices turned down, and they were left with a facility that they did not have the volume to fill. ... And ... when they shut down it was thirty-five uh welding level jobs.

Another local employer who openly supported President Trump described the impact of high prices of materials he imported for his transportation-equipment manufacturing plant in northeast Iowa.

And I have a reason to be fairly upset. ... this whole farming community tariff thing that we're going through. We saw 30 percent increase on our aluminum (prices). We had about 30 percent of our aluminum coming from China. And it can't be replaced in this country. ... We ended up raising our prices ... Well, it didn't cut back on sales as much, but I think it's going to hurt growth.

In our discussion of the Trump administration's claim that these tariffs would bring business back to the U.S., this person believed that the sacrifice was worth it because China was also paying a high price for their unfair trade policies.

Several respondents claimed that farmers have been economically impacted by Trump administration trade policies and low prices. As one person observed, "farmers were really affected by the, uh, fluctuations in the prices based on what they say out of Washington today or tomorrow." However, many Republicans in particular continued to support the Trump administration's promotion of these policies. According to a member of an Iowa crop advocacy association, "... probably the majority - and I don't know what that means, I would say probably 60 to 80 percent of farmers support the current administration as far as what they are doing with trade." When asked to explain why local farmers continue to support Trump when it is not in their best economic interest, this same person replied "... we're still agreeing that this [the trade war] is what needs to be done... farmers continue to be supportive. They were standing firm on that ... even though it's hurting them financially, they're willing to take it." This view was reinforced by a county supervisor and retired teacher who noted that, "I think it's really going to bite 'em. I think they're gonna be really shocked at how really angry we are out here." This exchange reveals how some people are willing to sacrifice in the short term for what they see as long-term gains for their businesses and economic interests.

Overall, attitudes about economic independence and persistent support for the Trump administration was widespread among farmers, local business owners, economic development people, and members of local government in many rural areas. The underestimation of how 'angry we are out here' reflects a polarizing and populist hostility towards elite politicians and others in economic decision-making roles in Washington, D. C. These sentiments are echoed by Cramer (2016), Monnat and Brown (2017), and Jacobs and Munis (2018) who describe how longtime Democratic voters and others in the Heartland felt abandoned by a Democratic Party that appeared to de-emphasize policies benefitting the (white) working class. Rural support for the Trump administration was maintained even when these policies appeared to harm immediate economic interests.

Thus, our research suggests that economic grievances were not the primary drivers of Heartland support for the Trump administration. Despite policies that produced tangible economic hardships such as job losses, closed businesses, and higher prices for manufactured items, many people in these small rural communities continued to

support the Trump administration. They were willing to tighten their belt, so to speak, and endure these economic hardships (Kurtzleben 2016). In contrast, some of our respondents who support, advocate for, and work with Latinos, immigrant laborers, and other marginalized groups in these areas were critical of the impact of Trump administration policies on food security, affordable housing, and other social and economic needs of their communities.

Social identities – race, immigration, and gender

Increasingly diverse populations in rural areas are often linked to the rise of populist movements and political polarization. Tensions in small towns and rural communities reflect resentment among some people towards racial minorities, women, and immigrants (Lay 2012; Lichter, Parisi, and Tazuino 2018; Kelly and Lobao 2018). Some of this resentment is revealed in micro-level aggression and bigoted attitudes and actions. Racial epithets towards immigrant labor that we examined earlier in this paper were evident in comments about immigrant laborers “liking agricultural and physical labor.”

These racialized sentiments and biases affected many social services in rural areas such as those in our study. For example, respondents in our study commented on how education and schools with Latinx and other non-native students have adapted in terms of language, culture, housing, and other social dimensions of an increasingly diverse population. The director of the local economic development group in one community stated,

Um, our neighboring county recruited, um, (immigrant) folks and they brought them up and it’s a different culture and ... they didn’t fit with the school system. They had language barriers, um, housing, um ... And they’re also seen’ that in Delaware County as well. Because they recruited some immigration and um, due to that they’ve got some issues in their schools. ... Things that, you don’t look at the whole circle before you bring ‘em here.

A local leader in agriculture lamented that “it’s just not the same small community that it used to be because of, ya know different cultures.” Another respondent commented about immigrants not fitting into the local community because they strained the police system and did not like the local cuisine.

Heartland communities are largely comprised of European immigrant groups who have “worked toward whiteness,” a process of racial identity reconstruction whereby once-stigmatized immigrant groups became recoded as “white” while adopting racialized attitudes toward new migrant group previously applied to them (Roediger 2005). As new immigration diversifies the communities in our study, respondents note increasing anti-immigrant and xenophobic attitudes associated with white identity politics. One respondent had a child in the local high school and was surprised at the prevalence of racist language. This parent stated, “when I was in school, somebody would’ve told somebody to shut up, and that’s not happening. There’s not that seeming check and balance that there used to be. ... perhaps people are more emboldened than they were before.” Another person added that some schools have attempted to address this racism and bigotry. In one community, school administrators and student leaders got together and developed some protocols and open discussions about racialized dynamics and inclusivity.

Food insecurity has also become a concern in these rural communities as increasing numbers of food banks distribute meals to low-income and immigrant communities. This demand has grown with the impact of COVID-19, reinforcing some of the sentiments that we heard about immigrants ‘living off the system’, or stereotypes about welfare dependency. A respondent who volunteers for a local non-profit organization in support of the Latino community stated that she thinks their community is overall very welcoming and has an appreciation for immigrants keeping their community alive. However, she described negative reactions from local citizens who are

obviously unhappy, ... and misconstruing that everyone in that line is an immigrant. That’s certainly not true. ... We, this is a monthly food distribution. We’re handing out the boxes and somebody drove by in a car or pick up and yelled, “And this is why we need a new school, need to pass a school bond.”

This scenario underscores the commonly-held belief in this community that increasing investment in schools is a result of the influx of immigrants and paid for by taxes from farmers and property owners.

Some of these narratives and biased attitudes towards Latinx, Laotian and other immigrant populations reinforce white supremacy and support for politicians who are seen as tough on immigrants. A local business owner in northeast Iowa commented, “I think the immigration issue was huge on that last race (*2016 presidential election*). Because, you know, Hillary was really talking open borders. I mean it was two extremes ... Between Trump and her, you know, one extreme to the other, between those two. And I think that played into a lot of voters’ minds.”

Another social dimension of right-wing populism is gender and especially the voting behavior of women in the 2016 and 2020 campaign. These aspects of our analysis play into and reflect sentiment towards Trump and conservative political parties. In general, women and especially women of color and working-class women are less supportive of Trump and what is interpreted as rhetoric that seeks to preserve white male supremacy (Gökariksel and Smith 2016; Kelly and Lobao 2018). According to one conservative business owner in northeast Iowa,

Trump’s got a bad, um, um, his MO (mode of operation) is, he’s – he has a problem with women. (pause) You know, he just does. ... Well, he does.... you know, it’s like, my wife would be a great example, because she voted for Trump ... But for me just talking to women in general, and his personality ... is just not great with women.

This respondent went on to report that he was “nervous about the women vote” in the upcoming election. Thus, gender relations and women’s attitudes towards the Trump administration have shifted, even among women who may have supported Trump in 2016. According to some of our respondents, the bigotry and negative rhetoric towards women have significantly changed their opinions about populist leaders.

Finally, health issues present significant social and economic challenges for many people in rural Iowa who are concerned about access to health insurance, the cost and availability of quality care, and the status of mental health among people of all ages. A local farmer who has lived in his home community all of his life stated,

The healthcare thing is a big thing, because even if you have health insurance, the co-pays are high and you know, they’re looking for a way they can afford it. And that reflects on the food thing too, because if you’ve got bills, you need to be healthy in the first place and, and I don’t know, you know access. ... And you know, it just costs so darn much. That’s just a big issue.

Health care is also linked to employment in these areas and the need for jobs that provide decent insurance. Mental health issues are a growing concern and especially the growing use of opioids in many rural communities. The incidence and impact of mental health problems in rural America have been documented in many studies (Monnat and Brown 2016; Peters, Miller, and Hochstetler 2019). Problems stemming from mental health were also prevalent during the Iowa farm crisis of the early 1980s. Although several mental health care institutions are located in their communities, the participants complained about their overcapacity and lack of quality service. In sum, the role of social identities and provision of services such as education and health care are linked to populist attitudes and white identity politics in the Heartland state of Iowa. The rural dimensions of these connections are expanded on in the next section.

Rurality, populism, and White identity politics

Many of the narratives shared by residents of rural Iowa are embedded in the tide of agrarian populism that washed across the U.S. Midwest in the late 19th century (Berlet and Sunshine 2019; Hoganson 2019). In these areas, populism is often expressed in the form of resentment against demographically and economically advantaged urban

areas (Cramer 2016). We encountered echoes of these populist attitudes in our study among respondents who resent what they perceive as fewer resources going to rural areas compared to the more populous and wealthy central Iowa and specifically Des Moines, the center of state government and taxation. One respondent referred to the 'Golden Circle' of the capital city where the ornate gold-leaf dome covers Iowa's capitol building. Populism among our respondents added anti-taxation, anti-government, and anti-regulation to the base of rural agrarianism.

Community leaders complained of recent consolidation in regional governance districts that further alienated them from access to services. They expressed frustration that rural counties were overlooked and undervalued by political leaders. One respondent remarked, "sometimes we feel like the ugly stepchild to the rest of Iowa." An aggrieved sense of alienation from Iowa's urban power-centers was reinforced by a respondent who joked, "they wanted to give U.S. (rural counties in southern Iowa) to Missouri a couple months ago." These sentiments resonate with Cramer's (2016) research on rural resentment and feelings among residents in rural areas that they are left behind as urban centers grow. As one local economic development director stated, "it'd be nice to see assistance to come back to the rural communities to help provide some kind of training for adults that would want to take" classes for advanced degrees. These populist sentiments help explain why, despite ongoing difficulties that rural farmers, businesses, and others experience with trade fluctuations and low prices, many people in the Heartland still identify with Trumpism.

As noted above, the outmigration of young people from these rural areas also increased resentment among rural groups towards urban areas. In many cases, small rural towns lack the amenities that many young people seek. One local businessman described how his adult son felt when he returned to their community after living on the West Coast. "Young people here think the culture ... is lacking. It's not the same kind of culture they have out there." Such concerns are similar to those of 'identitarian nativism,' a movement that emphasizes the loss of cultural values through an 'exchange of population' through low autochthonous birthrate, out-migration of native children, aging of native population, and immigration (Goetz 2021). Further, resentment and hostility towards larger urban areas reinforce support for right-wing populism, libertarian distrust of centralized taxation, and the privileging of local needs and decision-making (Silva 2019). Many rural communities recognize the shortcomings in their lives and locations, and resent that political emphasis and state expenditures seem to flow to larger cities. These populist views translate into support for Trumpism's rhetorical valorization of 'Real America' that places 'America First' over the interest of 'globalists' and 'caravans of migrants'. These populist sentiments underlay Trump administration policies toward China, especially the trade and tariff wars that were disrupting Heartland agriculture, as well as immigration policies that emphasized border walls, refugee internment camps, and restrictions on migration.

Two counties in this study are located in former Republican congressman Steve King's district where respondents discussed their concerns about the contemporary political climate. Mr. King was a divisive, polarizing political personage who embraced populist rhetoric and white supremacy, achieving national notoriety for his disparaging comments about immigrants and immigration (Junod 2014; Lay 2017). As an Iowa congressman, Mr. King was a prominent advocate for ideas associated with the Great Replacement, boasting that he had "market tested" the Trump administration's immigration policies in Iowa for 14 years. King was removed from his congressional committees by Republican party leadership after he asserted the positive value of white identity: "White nationalist, white supremacist, western civilization – how did that language become offensive? Why did I sit in classes teaching me about the merits of our history and civilization" (Gabriel 2019). While considerable support was expressed for Mr. King in our interviews, some of the strongest tropes associated with him and with Great Replacement ideology more broadly, such as conspiratorial antisemitism, dystopianism, fear of racial impurities, and immigrants as an existential threat were muted or altogether absent in the discourse of our respondents. Our respondents spoke in milder tones, emphasizing "in-group love" more than "out-group hate" (Jardina 2020). Rather than express strong animus toward outgroups, they tended to speak of positive feelings associated with their rural way of life, their traditional communities, and rural values. Jardina and Mickey (2022) have found that even such mild expressions of white identity can translate into support for authoritarian politics and anti-democracy movements.

Though already accustomed to King, many of our respondents detected an increase in populist rhetoric and nativism within their communities in the wake of Trump's ascendancy as president. One person from this region who was a lifelong Democrat shared how one of her friends was politically galvanized upon attending one of Trump's rallies. Trump's populism divided and polarized her circle of friends in a rural Iowa county when she discovered they "...all voted for Trump, except for me. So, twice last year I had to leave and go home early because I made them uncomfortable... it's very tense and very awful." Polarization associated with right-wing populism in these rural communities has made the exchange of political views all but impossible. "They don't want any [contradictory] information. ...If I were to bring that up to her, we probably wouldn't talk for a while... it would be [a long] time before we could get back to where we were." Respondents reported self-exclusion from social groups that supported Trump's presidency. Since the thoughtful exchange of views was impossible, withdrawal from social groups was the respondents' only option: "Cause I can't keep my mouth shut. They will talk amongst themselves, but then I got to go home early."

In another rural Iowa county, populist rhetoric surrounding the Trump presidency divided family and friendship networks, disrupting social ties in the local community. A respondent said Trump divided her network so that long-standing social ties were cut separating avid supporters from avid detractors.

Yes, there are people in my life that I've stopped talking to. Not entirely because of their support of President Trump, but that was sort of just the tipping point. But on the other side, there are people that I have stopped engaging with because of their total hostility and inability to think clearly about who the president is.

For many rural community members, the only way to navigate a polarized political community under stress is to avoid talking about political topics altogether: "you just don't talk ... you just don't talk about it."

Several of our participants indicated that Trump's populism was more divisive than previous presidential administrations. Trump was described as very polarizing and his election emboldened partisans to become more heated and more vocal in their support. A respondent who worked a Republican party booth at a local fair indicated that during the 2016 campaign, Trump supporters "wouldn't say it real loud, but [whispering], "I hope he gets in." By 2019 "a lot of people would come by and tap [loudly] on the table, "Let's go! We gotta git it again." This is a blue-collar and traditionally more Democratic area but voted against Clinton and other Democratic candidates in the 2016 election. Another respondent noted that after the 2016 election, communities were divided into ardent supporters and avid detractors of Trump, both of whom were bolder about their political opinions, overshadowing the voices of middle-of-the-road types who were no longer encountered. In these areas, Trump's populism had raised the emotional temperature surrounding political discussion and debate among community members. "I think people feel more comfortable saying how they feel about it than perhaps they did before. Either side has become emboldened."

Like most rural communities in the Heartland, the counties we visited have historically depended upon civility, mutuality, and cooperation, as reflected in the oft-used colloquialism 'Iowa nice.' Polarized politics and loss of civility resulting from Trumpism were identified as a corrosive influence upon such rural community culture. Social media was identified as a carrier of populist political rhetoric and a divisive agent of polarization. People in these communities feel that they must choose sides as Republican or Democrat, and make their partisan affiliation a hardened identity. According to one participant, it is "difficult to walk back on your opinion anymore. We've created a culture where the only thing you can't do is admit you were wrong." Another respondent noted that strongly-worded partisan posts on social media inhibit relationships across party lines, and friendships and potential business contacts are abandoned because "they say the worst things about people that are maybe the other political side."

Support for Trump and conservative nativism also impacts local churches as the rising tide of populism led ministers and congregations to sort along polarized lines. One of our respondents described how members of their church had "literally gone to their minister and said, 'Where do you stand on Trump?' If the minister was a pro-Trump person, they'd be gone." Another rural Iowa respondent explained that Trump and political populism were

altering the impact of churches and the communities that they serve.

In rural Iowa, you know that’s a strong component of who we are. And, and you know people always speak very delicately usually in the church community because that’s just the way it’s always been. But um, now it seems to be where the politics are, is it’s really, the, your faith and your concept of what your, your religious [belief] is really on the line almost immediately. And, and it’s causing this super divide in the evangelical community for sure, um, because there’s, there’s just no middle ground. It’s just completely butting heads. ... I just think that’s, it’s polarized.

While rural churches traditionally unite residents into “moral communities,” the rise of right-wing populism created discord and division even within a single denomination, leaving congregations siloed within politically-homogenous churches, further eliminating the “middle ground” necessary for community functioning.

In general, respondents varied in their acceptance of Trumpism’s populist rhetoric: some thought it gave voice to their considerable resentment regarding the economic, political, and social disadvantages of rurality. The majority of our respondents recognized that Trumpism was polarizing and divisive, ardently embraced by some and despised by others. The affective polarization in their communities disrupted social networks, stressed community religious institutions, and undermined trust and mutuality essential to small-town and rural life.

In sum, our study reveals how right-wing populism proceeds within the context of localized rural politics by enhancing divisions, rhetorically defining dampened variants of ‘the people’ who must be defended against enemies in the form of elites, loafers, and racialized newcomers. Scholars have attributed the rise of right-wing populism associated with Trumpism to economic stress, threats to social identity, and rural resentment (Monnat and Brown 2017; Smith and Hanley 2018; Schaffner, MacWilliams, and Nteta 2018). The relatively prosperous and growing counties in our study, where unemployment was low, indicate that respondents were nevertheless deeply concerned about economic matters and expressed overall support for the ‘America First’ policies of the Trump administration. They worried about urban elites gaining an advantage at their expense. They were concerned about the impact of demographic change, and while not expressed in the harsh tones of Great Replacement rhetoric articulated by Iowa Congressman Steve King, they nevertheless voiced support for Trumpism’s white nationalist immigration policies. Though stated mildly and with ambivalence, our respondents framed their community concerns in complicated and sometimes unexpected ways parallel to populism and white identity politics. The language and imagery of these political movements associated with Trumpism was mirrored in muted form within the political discourse of respondents in rural communities and was especially evident when describing unstable economic conditions, changing social identities, and the salience of rurality to their way of life.

Conclusion: Contesting political populism and white identity politics

The rise of populism on the political right and identity politics in voting behavior, party affiliation, and political movements is increasingly evident in both the U.S. and Europe. The discourse of populist ideology separates society into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, ‘the people’ and ‘the corrupt elite.’ Right-wing populism is simultaneously a reaction to neoliberalism and a backlash to progressive political change. In the form of Trumpism, populism mobilized opposition to foreign influences, globalists, cities, and government (Agnew and Shin 2020; Berlet and Lyons 2000), and lead to the marginalization of immigrants, people of color, religious minorities, and the impoverished (Alba and Foner 2017; Gimpel and Celeste 2008), thereby incorporating central tenants of white identity. In this article, we document how the language and discursive framing of populism and identity movements on the political right are integrated into the political culture of rural America. When community leaders discussed the economy, changes in demographic composition or their rural identity the terms used were often consistent with these broader political movements.

This article analyzes the current political climate and what we argue are shifts to populism and rising white identity politics in the U.S. Heartland. Former President Trump ascended to the White House by flipping several key Heartland states, signaling a political shift toward right-wing populism and white identity politics. Identity politics draw from broader frameworks that help to conceptualize these political and social movements, and give insights into local dimensions of economic instability, contested politics, and spatial dynamics (Gusterson 2017; Mudde and Kaltwasser 2012; Silva 2019).

Affective polarization and political messaging about populism shaped the 2016 and 2020 elections and will likely shape political identities and behavior in the Heartland going forward. This research also leads to reconceptualizing the urban-rural divide and the importance of place in the context of these shifting political geographies (Jacobs and Munis 2018). Following Lichter, Parisi, and Taquino (2018) and others, rurality is no longer a clean geographic construct but is itself a social identity. Many rural residents are economically, culturally, and socially tied to urban living while many urban, suburban, and exurban residents are culturally and socially tied to rurality. Iowa is distinct from, yet similar to the rest of the Heartland. The geographic makeup of this state is largely rural with a few large urban and semi-urban centers.

While Iowa is not completely representative of the Heartland, let alone the U.S. as a whole, political sentiment and behavior reflect mainstream attitudes towards people of color, immigrants, women, economic challenges and prosperity, and rural resentment towards wealthier, more diverse urban areas (Cramer 2016; Lay 2017; Silva 2019). Whiteness, racial diversity, and ethno-nationalist messaging about migration was prominent in Trump's campaign and presidency in this region. We share the concerns of other scholars that hate-filled rhetoric and policies are part of growing misogynist, racist, ethnocentric, and xenophobic narratives among elected representatives and their followers (Junod 2014; Monnat 2016). These factors should be strongly considered in analyses of political campaigns and messaging to appeal to Iowa voters and those of the broader Heartland and nation.

In conclusion, extensive scholarship and critical debates have developed around the rise of populism and white identity politics in diverse political landscapes in the U.S. and Europe. Our focus on economic status, social identities, and geographies of place draw attention to crucial ways of understanding the complexity of why people vote the way they do, or what shapes political attitudes. The fundamental shift in recent elections and rise of candidates and political parties that promote populist and nativist platforms is cause for concern among many. Understanding this shift is crucial to leading a more progressive and inclusive movement for change.

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