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BECOMING PARTISANS: HOW PLACE MAKES POLITICS IN THE AMERICAN
HEARTLAND

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to residents of Iverson, Meriville, and Williston, who spent some of the most frightening hours of the COVID-19 pandemic sharing their fears and concerns with me.

I am particularly indebted to the people who welcomed me into their homes and their families during my fieldwork; without them, this dissertation would not have been possible.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES	iv
LIST OF FIGURES	v
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	vi
ABSTRACT	x
INTRODUCTION	1
CHAPTER 1. PROBLEMS AND POLITICS IN THE SMALL-TOWN MIDWEST	35
CHAPTER 2. LOCAL ORGANIZATIONAL ARRANGEMENTS AND THE EXPERIENCE OF POSTINDUSTRIAL SOCIAL PROBLEMS IN IVERSON, MERIVILLE, AND WILLISTON.....	63
CHAPTER 3. HOW LOCAL CONTEXTS PRODUCE (ANTI)-STATISM IN IVERSON AND MERIVILLE	95
CHAPTER 4. FROM PLACE TO PARTISAN IDENTITY IN IVERSON AND MERIVILLE	130
CHAPTER 5. POLITICS IN A DYING TOWN: ORGANIZATIONAL INSTABILITY AND POSTINDUSTRIAL POPULISM IN WILLISTON	165
CHAPTER 6. LOCAL CONTEXTS AMIDST NATIONAL CRISIS: IVERSON, MERIVILLE, AND WILLISTON CONFRONT THE ECONOMIC CRISIS OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC	195
CHAPTER 7. THE END OF PLACE?: WHY ELITE POLARIZATION DOES NOT NATIONALIZE ALL POLITICS	222
CONCLUSION. THE FUTURE OF PLACE IN HEARTLAND POLITICS	250
METHODOLOGICAL APPENDIX	266
Interview and Ethnographic Data Collection & Analysis.....	266
Additional Tables & Figures, Referred to in Main Text.....	272
Data Collection & Coding of Politicians' Facebook Posts.....	277
REFERENCES	285

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1. Cluster Demographic & Political Characteristics	45
Table 2. Evidence of Postindustrial Decline.....	50
Table A1. Sample Political & Demographic Characteristics.....	268
Table A2. Geography of Issue Content.....	279

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. Presidential Election Maps, 2000 and 2016.....	12
Figure 2. Industrial Employment in Iverson, Meriville, and Williston vs. the U.S. Average, 1940-2016.....	57
Figure A1. Blue-Collar Counties, formerly in the New Deal Coalition.....	272
Figure A2. Unionization by State, 1956, 1986, 2016.....	273
Figure A3. Denominational Adherence by County, 2010	274
Figure A4. National Trends in Unionization, 1939-2019.	275
Figure A5.. Democratic Party Voting in Union and non-Union Households, 1948-2016.....	276
Figure A6. Most Popular Issues on Facebook, by Place.....	283

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neuroses—you force me to remember that I can do it. It's annoying sometimes, but in the end it's what keeps me pushing forward.

ABSTRACT

It is now a truism of American politics that voters in White, postindustrial communities across the American Heartland favor the Republican Party, while those in multiracial, urban enclaves prefer the Democrats. *Becoming Partisans: How Place Makes Politics in the American Heartland* argues that this reddening of the Heartland has emerged through place-based processes, as voters make sense of postindustrial decline and national party politics from within their local communities. It shows how these place-based experiences help voters form and maintain the partisan attachments that are so consequential to American electoral outcomes.

Becoming Partisans develops these arguments through a longitudinal, comparative ethnography of Iverson, Meriville, and Williston.¹ All three are predominantly White, blue-collar communities in the Midwest, the very kinds of places that have been at the center of national debates about the rise of Republicanism in the American Heartland since the 1960s. And yet, they have voted differently for decades: Iverson is a Democratic county; Meriville is a Republican county; and Williston is a former swing county that has recently turned to the right. Based on eighteen months of fieldwork during the 2020 presidential election and the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, I argue that local organizations—particularly the political activism of unions in Iverson and the civic engagement of churches in Meriville—help sustain a working-class Democratic community on the one hand and a Christian, Republican community on the other. But in Williston, where both kinds of organizations struggle to fulfill the community roles they once did, residents’ anger and fear over the death of their small town is increasingly captured in the populist rhetoric of the Republican

¹ Names for all communities and participants are pseudonyms, in accordance with IRB protocol. Names for states are real.

Party. Together, these cases suggest a revision to our understanding of entrenched Republicanism in the American Heartland: I show that the same kinds of people do not necessarily react to changing party politics and economic dislocation in the same way, but rather, they interpret social and political dynamics from within their communities. This also means that the rise of right-wing populism among Whites facing status and economic threat is not a necessary product of deindustrialization or an increasingly multiracial society; rather, it is produced through an uneven, unsteady process that can be halted, or even reversed, at the most local levels.

INTRODUCTION

It's early on a summer evening in Meriville County, Indiana in 2019, and the county fair is in full swing. Beyond the dirt lot full of games and attractions stand booth after booth with crawling lines of patrons in t-shirts and jean shorts, waiting for their homemade baked goods, fried pickles, and taco salads from the biggest churches and service sororities in the county. Just past the individual tents, long, narrow buildings are lined with further stands for local businesses, nonprofits, and, of course, the local Democrat and Republican Parties.

The Republicans have a booth set up near the entrance to one of these buildings, with a long, grassy hallway separating them from the businesses set up across the way. It's a small space, but the walls are plastered with brightly-colored signs displaying the names of every GOP candidate running for local office this fall. Lauren, the Chair of Meriville County's GOP, is working the booth with three other elected officials tonight—all middle-aged White women with blonde hair and easy smiles. But Lauren is the one responsible for the eye-catching display—she personally collected the t-shirts, banners, and signs from all of “her” candidates to create the attraction. On either side of the booth stand cardboard cutouts of the country's top Republicans – Trump on the left and Pence on the right. As I sit with Lauren and the others for the evening, I occasionally have to duck out of the way as residents stop to take photos in front of the Trump cutout. But the booth's main attraction sits at the tall table in front: paper fans bearing the label “I'm a fan of the Republican Party.” On a hot summer evening, they're both funny and practical.

Between the Trump/Pence figures, the paper fans, and Lauren herself, the booth is a popular stopping-off point throughout the evening. Lauren seems to know almost everyone who walks by: she remembers kids' names, parents' names, jokes about haircuts and how much people have grown. She tells me later that she makes it a point to know a lot of people in the

county, and as far as I can tell, she has succeeded. It doesn't hurt that she was born and raised here, and attended a large and well-connected parochial school in Meriville City, a town of about 20,000 people and the largest in the county. Just as many people stop by to catch up with her as to take in the Party's wares.

The Democrats' "booth" is also located near the entrance of one of the fair's major buildings—but at first, I almost miss it. When I eventually do find Carolyn, the Party's Secretary, she's seated on a folding chair in front of a card table with one other woman. Both are in their 60s. Behind them sits a sign proclaiming "Sondra for Mayor," and another with the label "Democrat," but the other scant decorations are all red-white-and-blue – patriotic rather than partisan. On top of the table sits a little bowl offering Dum Dums to visitors, and next to that they have two clipboards to register voters. It's a quiet booth, especially compared to the energy that Lauren and company bring to the GOP territory, which is constantly drawing in passersby to participate in the raffle, grab a fan, or catch up with one of the candidates.

Everyone knows that Republicans have long dominated in Meriville County—Donald Trump carried it with over 75% of the vote in 2020—but several GOP activists had told me that the Meriville County Fair was the Democrats' last toehold of power in the county. And yet, even here, this power is limited to a lackluster card table. Meriville is a Republican county.

Just a few weeks before I join Lauren at the Meriville County Fair, I travel to Iverson County, Wisconsin, a place much like Meriville: overwhelmingly White, centered around a small town of about 25,000 people in the Midwest, and founded on blue-collar work. But my experience in Iverson is vastly different from the one I had in Meriville. On one of my first afternoons in town, I meet Arthur, the former Chair of Iverson's Democratic Party and retired railway engineer, at a local bar housed in an old supply depot for the railroad. The interior still

contains remnants of an old depot – wooden benches against the wall by the entrance, wide, wooden planks that make up the floors, and a big window that looks out the back – but there is also a bar to the right of the doorway, and a band stand beyond that. On Friday afternoons, the place is packed. But at 3 o’clock on a weekday, it’s quiet, making it easy to spot Arthur, wearing a faded red baseball cap and nursing a beer in one of the booths. Arthur explains that his choice of meeting spot was purposeful, as this is my political initiation in Iverson, where all politics happens at the bar. And then we’re off, Arthur’s political passion guiding the conversation: he speaks to me of his love for Elizabeth Warren and his desire to do away with the “old White guys” in politics, despite being one himself. And as he explains, he’s not alone in his politics: “The whole town is blue,” he tells me. And he’s right: statistically, Democrats are favored in Iverson—Joe Biden won here with over 55% of the vote in 2020, and a Republican presidential candidate has not won a presidential contest in the county since before the New Deal.

As it turns out, Arthur is also correct when he tells me that all politics in Iverson happens at the bar: later that same day, Arthur and I gather again with a group of about 20 Democrats of all ages, seated around a long table in a dimly lit room at the back of a different bar along Iverson’s Main Street. It’s the monthly Democratic Party meeting, and a young organizer named Johnny, sent from the state Democratic Party out to Iverson County, begins the gathering with a call to arms: “This meeting is about how we’re gonna beat Donald Trump in 2020.” The room whoops and cheers on cue. Over the course of the following hour Johnny doles out organizing roles to the group, articulating a multi-faceted local, state, and national strategy on the long road from June 2019 to November 2020.

Iverson County’s Democratic Party is energized, occasionally argumentative, and somewhat disorganized, but most importantly, they’re *there*, month-in and month-out.

Meanwhile, the county's Republican Party is, for all intents and purposes, nowhere to be found. If Meriville County Democrats are relegated to a card table, Iverson County Republicans are relegated to another county. In fact, an email to the county GOP renders a response from the Congressional District Republican Party. Even local politicians who might be interested in organized Republican Party support cannot find it in Iverson County. As Ed, a City Councilor, told me:

When Scott Walker was governor, he came to town. I saw nowhere that he was coming to town, and he went to a little restaurant. They had assigned a room probably for 30 people or so, and there were probably 20 people in there. The governor is in town and hardly anyone acknowledged...Whereas Tony Evers comes to town and there are hundreds of people.

As he concludes, the Iverson County Republicans are almost like "a secret club." Iverson is a Democratic county.

But in Williston County, Minnesota—a place much like Iverson and Meriville—the Democrats and Republicans offer a relatively equal show of force. Each week the parties trade off writing an opinion column in the local paper, and both can count on a sizeable group of energized activists to show up at local events with petitions, to knock on doors, and to attend the quadrennial caucuses for presidential primaries. And in the late summer of 2019, they both rent out the same pavilion in a local park for their annual picnic, hosted just weeks apart.

In mid-August, the pavilion is decked out in GOP fanfare. It is a cavernous space, with a tall, peaked ceiling much like a barn, and ten or so round tables fill the room, each with the same center-piece – two small American flags crossed over each other. A much larger flag, about 20 feet tall, stands at the front of the room, right behind the cardboard cutout of Donald Trump. Various smaller GOP signs adorn the walls, carrying campaign materials for local Republican incumbents as well as the Trump/Pence picket. There are also signs advertising Republican

slogans such as, “If you love your freedom, thank your veterans,” and “GOP” in large letters above the words “Greatest Opportunity Party.” A long table in the back is laden with barbecue from a local restaurant and a podium is set up at the front to host local politicians, both incumbents and candidates for office, all the way from Minnesota state representative to U.S. Congressional Representative. By the time the speeches commence, the tables have nearly filled up – there are about 40 or 50 people in the room, including the politicians and some of their staff.

Williston’s Republican incumbent in the U.S. House of Representatives is the last to speak. He talks about local issues as well as Democrats’ extremist abortion and gun control legislation in the House, and then he shifts his tone: “Have you all seen the recent polls?” he asks. “Elizabeth Warren is surging,” he says. A murmur of recognition ripples through the crowd. “And I would love for her to be the nominee,” he continues, “because she’s a socialist democratic candidate if I ever saw one.” Someone snorts in the front row. “And we don’t want a socialist, because it will put our healthcare at risk. America has the highest quality healthcare in the world. Now, it might not have the best delivery, but it does have the best quality. And Democrats’ healthcare plans will ruin that for us. If we switch to single-payer, reimbursement rates for rural hospitals will fall even further...” Your rural healthcare will struggle even more than it is now, he tells them. Then he concludes his speech: “Let’s fight not to become Venezuela!” And the crowd bursts into applause.

Just a couple of weeks later, a similar-sized crowd gathers in the same cavernous room. Although the local Democrats—in Minnesota, the Democrat-Farmer-Laborer Party, or DFL—have far less décor, they have a similar slate of speakers, from local- to state- and federal-level politicians. The DFL picnic is a potluck—in fact, a party member scoffs when I tell them the GOP paid to order barbecue—and the back table is similarly full of food. Once we’ve all filled

our plates and taken our seats, George—the informal MC of most local DFL events—takes up the mic and introduces the speakers.

The last of these is the Democratic candidate for the U.S. House of Representatives. He begins his speech by talking about the closure of a local agro-business that will cost the district several hundred jobs. “Do you know why that happened?” he asks the crowd. “For three reasons: it happened because of the tax breaks given to big corporations. Do you know where the corporation is headquartered?” He pauses for effect. “Singapore.” The crowd grumbles in displeasure. “And it happened because of an endless trade war,” he continues. “And finally, it happened because the corporation that owned the plant could just do that overnight because the workers had no unions to represent them.” When he concludes, the crowd erupts in cheers.

In the span of a month, the local Democrat and Republican Parties in Williston county put up the same show of force in the exact same space—a symbol of their longstanding status as a swing county. In fact, for decades, presidential elections have hovered at just about the 50% mark in Williston county, and lower-level offices regularly change hands between the parties. Nothing was ever a sure bet. But just over a year after the 2019 party picnics, Republican victories up and down the ballot in the 2020 election appeared to consolidate a shift that was evinced in the 2016 election: Williston is becoming a Republican county.

As these snapshots indicate, Iverson, Meriville, and Williston all have different politics: Iversonians tend to be Democrats; Merivillians tend to be Republicans; and Willistonians have tended to be divided. These differences took root in the 1950s and 60s and have persisted since.

And yet, Iverson, Meriville, and Williston are nearly identical on many of the dimensions that social scientists consider important for electoral outcomes: they are all overwhelmingly White and historically blue-collar counties centered around small towns of 16-28,000 people, whose employment today is still concentrated in manufacturing, transportation, public sector, and service sector jobs. They are also archetypes of the White, Midwestern communities in the nation’s former manufacturing heartland that were considered singularly important in shaping the outcome of the 2020 race for the White House.² In other words, the usual explanations—demographic composition, region, and size—can’t explain why Iverson, Meriville, and Williston vote differently. But understanding political partisanship in communities like these is paramount to American electoral outcomes.

So what is it about living in these places that leads similar people to form different partisan attachments? And how have these place-based differences proved to be so durable despite increasingly virtual forms of social interaction and political communication? These are the puzzles at the center of this book. Over the course of 18 months, from May 2019 through the November 2020 presidential election, I interviewed nearly 200 residents and community leaders across Iverson, Meriville, and Williston. Before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, I lived in each community for 6-8 weeks, observing City Council, political party, and union meetings; attending community events; and volunteering for a mayoral campaign in Meriville. During this time I also spoke to nearly 100 “community leaders” – elected officials, labor leaders, nonprofits heads, pastors, and party activists – about the challenges their communities face and how they work to resolve them. But the core arguments of the book come from four rounds of interviews each with 86 “ordinary residents” across Iverson, Meriville, and Williston, beginning in June

² Lerer and Epstein 2019

2019 and concluding just before the 2020 election. Three of these interviews took place on the phone and over Skype between February and November 2020, capturing the very beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in March and April, political contestation over stay-at-home orders in May and June, and residents' final decisions about the presidential election in fall 2020. I refer to the people in these interviews as "ordinary residents" or simply "residents," because they are not formally involved in local politics or community governance.

This book builds from these conversations to explain why Iverson, Meriville, and Williston defy both commonsense and social scientific expectations. It offers two answers. The first is that *place-based politics*, or a correlation between where people live and how they vote, is not just the result of certain kinds of people choosing to live in certain communities; rather, it emerges because places shape how people makes sense of their social identities and problems, and which political party best represents them.³ In short, my contention is that places shape Americans' partisan attachments and reinforce them over time. For communities across the American Heartland, this means that a homogenizing narrative of White, postindustrial populism misses the very sites in which voters make sense of postindustrial decline and learn which party is up to the task of addressing it. And for American politics writ large, this means that political outcomes emerge not just through the aggregation of individual demographic or psychological traits, but through social interactions and processes of meaning-making that are often rooted in voters' communities.

³ There is little evidence that people choose where to live based on a community's politics. The alluring idea of such a "Big Sort," first posed by Bishop (2009) has been heavily contested (see: Abrams and Fiorina 2012; Johnston, Manley, and Jones 2016; Mummolo and Nall 2017). The evidence suggests that people have too many constraints on their geographic mobility to rank politics high on their list of priorities.

The second answer is that national political debates and the digital means of communication that convey them to voters can reinforce rather than erode place-based politics. Contrary to current assumptions about how polarization among elites and between media outlets have wiped away local distinctions in American politics, Part II will show how the unemployment crisis wrought by the COVID-19 reproduced existing place-based political differences across Iverson, Meriville, and Williston. New lines of difference did emerge as individual partisans polarized on novel public health issues raised by the pandemic—regardless of place. But concerns about COVID merely replaced other issues that had been highly salient to residents in summer 2019 without displacing the core elements of place-based politics. In other words, residents’ polarization on novel issues is almost epiphenomenal to the political differences across Iverson, Meriville, and Williston.⁴

Taken together, this book offers an account of how place-based politics emerges through voters’ experiences within their communities and persists even in an increasingly national and even global era. In so doing, it offers a revision to the consensus account of politics among White voters in the postindustrial Heartland and revitalizes our understanding of why Americans’ partisan attachments are so durable. The remainder of this chapter situates this argument in the context of existing debates about the “reddening” of the American Heartland, and then I conclude by laying out the plan for the rest of the book.

The Reddening of the American Heartland

⁴ This does not contradict evidence that partisanship guides the public’s opinion on myriad issues, even on questions like abortion that we may have otherwise thought of as moral or personal questions (see: DellaPosta 2020; Layman and Carsey 2002). Instead, I’m arguing that places shape certain political beliefs *and* partisanship, which means that place-based beliefs are rarely at odds with party position-taking—instead, they’re mutually reinforcing.

Writing in 1969, Republican Party operative Kevin Phillips argued that Nixon’s first election signaled the beginnings of an emergent “Republican Majority” that was “becoming much more lower-middle class and much less establishmentarian” (1969:543). The GOP, he claimed, was the beneficiary of a political realignment around race, class, and geography, riding to victory on the backs of “a populist revolt of the (white) American masses” in the South and West against the “Liberal Establishment” of academics, government planners, and “corporate welfarists” (1969:550).

Nearly 40 years later, another political observer offered a similar argument, this time from a perspective that was critical of, rather than congratulatory toward, the Republican Party and their voters. In *What’s the Matter with Kansas?*, Thomas Frank (2004) argued that working- and middle-class voters across the American Heartland had been swindled by Republican Party operatives who convinced them to vote against their economic interests in favor of cultural validation. As he concluded of the Republican Party in the early 21st century: “it is a working-class movement that has done incalculable, historic harm to working-class people” (2004:6).

And just a few years after Frank’s writing, observers revived this same set of concerns about the Republican Party coalition in the run-up to the 2016 presidential election, and again in the wake of Donald Trump’s surprise victory: would White working- and middle-class voters in rural, Heartland communities be marshalled into the Democratic coalition, according to their economic interests, or swayed again into the Republican coalition for “cultural” reasons?⁵

The persistence of these questions alludes to their practical importance for American electoral outcomes. Although the U.S. is an increasingly urbanized, multi-racial society, the politics of White voters in sparsely populated states have an outsized impact on American

⁵ See, e.g., Cook 2020; Edsall 2016

elections because of partisan gerrymandering, the electoral college, and the Senate.⁶ Take, for example, Wyoming, the least populous state in the union, and California, the most populous state. In 2021, Wyoming had one U.S. Senator for every 190,000 citizens and more than 80% of the population identified as White, Non-Hispanic. In California, where Non-Hispanic Whites compose just under 35% of the population, each Senator represents nearly 20 million citizens. In other words, Whites living in rural states are important for electoral outcomes, which means that it is also important to understand how they choose a political party.

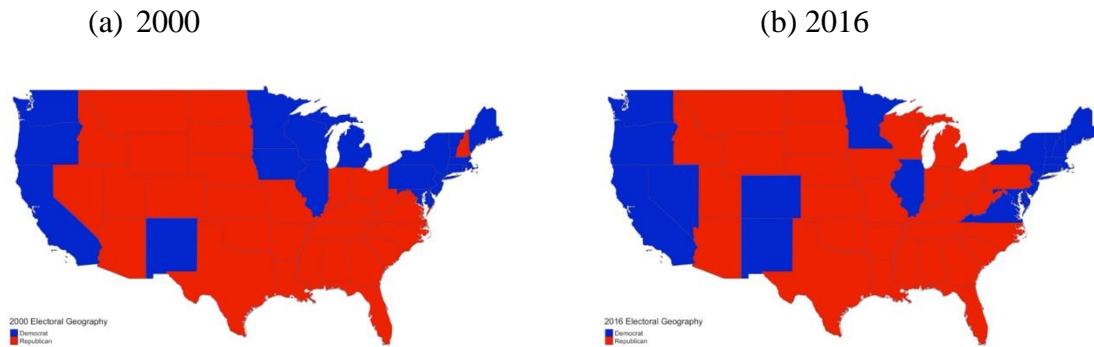
And as Phillips' and Frank's comments above indicate, recent decades have offered growing evidence that voters in these communities prefer the Republican Party. As panel (a) in Figure 1 shows, the 2000 presidential election marked the first time since the Civil War that a Democratic presidential candidate failed to carry a single state in the South: even though Al Gore was a native Tennessee-an, he was unable to win even his home state.⁷ Instead, Democrats consolidated their strongholds in urban enclaves of coastal states. And the outcome of the 2016 election, shown in panel (b) of Figure 1, only appeared to further solidify these trends: with a few exceptions, a broad swath of red covered the vast American Heartland from Florida to Idaho, while blue states were relegated to the Northeast and West Coast.

So what produced this reddening of the American Heartland? The consensus answer among social scientists is that White voters have increasingly sought to protect their racial rather than class interests—an answer that, as we saw above, has been articulated in various ways since at least the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s.

⁶ See Rodden 2019

⁷ As Miller and Schofield 2003 have observed, this was in fact a nearly perfect inversion of the 1896 presidential map, when Democrats swept the Heartland and Republicans were favored on the Coasts.

Figure 1. Presidential Election Maps, 2000 and 2016



But developments in the late 2000s seemed to accelerate this process, as Whites felt their racial privilege under threat after the election of the first Black president, the changing racial demographics of the country, and the decline in manufacturing employment.⁸ These changes are thought to have driven White voters who were most threatened by the current economic system—those without college degrees and living in postindustrial communities—to support populist mobilizations like the Tea Party and populist candidates like Donald Trump who reaffirmed their racial privilege.⁹ The result, according to this argument, is a growing tidal wave of red across the American Heartland driven by a groundswell of postindustrial populism among White voters driven by concerns about racial threat.

⁸ On racial threat and White support for Donald Trump, see: Bobo 2017. On racial threat undermining White support for redistributive policies write large, see: Tesler 2012; Wetts and Willer 2018

⁹ See Bonikowski 2017 and Hochschild 2016

But the puzzle of Iverson, Meriville, and Williston suggests a revision to these accounts for two reasons. First, these three communities pose a different question to other studies on the same topic. Rather than explaining only the apparent contradictions in Republican partisanship among Heartland voters, this book instead takes us to *both* the places that vote for the Republican Party when it appears contradictory to do so, *as well as* the places who vote for the Democratic Party. And by exploring this heterogeneity, it shows why certain pathways are more likely than others for White, postindustrial communities, revealing how the reddening of the American Heartland emerges from within local contexts.

And second, the fact that Iverson, Meriville, and Williston are so similar in terms of their residents' race, education, occupation, and income helps us disentangle the two potential causes for growing Republicanism in the American Heartland: either that those towns, counties, and states are composed of certain *social groups*—White, working- and middle-class voters—who are increasingly affiliating themselves with the Republican Party; or that places themselves “add something extra” to individuals' experience of politics, leading those *communities* toward the Republican Party.¹⁰ In contemporary political debates, these two mechanisms often get confused, as Frank's (2004) discussion of White, working-class Kansans, quoted above, suggests. For example, when pundits talk about wealthy, White suburbs as ripe for Democratic intervention, it's not clear if they mean wealthy, White *suburbanites* are turning toward the Democratic party, or if they mean that something about the suburbs as *places*—above and beyond the people who live there—makes them apt targets for the Democrats.¹¹ A comparison across Iverson, Meriville,

¹⁰ Gimpel and Schuknecht 2003 refer to the former as a “compositional” approach and the latter as a “contextual” approach.

¹¹ For example, FiveThirtyEight in an article titled “Why the Suburbs have Shifted Blue” argues that the Democratic shift in recent years is actually about the educational composition of the electorate rather than suburbs per se (Skelley et al. 2020). In contrast, a longstanding literature in

and Williston will allow us to disentangle the role of people from the role of places in producing the reddening of the American Heartland.

Social Groups, Partisanship, and Political Change

This disentangling is important, because the point of departure for understanding politics in Heartland communities is through the *kinds of people* who live there – in this case, White, working- and middle-class men and women. Decades of scholarship have shown how this group’s turn toward the Republican Party began in the 1960s, after Nixon’s successful appeal to the “Silent Majority” in the wake of the Civil Rights movement. It is a story rooted in classic theories of American partisanship and political change, which argue that political parties emerge to represent the prevailing divisions in society. According to these accounts, individuals join the party that represents their social group—the people who share their position in the social structure.¹² As pioneering political scientists in the “Michigan School” argued in the 1960s, partisanship represents the “perfect distillation” of voters’ life histories and social positions (Campbell et al. 1960:34).¹³

history and political science identifies the suburbs as apt sites for political mobilization in the post-war era, fueled by particularly resonant debates over busing (Lassiter 2013); a culture of kaffeeklatsches and civic engagement among women (McGirr 2015); and Eisenhower-era infrastructure that connected them all (Nall 2015).

¹² This account is referred to as “cleavage theory.” See: Lipset 1960; Lipset and Rokkan 1967.

¹³ Although Lipset and Rokkan’s cleavage theory indicates that individuals’ voting behavior will be dictated by their social position, the theory’s central concern is with the relationship between social structure and political parties. As such, the mechanisms of translation between individual and vote choice are less clear. The Michigan School were the first to offer such an account (Campbell et al. 1960). According to their “funnel of causality” model, “socio-demographics” do shape partisanship, but it was partisanship that shaped people’s issue attitudes, candidate evaluations, and vote choice. The funnel of causality model thus has a structural foundation akin to that of cleavage theory, but it’s focus is on the individual, psychological components of political behavior that take place *after* partisanship is formed, setting aside the social processes that lead to partisan formation. The result is decades of scholarship in American political

This model of partisanship suggests a kind of automatic, or at least uncomplicated, translation from social group membership—some objective categorical membership—to partisan identity. In contrast, recent scholarship has argued that this process of translation is a political one: there are myriad lines of division in society that carve out different groups defined by ethnicity, race, religion, and gender, but rarely do all of these groups carry political meaning for their members.¹⁴ Social identities—a collective sense of “we” understood in opposition to some other “them”—must first be constructed from a shared social position, and then linked to a political identity. And political parties themselves play a role in this, as they can redefine group interests through strategic communication and efforts to incorporate civil society organizations like unions, churches, and social movements into their party coalition.¹⁵

behavior that have sidelined the question of how social group membership is translated into social identity, and further, how that identity gains political content. See Green, Palmquist, and Schickler 2002 for a more contemporary account of the funnel of causality.

¹⁴ See Lee 2008 and Smith 2004 who develop this critique of how the funnel of causality model is applied in contemporary studies of American political behavior. See Huddy 2013 for a summary of the literature linking social groups to political identity.

¹⁵ See De Leon et al. 2009 for a summary of the “political articulation” school, which represents the current sociological approach to the study of political parties and how they reshape social cleavages. In her study of Communist Party success in Kerala, India, Menali Desai argues that “...party strategies and tactics are key determinants of their own ascendancy and hegemony, and it is through this very process that the *formation* of cleavages develops at particular historical moments” (Desai 2002:617). While parties are constrained by available social structural possibilities, they may exploit ruptures in the politics-as-usual to redefine, and even transform, the definition of class interests (Desai 2002:625). The political articulation school’s account of how political and social change is a meaningful departure from structuralist accounts rooted in cleavage theory (e.g., Key 1947, Ladd and Hadley 1978, Lipset and Rokkan 1967, and Petrocik 1981). Ladd and Hadley (1978, 92) are examples of this tradition. As they argue, party systems are “ordained by the inauguration of the sociopolitical setting.” In other words, social change leads to electoral realignments, and parties play some role in this, but they are not the central actors. In reacting to these classic accounts of political parties, sociologists in the political articulation school share much of their perspective with political scientists in the “UCLA” school of political parties (see: Bawn et al. 2012; Karol 2009; Schlozman 2015) who show how parties evolve when social groups advocate for inclusion in a party coalition or press their existing party coalition for change.

This historically and politically contingent process explains the Heartland's turn toward the right as a product of individual-level change aggregating up to a community, state, and then regional level: in short, as national political parties have redefined and politicized social groups since the New Deal, members of the White, working-class have defected from the Democratic Party.

The New Deal is a central starting point to this story because it was the height of "traditional" class politics in America, a brief period when the working-classes were associated with the party on the left and the middle- and upper-classes with the party on the right.¹⁶ But even then, class politics was conditioned by race. It was a coalition of working-class Whites, Southern Democrats, and northern urbanites who carried FDR to the White House in 1932. As an increasing number of African Americans joined them over the years, party elites avoided racial politics at the national level and made various concessions to the South on racial policy to protect this unwieldy coalition for decades.¹⁷ But by 1964, Democrats' response to the Civil Rights movement and Republicans' nomination of Barry Goldwater brought the simmering tension around racial politics to the surface, cracking the fragile New Deal coalition and leaving no doubt that the Republican Party was now the home of racial conservatives. This realignment around race propelled Southern whites into the Republican Party and equally propelled African Americans, those newly enfranchised voters in the South and those with lingering Republican

¹⁶ See Hout, Brooks, and Manza 1995 for this definition of "traditional" class politics.

¹⁷ See Katznelson 2005, 2013; Schickler 2016

sentiments in the North, toward the Democratic Party.¹⁸ In sum, it was a regional shift produced by the movement of key social groups.¹⁹

The Civil Rights movement also provoked the early political mobilization of Christian religious groups, creating further Republican inroads among Whites across the Heartland. Southern fundamentalist Christians had long opposed integration and many reacted in shock at a fellow Southern Democrat signing the Civil Rights Act in 1964.²⁰ Over the following years, religious group membership increasingly gained political valence as fundamentalists and evangelicals organized in reaction to the Supreme Court's ruling against state-imposed prayer in schools, the IRS' revocation of Southern "seg" academies' tax-exempt status, and the spread of sex education.²¹ The Rights Revolutions only spurred on these processes, making personal, moral questions public, political issues. By the late 1970s, religious traditionalists were a mobilized social group, ripe for incorporation into a political party.²² And in 1980, the Republican Party officially endorsed a constitutional amendment to ban abortion, signaling that they were now the party of this social group.²³

At the same time as these shifts were occurring, unions' sociopolitical power was in decline: at the peak of American unionization in 1954, 35% of employed nonagricultural workers

¹⁸ There were decades'-long tensions within both parties prior to 1964, but nationally, this election marked a turning point. See Carmines and Stimson 1989; Feinstein and Schickler 2008; Karol 2009; Petrocik 1981.

¹⁹ See Bartels 2006 for a description of White, working-class defection from the Democratic Party in the South.

²⁰ Williams 2010

²¹ Nevin and Bills 1976; Schlozman 2015

²² See: Guth and Green 1991. As Putnam and Campbell 2010 argue, the politicization of moral issues shifted the way religious group membership shaped partisan identity in the U.S. Previously, Christian denomination was the key social identity, as Catholics favored the Democratic Party and Protestants favored the Republican Party.

²³ For evidence of this political divide emerging the mass public: Adams 1997; Kellstedt et al. 1994, For an account of party operatives, see: Rosenfeld 2017.

were union members; this dwindled to 20.9% by 1980. Just as mobilization among religious groups created a social identity among religious traditionalists that the Republican Party ultimately captured, the *demobilization* of unions threatened the salience of class as an organizing principle in Americans' social and political lives.²⁴ This was not because Democrats' association with unions ended; in fact, it was further solidified by Reagan's brazen attacks on unions in the 1980s and Republicans' efforts to pass legislation that undermined union organizing. But race and religion increasingly seemed to be the most salient social identities for American voters. And because the construction of a social identity is central to the process of translating group membership into partisan identity, this means that Americans' social class seemed to contain less and less political meaning.²⁵

Thus, by the 1990s, three decades of political mobilization, social change, and economic restructuring had fundamentally reshaped the political coalitions of both major parties. And taken together, voters' social position—their race, class, and religion—along with party efforts to absorb those social groups, seemed to explain White defection from the Democratic Party, particularly among the working- and lower-middle-classes that had supported them through the New Deal era. And the political realignment of these social groups explained the reddening of the American Heartland as nothing more than an aggregate of individual preferences.

Place, Partisanship, and Political Change

²⁴ On union decline in the U.S., see Mayer 2004.

²⁵ This led to a series of debates in the 1990s about the “death of class” in American politics (see: Clark and Hoffmann-Martinot 1998; Clark and Lipset 1991; Waters and Pakulski 1996). The last statement on the matter was in a series of publications by Clem Brooks and Jeff Manza, who argued that class continued to matter, but in different ways than it had historically: more highly educated professionals were moving toward the Democratic Party while some working-class voters were moving toward the Republican Party.

But the 2008 financial crisis reinvigorated questions about White politics in the American Heartland. While Barack Obama swept into office on the back of a cross-racial, working-class coalition, his election also fomented a populist backlash that further drove Whites of all incomes away from the Democratic Party.²⁶ After passage of his signature legislative achievement—the Affordable Care Act (ACA)—Tea Party mobilizations across the country brought anti-statist, “small government” candidates to the highest levels of state and federal office.²⁷ With the election of Donald Trump in 2016, this appeared to be more than a temporary blip, but rather a deepening of divisions around race, class, and place: working- and middle-class White voters across the American Heartland had become the foundation of the Republican Party, while urbanites and educated professionals, regardless of race, undergirded the Democratic Party.²⁸ This outcome reinvigorated decades’-old questions about what motivates the politics of the White, working- and middle-class voters in post-industrial communities across the American Heartland.

The history briefly synopsised above is clearly part of this story. But sociologists and political scientists have increasingly argued that place itself is a key part of the current political stasis. In other words, it’s not just that *individuals* who share a certain social identity—White, evangelical, or working-class, for example—are voting Republican more than ever; it’s also that they’re doing so from within *communities* fundamentally reshaped by decades of state and market retreat. This perspective implies that communities are more than just the sum of their

²⁶ See Tesler 2016 on growing racial polarization in the Obama era.

²⁷ Skocpol and Williamson 2012; Tesler 2012

²⁸ See Kitschelt and Rehm 2019; Morgan and Lee 2017 for evidence on shifts in class voting based on occupation, income, and education among White voters. As Kitschelt and Rehm show, income and education operate in interaction to shape White voters' partisanship. See Rodden 2019 on the urban/rural divide.

parts – in other words, that ecological measures of race, class, or other demographics can only tell us one piece of the story about what it means to live in a place.²⁹

And in the American Heartland, the consensus account argues that the political meaning of place is defined by loss: at the same time as factories disappeared from these communities and union membership declined, the federal government also reformed the way it invested in citizens' lives, shifting the balance of social provision to local, private sources and forcing communities and nonprofits to compete for government funds.³⁰ As public and private resources fled from postindustrial and rural communities, so too did their best and brightest young residents, creating a negative spiral of economic and population decline.³¹

In sum, the people and places that make up the Heartland were left behind by this restructuring. And as Katherine Cramer (2016) has shown in Wisconsin, this created fruitful ground for rural dwellers to turn against the state as they began to imagine that the public resources draining from their communities were flowing instead toward urbanites. Cramer's argument is that a place-based identity as rural residents shapes a distinctive kind of populist anti-statism among the Wisconsinites she speaks to, more so than their racial or class identities.

Cramer's argument is largely race-neutral, suggesting that White, Black, Latinx, or Asian voters in such communities might all develop a similar political orientation. But as others like Arlie Hochschild (2016) have argued, individuals' race and class are intertwined in the formation of place-based politics. Hochschild finds that Whites in her Louisiana study support the anti-

²⁹ See Gieryn 2000 and McQuarrie and Marwell 2009 for theoretical accounts of what makes up a place, beyond the people who live there.

³⁰ On union decline and the rise of economic inequality, see: Hirsch and Macpherson 2019; Rosenfeld 2014; Western and Rosenfeld 2011. On devolution and marketization, see Marwell 2004; Smith and Lipsky 1993.

³¹ See: Carr and Kefalas 2009; Johnson 2011, 2013.

government Tea Party movement not just because of the many losses they've seen in their community, but because they believe minorities are cutting them in line for government assistance. This belief, what social scientists refer to as "racial resentment," has long undermined Whites' support for redistributive policies.³² What Hochschild shows us is that this can happen even in a community where residents would benefit from expanded government intervention to mitigate environmental pollution from local factories and increase healthcare access.

In part, this is because postindustrial decline and welfare state retrenchment preceded the election of the first Black president who governed an increasingly racially diverse nation amidst growing economic inequality. Taken together, scholars argue, these political and economic processes set the stage for a right-wing populist backlash among Whites in postindustrial communities who felt the government was promoting the well-being of racial minorities at the expense of a fragile White privilege.³³

In sum, these accounts point to place as an important piece of the story in the reddening of the American Heartland: as the Republican Party moved to embrace a rhetoric that appealed to

³² For a review, see Valentino & Hutchings in 2004.

³³ There is some debate about whether economic or racial/cultural threat lead White voters into the Republican Party in 2016. Economic hardship alone is not a sufficient explanation for their shift (see: Mutz 2018), but when it is considered alongside cultural factors that produce a sort of "status anxiety" among non-college-educated White men, these factors together help explain the rise of right-wing populism across Western democracies (Gidron and Hall 2017). In the U.S., the emergence of this populism is particularly linked to a decline in the "psychological wages" of Whiteness (Du Bois 1995; Roediger 2007) in the postindustrial era and amidst the changing demographic composition of the U.S. (see, e.g., Metzl 2018). But Silva's (2019) recent ethnographic account of a former coal town in Pennsylvania indicates that those political dispositions are often shared across racial groups, even if White people are the most likely to feel the Republican Party is the party to resolve those challenges.

White *individuals* facing economic precarity and racial threat, it was the changing context of their communities that made those appeals resonate.³⁴

Place and the Perpetuation of Political Identity & Belief

But this story, which has become the point of departure for both journalists and social scientists in explaining Donald Trump's success in the White American Heartland, often assumes a kind of political homogeneity across the region, imagining the broad swath of red is full of communities that are not just different from urban coastal enclaves, but similar to one another. This assumption is undermined by the very puzzle of Iverson, Meriville, and Williston, whose longstanding political differences cannot be understood using existing theories of place-based politics, because those accounts focus on explaining differences among different kinds of places—in other words, the rural-urban divide.

Like Iverson, Meriville, and Williston, other postindustrial communities are also distinct from one another. And the central contention of this book is that these community-level differences shape how residents come to understand three things: 1) what their problems are and how to solve them politically; 2) what their social identities are; and 3) where they fit into the party system. In other words, place contributes to residents' understanding of *who they are*, *how they do things*, and *which political party is for them*. Together, these factors produce and reproduce residents' partisan attachments. This means that place-based politics results not just from an aggregate of residents' individual political commitments, but from place itself acting on those partisan attachments. And amid increasingly virtual modes of political communication,

³⁴ On resonance, see: McDonnell, Bail, and Tavory 2017. On the resonance of populist appeals in a postindustrial era, see: Bonikowski 2017. And for an analysis of Donald Trump's populist rhetoric, see: Lamont, Park, and Ayala-Hurtado 2017.

place remains a persistent factor in shaping Americans' political differences because durable forms of community organization lead residents to taken-for-granted political beliefs, and as they act on those beliefs, they reproduce their local social environments. In other words, place and politics are mutually reinforcing.

How do places accomplish this? Through comparisons across Iverson, Meriville, and Williston I describe how these three place mechanisms operate together to produce and reproduce residents' partisan attachments. First, each community's *local organizational arrangements*, or the public and private entities in a community and their relationships to one another, make certain ways of defining and solving social problems more likely. Second, through routine social interaction and moments of collective problem-solving, the communities arrive at shared definitions of community and individual identities. And finally, these experiences help residents understand which political party is home for them and their community.

I identified these place mechanisms through my conversations with residents and community leaders, through administrative data on local organizations, and through my observations of community activities. But in developing the argument that these factors have a causal effect on residents' partisan attachments, I also rely on existing theory from sociologists of community, culture, and civil society.³⁵

The political importance of local organizational arrangements stems from the fact that U.S. social welfare provision has always relied on a mix of public-private and local-national organizations to provide social programs. More recent shifts in federal social policy further devolved provision to local levels and privatized it, shifting greater responsibility onto cities and

³⁵ On this approach to developing causal arguments using ethnographic data, see: Tavory and Timmermans 2013.

counties. This means that a community's ability to provide its citizens with needed services increasingly depends on the quality and quantity of *non-governmental* organizations within the community.³⁶ This is particularly true in rural and ex-urban places where, because of geographic isolation, residents cannot borrow services from better-resourced places. As a result, these communities' capacity to address the opioid epidemic, decaying housing, and crumbling infrastructure increasingly depends not just on local organizational resources—the quantity of service-oriented nonprofits, businesses, unions, and churches—but also on their relationships with one another and their willingness to engage in collective problem-solving.³⁷

In sum, local organizational arrangements impose a set of constraints on how communities solve problems. In Meriville, for example, churches, nonprofits, and volunteers create a private but collective problem-solving arrangement outside of local government. When new problems emerge, those organizations step in to resolve them. By way of contrast, in Iverson the ties are between unions and elected officials, because these ties ensure that community leaders view the political and economic spheres as inextricably linked. When new problems emerge, they look to government as a key vehicle to shape economic outcomes. Williston has both churches and unions, but their relationships to one another lack the kind of stability that characterizes the organizational arrangements in Iverson and Meriville, leading to frequent disagreement over how to define and solve the community's problems.

³⁶ On historical state-building, see: Balogh 2015; Clemens 2011, 2020; Skocpol 1992. On contemporary spatial inequality in service provision, see: Allard 2009; Marwell and Gullickson 2013.

³⁷ Scholars have generally argued that partnerships among organizations shape the provision of services, and even the very survival, of postindustrial cities in the context of social welfare devolution and marketization (e.g., Pacewicz 2016; Safford 2009). For how this argument applies specifically to rural and ex-urban communities, see: Flora et al. 1997; Lobao, Adua, and Hooks 2014; Morton, Chen, and Morse 2008; Warner 2003; Warner and Hefetz 2003.

But where organizational arrangements are stable, as in Iverson and Meriville, they provide the context in which residents learn to make demands on the state: after several experiences working within existing organizational contexts to address social problems, residents and community leaders come to diagnose new problems in reference to these past experiences. The process of defining problems and identifying appropriate solutions eventually becomes routine and taken-for-granted, and residents apply this logic to issues on both the local and national levels.³⁸ In a church-going community like Meriville where nongovernmental solutions are commonsense, residents develop a particular kind of anti-statism. In a union town like Iverson where economic battles are fought on political terrain, residents instead turn to the state to solve their problems. For this reason, organizational arrangements and definitions of social problems are related but distinct place elements. It is organizational arrangements that first constrain communities' collective action: in the above example, Iverson simply can't solve its social problems through churches because its churches don't have the financial and human resources to do so. But even if we were to inject financially healthy churches into Iverson, we should not expect residents to suddenly adopt Merivillians' anti-statism until they've lived within their new organizational arrangements for some time and learned that anti-statism "works" to solve problems in the context of a church-going community.³⁹

³⁸ This account is rooted in cognitive-cultural arguments in sociology, which claim that beliefs emerge through routine experiences of problem-solving within a particular institutional environment. See: Lizardo and Strand 2010; Martin and Desmond 2010; Strand and Lizardo 2015.

³⁹ As historic institutionalists have long argued, the relationship between institutions and beliefs is a path-dependent process that involves both resource constraints and cognitive constraints: institutions shape available modes of political action, and over time, political actors come to take those actions for granted (DiMaggio and Powell 1983; Sewell Jr 1992; Thelen 1999).

Moreover, this routine process of coordinating collective action also helps to inculcate a distinctive, localized sense of “we”—a way of defining not just what the community’s problems are, but who the community *is* that civic actors are part of and working to improve.⁴⁰ But community identity-building also takes place on a regular basis outside of these moments of collective problem-solving: when people meet in churches or diners or bars, their social interactions are structured by the community’s shared understandings and expectations for interaction. The effect of the community—its way of defining itself and how to act within it—then extends through loose-knit social networks, media, and the built environment.⁴¹ Consider how Arthur, above, “initiated” me into Iverson politics—in so doing, he was teaching me something about the meaning of the place. And as we will see through the cases of Iverson, Meriville, and Williston, residents regularly interpret their social identities through shared frameworks of *community identity*: Merivillians, for example, are not just a church-going community that takes care of itself through nonprofits and churches, which they are reminded of each time their churches work to solve a social problem; they are also a German Lutheran community, an identity that is reinforced each time residents enter town through one of the main thoroughfares and see the signs naming the five German Lutheran congregations within town limits, or attend the county fair in summertime and buy food from one of the large booths that

⁴⁰ See: Baiocchi et al. 2014. Lichterman and Eliasoph (2014) have recently argued that sociologists should understand civil society not just as something that exists within “civil society organizations,” but through different modes of civic action, coordinated among actors in different settings.

⁴¹ See Gary Alan Fine’s (2010, 2012) arguments for a sociology of the *local* or meso-level. Japonica Brown-Saracino (2015, 2018) builds on these arguments to elaborate how bundles of place elements (place narratives, numbers and acceptance, and engagement with the city’s “socio-landscape”) shape LBQ identity in four cities. Ido Tavor’s (2016) account of Orthodox Jewish identity (or *identification*) in a Los Angeles neighborhood similarly shows how places shapes the process of social identity construction, but he emphasizes the built environment and social interactions among residents that routinely summon residents’ Orthodox Jewish selves.

are run by German Lutheran churches. Willistonians, in contrast, drive by an empty lot formerly occupied by the town's largest employer, RiverValley, which has sat vacant for nearly two decades and stands as a reminder that they are a place defined, above all, as a dying town. As with routines of problem-solving, these definitions of community identity are constrained by demographic factors—Iversonians, for example, would not identify as German Lutherans because their community has far fewer German Lutheran residents. But the way residents make sense of those demographic factors also matters in the production of community identity: for example, Iverson does contain five ELCA Lutheran churches within town limits, but residents never mention this as a defining feature of their town.

In sum, place matters for politics because of both the “hard” factors—local organizations, material conditions, demographic composition—and the “soft” factors—the way residents make sense of those features and derive shared political conclusions from them, through collective experiences of problem-solving and routine social interaction.⁴² This means that even when similar communities are forced to adapt to the same shifting national political-economic context, the way they make sense of that context will depend on their pre-existing organizational, cultural, and political materials.

Much of this argument is not new: urban sociologists have shown that places shape residents' religious, racial, and sexual identities through exactly these mechanisms—social interactions structured by local organizations, shared place narratives, and the built environment.⁴³ Following a constructivist approach to social identity that emphasizes how

⁴² On the reproduction of place, see: Molotch 2002; Molotch, Freudenburg, and Paulsen 2000.

⁴³ This differs from arguments that place itself can become the basis of a social identity that gets mobilized politically, as in Cramer's (2016) account of rural consciousness. Here places shape the process of social identity formation, instead of standing in for class, race, or religion as a politically meaningful social identity (e.g., Gould 1995).

identity formation is contingent on social and political factors, sociologists like Japonica Brown-Saracino (2015, 2018) have identified place as an important piece of this process, as places are often the sites where people produce accounts of themselves and others like them in routine social interaction.⁴⁴

This process alone would be sufficient to explain how places shape partisan identity formation: if social identity formation varies by place, and social identity informs partisan identity, so too will partisan identity vary by place. But my argument is that place also shapes how residents translate those social identities, once formed, into political identities, because places produce local interpretations of national party politics. As Barry Eidlin (2018) has shown at the national-level, relations between organizations—in his case, political parties, unions, and the state—naturalize connections between certain actors and certain organizations. And as I will show in the cases of Iverson and Meriville, the same occurs on a smaller-scale at the local level: through shared experiences within different organizational settings, residents learn that certain kinds of people—workers or Christians, for example—belong with different political parties—in this case, the Democrats or the Republicans.

The result is that similar people, living in distinctive local contexts, arrive at different but equally taken-for-granted understandings of who they are, what their problems are, and which political party best represents them and their community. In other words, Iverson, Meriville, and Williston show us not just *that* place shapes Americans' partisanship, but *how* it does so.

⁴⁴ There have been many definitional debates about the meaning of the term “identity” (for a summary and critique, see: Brubaker and Cooper 2000. Like others, my argument here does not intend to engage in these debates, but rather to highlight the contextual nature of identity formation, and the role of place in that process (see, e.g., Moon 2012).

There is also a degree of path dependency in the relationship between place and partisanship: residents' reproduce their social environment each time they draw on existing organizational arrangements to solve problems or interact with neighbors based on shared assumptions about what is appropriate in the community. This means that change in place-based politics will not just emerge from a national crisis or the introduction of a novel issue to the policy agenda; rather, change requires that those exogenous shocks destabilize local organizational arrangements, routine ways of defining and solving problems, or taken-for-granted community identities.⁴⁵ In fact, because residents of Iverson and Meriville during the COVID-19 pandemic continued to make demands on the state in reference to their local contexts, the crisis ultimately restabilized rather than destabilized their place-based politics. But Williston offers a view of how change in the relationship between place and partisanship can happen. As we will see, organizational instability produces not just disagreement among residents about how to address their problems, but a kind of despair about their community's future. As the Republican Party increasingly appeals to dying towns like theirs, Williston becomes increasingly Republican. In other words, Williston's story largely conforms to the prevailing account of White, postindustrial populism. But it is only through comparison across Iverson, Meriville, and Williston that we can see this outcome is the product of an interaction between local and national factors. In all three cases, residents make sense of political and economic transformations from within their communities. But it is only in Williston that the lack of organizational stability provokes a deep sense of community decline that makes Republicans' racialized, populist rhetoric all the more appealing.

⁴⁵ Lizardo and Strand 2010; Molotch et al. 2000

A Contextual Account of Partisan Identity in a National Era

By answering the question of how place shapes and perpetuates Americans' partisanship, this book also revives and extends oft-forgotten accounts of how partisan attachments form and endure. As the pioneers of survey-based voter studies noted in the 1940s and 50s, Americans' relationship to their political party is both profound and enduring, often passed down from parents to their children.⁴⁶ In the ensuing decades, scholars have shown that partisanship persists because it is not just an affiliation, but a social identity, one that offers the lens through which voters evaluate both political objects and objective economic conditions such as inflation and unemployment.⁴⁷ As such, it has become the "most important explanatory variable" in American political behavior research.⁴⁸ And as an explanatory variable, this identity-based theory of partisanship has proved immensely useful.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee 1954; Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet 1948

⁴⁷ Drawing on social psychological theories of social identity, political psychologists argue that this means partisanship is capable of structuring the world in much the same way as other identities do: partisans prefer co-partisans, discriminate against out-partisans, and generally view politics through an "us vs. them" lens (Achen and Bartels 2016; Huddy 2001; Tajfel 1981). On how partisanship shapes views of objective facts, see: Bartels 2002; Huber, Hill, and Lenz 2012; Tilley and Hobolt 2011.

⁴⁸ See Huddy et al. 2015. This discussion in part skims over a decades'-long debate regarding the extent to which partisanship could be conceived of as a "running tally" of voters' preferences (Fiorina 1981) or is better conceived of as this kind of psychological attachment (see Fiorina 2002 and Johnston 2006 for reviews). Part of the reason the debate proves so difficult to resolve is that correlational studies of partisanship, preferences, and vote choice do little to reveal causal relationships (as Achen and Bartels note). That said, there is some consensus among American political behaviorists that partisanship is a psychological attachment that shapes most of voters' preferences and behavior, and as such has been incorporated into models inspired by the earlier "utilitarian" view of partisanship (Healy and Malhotra 2013).

⁴⁹ For example, it suggests a resolution to an ongoing paradox regarding political polarization: although scholars continue to question whether the American public is polarized at all (Abramowitz 2010; Baldassarri and Gelman 2008; DiMaggio, Evans, and Bryson 1996; Evans 2003; Fiorina 2011), Americans agree that polarization is a fact of life (Baldassarri and Bearman 2007). If partisanship is indeed a powerful social identity as well as political force, we can conceive of polarization as not ideological or issues-based, but as a growing dislike of the

But as researchers have presented an increasingly detailed account of how partisanship affects political behavior, they have paid much less attention to the factors that lead people to form such enduring partisan attachments in the first place. As I described above, Iverson, Meriville, and Williston offer some insight into these processes, because they rule out many of the existing explanations for partisanship, which are rooted in individual-level differences. Instead, they show us how social contexts shape the way individuals map their social positions onto the party system—an insight that was central to the very same voter studies that founded the contemporary field of American political behavior research, conducted by Paul Lazarsfeld, Bernard Berelson, and their colleagues from Columbia. According to them, partisanship endures not just because it's inherited from one's parents, but because voters self-select into social networks of similar people who reinterpret national politics for them and reinforce their political views.⁵⁰ This means that individuals' partisan attachments are not just a psychological outcome, but a social one.

This is the argument that I revive and advance in this book, adapting it for a modern era in which social media and digital communications technology have made politics an increasingly national, rather than local, affair.⁵¹ As I situate residents of Iverson, Meriville, and Williston within flows of political information—from local and national media; from in-person, online, and newspaper sources; and from experiences in their communities—we will see how new forms of political communication show little impact on place-based politics in the three communities.

opposing party and a preference for co-partisans (Iyengar et al. 2019; Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes 2012; Iyengar and Westwood 2015).

⁵⁰ Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee 1954; Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet 1948. For more recent studies of the social contexts of political discussion networks and how they shape Americans' voting behavior, see: Huckfeldt and Sprague 1987, 1995.

⁵¹ Hopkins 2018

Nor does elite polarization on national issues: even when the COVID-19 pandemic led individual partisans to polarize on public health questions for which they had no reference point in local experiences, these differences did not displace the place-based politics that already demarcated the communities. The result was that, on the eve of the 2020 presidential election, partisan residents across Iverson, Meriville, and Williston were in heated disagreement on several new issues, but the core differences among them, rooted in place, persisted.⁵² My contention is that, as long as place-based factors continue to reinforce residents' partisan attachments, and those attachments lead partisan residents to polarize on new issues as they enter the national agenda, the political significance of place is likely to persist for some time to come.

This argument is not limited to just Iverson, Meriville, and Williston, or even to White, postindustrial communities like them. There is a growing body of evidence that place has a causal effect on Americans' partisanship, and the three place mechanisms that produce partisan tendencies in Iverson, Meriville, and Williston can help explain *how* place accomplishes this.⁵³ That's because the factors that produce variation in local organizational arrangements—welfare state devolution and the outsourcing of manufacturing jobs amidst globalization—have fundamentally reshaped most communities across the U.S.⁵⁴ These processes have left a legacy of geographic unevenness that shapes how communities are able to adapt to emergent crises and challenges, as we saw with the COVID-19 pandemic.⁵⁵ Similarly, much of the theoretical and

⁵² See Taber and Lodge 2006 and Zaller 1992.

⁵³ If we consider the small geographic scale at which partisan segregation exist (Brown and Enos 2021), along with growing evidence that neighbors' partisanship is not an important factor in Americans' residential choices (Mummolo and Nall 2017), it looks increasingly likely that place itself affects partisanship.

⁵⁴ In fact, much of the research on this subject focuses on intra-city variation in organizational resources for problem-solving, examining large cities like New York or Chicago (e.g., Marwell and Gullickson 2013).

⁵⁵ See, e.g., Green and Loualiche 2021.

empirical evidence I draw on to develop the argument about place-based social identity formation comes from studies of neighborhoods in large U.S. cities, suburbs, and mid-size cities. In other words, we should expect that these mechanisms help explain the broader phenomenon of place-based politics in the U.S., well beyond solving the puzzle of Iverson, Meriville, and Williston.

Plan for the Book

The first chapter takes a deep dive into Iverson, Meriville, and Williston. I describe what makes the communities such similar kinds of places, and the many challenges they have shared amidst globalization and deindustrialization. I also discuss the differences that don't account for their politics. Chapter 2 takes up the first of the four place elements that do explain the differences across Iverson, Meriville, and Williston: local organizational arrangements. First, I show that Iverson and Meriville each have longstanding sets of organizations that structure civic action. Meriville is a church town, where churches, nonprofits, and volunteers create a private but collective problem-solving arrangement outside of local government. By way of contrast, Iverson is a union town, where ties between unions and elected officials ensure that community leaders view the political and economic spheres as inextricably linked. But while organizational life and public action differ across Iverson and Meriville they both have longstanding organization arrangements that provide continuity and regularity to civic and community life. In Williston, this is not the case. I describe how unions and churches in Williston have suffered membership challenges, but I also show that even in their heyday they were never integrated into community governance in the same way that they are in Iverson and Meriville.

Chapters 3 and 4 zoom in on Iverson and Meriville, to advance a central contention of the book: that the local organizational arrangements described in Chapter 2 lead residents to taken-for-granted understandings of what their problems are, who they are as a community, and which political party best represents them. In Chapter 3, I examine the routine experiences of problem-solving that lead Iversonians to understand themselves as a community that would benefit from state intervention while Merivillians understand themselves as a community that takes care of itself. Chapter 4 shows how Iversonians' and Merivillians' everyday social interactions and routine experiences of collective problem-solving lead them to distinct understandings of their community identities and where they fit into the national party system. Merivillians think of themselves as a community of churchgoers, a place where Christianity is central to residents' identities and the community takes care of itself with no need for state intervention. And because they view the Republican Party as the Party that stands for Christianity and local control, it is the party for them and their community. Iversonians, in contrast, think of their community as struggling under the weight of challenges beyond their control—a community of “have-nots”—in an unequal society that requires state intervention to balance the scales. And to them, party politics express class divisions, with the Democrats working to bring in the state and support organized labor in an effort to level the playing field.

In Chapter 5, we return to the case of Williston and, more generally, the question of what happens when local organizations face declines in membership and resources and can no longer shape civic action in the ways they do in Iverson and Meriville. I argue that local organizational instability is essential to understanding the rise of right-wing populism in Heartland communities like Williston: without a routine way of defining and solving social problems, the community instead relies on ad hoc partnerships and grassroots efforts each time a new problem emerges. The

result is that, while Willistonians increasingly understand their community as a dying town, they disagree as to how to resolve this seemingly insurmountable challenge. Residents are often left sad and angry, and as the Republican Party increasingly takes up the populist mantle of the “the party of the left behind,” those claims resonate with Willistonians. But Chapter 5 argues that this outcome is not a direct result of Williston’s postindustrial challenges; rather, it emerges as residents attempt to make sense of those challenges without a coherent framework for doing so.

Where Part I examined place-based politics in “settled” times, Part II examines how they fare during times of change: the national crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic and elite polarization on novel issues, including the pandemic, during the 2020 presidential election. In both cases, I find that even national tumult did not dislodge the relationships that produced and reproduced partisan differences across Iverson and Meriville. Chapter 6 illustrates how place-based politics were reproduced as residents of each community thought about what kind of state intervention they wanted to mitigate the unemployment crisis wrought by the pandemic. And Chapter 7 shows that even when individuals’ partisanship and media consumption drove polarization on novel issues, this polarization was short-lived compared to the enduring factors that shape place-based politics.

In the final chapter, I argue that the comparisons across the three communities and within each community over-time make it clear that place-based politics is unlikely to change because of polarization; rather, the breakdown of local organizational contexts, changes in community identity, and political party maneuvering are the likeliest causes of destabilization. And finally, I conclude by discussing the lessons that Iverson, Meriville, and Williston teach us for Heartland politics and place-based politics more generally.

CHAPTER 1. PROBLEMS AND POLITICS IN THE SMALL-TOWN MIDWEST

On my first evening in Iverson the spring air still carries a winter chill. From the passenger seat of Elaine's car, I watch as we pass by the railyards and skirt the towering industrial park that lines the riverfront. We've reached the corner of Main Street and Elm, and Elaine explains: "This is where all the bars and restaurants are," as she turns down Elm. Elaine is a middle-aged woman who was born and raised in Democratic Iverson, and she's volunteered to show me her hometown tonight in what, to her, is its truest form: the bar scene.

Our first stop is on our left. "This is a busy bar," she says, referring to the Hull. "This will be working-class in here." We pull into a crowded dirt parking lot behind a small, nondescript building with dark green and tan siding. We walk in and find the place is packed. The small, darkly lit room with a bar to the right and tables lining the left wall is filled with people. Everyone inside is White, like both Elaine and I, and even in the dark a speckling of camouflage throughout the crowd is visible. Just a few steps in we see that it will be impossible to find a seat. We head back to the car and resume our drive, with Elaine offering a similar description of the clientele that patronizes each bar we pass or stop at over the course of the evening: Hull is the generic "working-class" bar, but there are also bars catering to workers coming off the night shift, shippers, jocks, pool players, and hipsters. Iverson's social scene, according to Elaine, who no longer drinks, caters to every version of working person that Iverson's economy produces.

When we've turned back onto Main Street, Elaine gestures out the window and explains: "This is all redone. Just from like three years ago. This did not look like this." The wide lane is split by a row of trees, and the sides of the street are lined with 19th century buildings with brick facades in relatively good repair. The tall, wrought iron streetlamps have banners attached to them alternately advertising Iverson's business district and its proximity to outdoors activities. But the progress of Main Street's revitalization appears to be somewhat stilted, as Elaine

indicates: “Some of these, these are all closed,” she says, pointing at a few empty storefronts. “They come and go...it’s a high tax rate in Iverson.”

Over the next few hours, Elaine continues to punctuate our journey with a mental map of her own history and Iverson’s. As she does so, she regularly compares Iverson to other places she’s lived, reflecting on the years she spent away from home. Then she adds: “I think a lot of people do what I did, leave and come back.” “Why do you think that is?” I ask. “Growing up here, you’re pretty sheltered. So the crime that we see is not, like, major city crime...”

“So were you ready to come back when you came back?” I ask. “No,” she says in a joking tone, “I was never ready to come back here.” I laugh along, but I realize that she is also serious as she continues: “Cause it’s a very depressed economy. It’s hard to make a living here,” she concludes.

Just a few weeks later, I arrive in Meriville, where Wayne—a former County Commissioner—offers a similar tour of Meriville County. We’re making our way along the winding roads, surrounded by corn and soybean fields, in Wayne’s large black pick-up. And we continually return to the same theme: “This is a heavy Lutheran—*German* Lutheran area,” he tells me. “You drive through Meriville (City) and you’re gonna see a lot of Lutheran churches. You drive through the country, and I can show you a lot of Lutheran churches.” And he sticks to his word. A few hours later, as we come up a hill, he teases: “Guess what kind of church it’s gonna be up here on my right?” “Lutheran?” I ask. “Ding, ding, ding!” he says. We head back south, and he points out the cemeteries and farms with German names.

Back in Meriville City, the town layout is similar to Iverson’s. Just as Iverson’s Monroe Hill looms large in residents’ minds as the “rich neighborhood” and Rivers Edge maintains a notorious association with poverty, bars, and strip clubs, Meriville also has these kinds of

distinctions. Meriville City is surrounded by newly-built colonials with bright green lawns maintained by sprinkler systems that emerge at regular intervals to keep them that way. But these neighborhoods sit just outside the town limits in unincorporated territory, where residents do not have to pay city property taxes. In the city center, the median income for families drops by almost two thirds,⁵⁶ and this is visible in the quality of housing. Just beyond Meriville's Main Street sit row upon row of plywood homes not well-suited for rain, wind, or snow. Meriville's housing stock is much newer than Iverson's, but even here the challenges of maintaining aging housing are immense.

After navigating the residential lanes and returning to Meriville's Main Street, the similarities to Iverson are striking. The 19th century business district is also crossed by a larger, busier road that carries you to CVS, Wal-Mart, and other major retailers. But, as in Iverson, Main Street itself houses the small businesses: a gift shop, bike store, and small clothing boutique, as well as a handful of local restaurants, new and old. The crown jewel, perhaps, is Peterson's, the family diner that sits within a few hundred yards of the public library and across the street from the bank.

Inside, there is a large wooden sign painted white with black letters that reads, "If it ain't fried, it ain't food" above the skillet. If Peterson's is Meriville Main Street's institution, Café 153 and The Depot—two new restaurants within a block of the diner—are signs of an ongoing downtown revitalization process that mirrors Iverson's. There is also a new park nestled between buildings and fresh coats of paint on 100-year-old facades. But much like Iverson, revitalization is not an unmitigated success: a longstanding family-run hardware store closed down just before I arrived in town, leaving its storefront vacant.

⁵⁶ According to American Community Survey 5-year Census tract data from 2019.

Williston, in contrast, has had the most success with its downtown. This becomes clear the first morning I drive into town: I reach the end of a residential street at the top of a hill, and as I pull over the crest I spot a craggy bluff jutting over a small stream. A large park that borders the stream is dotted with picnic benches and tall trees that cast shade over visitors. I follow the stream up another hill and find myself on Main Street. The same 19th century brick buildings line the street, but they are in excellent condition, and I cannot see a single empty storefront along the way. There are boutiques, jewelry stores, antique stores, a flower and gift shop, an insurance agency, and two or three bars and restaurants. A glossy blue store front advertises a wealth management firm which, as someone tells me the next day, is relatively new. There is also a coworking space and several arts-related spaces: a gallery, a local theater in a historic building, and an arts center. The arts center has a rainbow-colored “All Are Welcome Here” sign in the window.

Round planters sit next to benches and hanging flowerpots adorn the wrought-iron streetlamps, very similar to Iverson’s—I learn later that the flowers faced some community opposition because many residents did not think they were worth the cost. But now they draw people down Main Street, where it opens onto the bluff, just above a park with a popular splash pad for children and a gazebo with built-in seating arranged in a semi-circle. A large sign advertises concerts in the park here each Thursday of the summer. Williston’s Main Street, in short, is charming.

And once a month when weather permits—which is a relatively short window in Minnesota—Willistonians gather along the street for “Tuesdays in Town.” On these occasions, the street is cordoned off for two or three blocks and Main Street business offer their wares from tents, booths, and food trucks outside their storefronts. Even at 2 p.m. on a Tuesday in late

August, there are dozens of people in the street, buying corn dogs from the food trucks during their lunch breaks, bringing their kids to enjoy the bouncey-house, or sitting at one of the picnic tables by the temporary stage to listen to live bands perform music.

The whole scene is the result of “partnerships,” as Connie, the head of the Tourism Board, calls them—between local government, businesses, nonprofits, and volunteers. For example, as she explains: “The city wasn’t willing to fund a new fountain, so okay, let’s get together. We had a committee. We were able to fund the fountain. And what we did was we went to different businesses...” Her office relied on a similar process to fund the Tuesdays in Town initiative.

But despite Williston’s success with Main Street revitalization, residents are more likely to describe it as a community in decline than one that is thriving. As Anthony, who grew up in Williston and now serves on the County Board, summarizes the community’s challenges: “Aging population, changing demographics, available jobs.” Echoing Elaine from Iverson, he says of the people who have left: “but what’s here to come back to?” And in Williston, this kind of concern is pervasive. Fewer jobs means that more young people leave for economic opportunity; the community ages and the population declines; the tax base falls; and it becomes harder and harder to make the kinds of improvements that would attract new businesses.

In many ways, Iverson, Meriville, and Williston are all variations on a theme: small towns in the Midwest, where train lines and agricultural life in the 19th century gave rise to bustling downtowns. Today, mayors and civic leaders are trying to revive those shopping

districts after the malls of the 1980s, the Wal-Marts of the 1990s, and now Amazon, have left them ghosts of what they once were.⁵⁷ But while each community might *feel* similar to new arrivals, there are also important differences—Iversonians are constantly remarking on their bar scene and the lack of good jobs in town, a way of indexing their longstanding reputation as a working-class town that struggles with poverty and addiction; Merivillians are regularly reminding each other that they live in a church-going, Lutheran town, where the economy is thriving; and Willistonians, while enjoying perhaps the most idyllic small-town setting of the three communities, focus instead on their challenges, which many view as indicative of a slow, irrevocable decline.

As I will argue throughout Part I, these are the differences that matter for explaining the divergent partisan tendencies across Iverson, Meriville, and Williston. But this chapter focuses instead on the similarities among the three communities, as well as the differences that *don't* matter. For example, despite the fact that Main Street revitalization is a central concern to many community leaders and urban planners in these communities and across the country, the varying degrees of progress in Iverson, Meriville, and Williston explain little of the difference in how residents think about their communities: while Williston has clearly had the most success in this, it is in Iverson that residents are most likely to describe revitalization as a reason to have hope for their community's future.⁵⁸

But there are many other reasons why these three communities might vote differently in national elections. The most obvious is that they are different *kinds of places*—for example,

⁵⁷ On the history of small-town Main Streets as both physical and cultural object, see: Orvell 2012.

⁵⁸ For example, the organization Main Street America provides planning expertise to local affiliates across the country—organizations like Meriville's DRG—that are working toward revitalizing their historic downtowns.

urban areas have been decidedly Democratic since the New Deal era, while rural counties are becoming increasingly Republican—or places that contain different *kinds of people*—we might, for example, expect a community with a large population of White, evangelical Christians to vote Republican and one with a large proportion of Black Americans to vote Democratic.⁵⁹

This chapter provides further evidence that these explanations offer little insight into the puzzle of Iverson, Meriville, and Williston. As I will show here, they are not just composed of similar kinds of people, they are also similar kinds of places: small, Midwestern towns. And they feel the same to residents, many of whom have deep roots to their communities and are well-aware of the many social problems they share with other small cities and towns across the American Heartland.

But they do have some differences—Meriville has attracted more industrial employment than either Iverson or Williston, while deindustrialization has made Williston a community on the precipice of death, or at least that’s how its residents feel. But as I will also show, the communities’ objective experiences with deindustrialization do not explain their political differences. Given existing accounts of right-wing populist voters as the “losers” in the decades’ long onslaught of globalization and deindustrialization, we might expect levels of deindustrialization to be a direct corollary to a community’s Republicanism, or at least to

⁵⁹ As described in the Introduction, prevailing accounts of Americans’ partisanship rely on arguments about social group membership leading to political identity. Because of this, a common answer for the existence of place-based politics is that places are containers of certain kinds of people whose social group membership leads them to vote a certain way (see Rodden 2019 for a social groups argument for the rural-urban divide in politics). But others, like Katherine Cramer (2016), argue that places themselves shape political identity formation, above and beyond the kinds of people who live there.

populism.⁶⁰ And yet, this is the exact opposite of what we see in Iverson, Meriville, and Williston: Meriville, the community with the most manufacturing employment and annual capital investment and the lowest unemployment rate, is also the most Republican.

Instead, as the remainder of Part I will show, what does explain the differing partisan tendencies of residents across Iverson, Meriville, and Williston, is how local organizational arrangements have helped them navigate these changes and make sense of their social and political worlds. But for now, we turn to what makes these three communities similar.

The Similarities of Small-Town America

It “feels like a small town”

Iverson, Meriville, and Williston do not just share demographics and regional location: during the New Deal era, they also shared voting patterns. In fact, I came to these communities because each was part of a broader set of more than 400 counties—all predominantly White and blue-collar—that formed one important piece of the New Deal coalition that brought FDR to power in the 1930s and 40s. But by the close of the 1960s, these counties had gone separate ways: as the country underwent a process of racial realignment, in which the Democrats’ stance on Civil Rights began to splinter their working-class base by race, these counties also splintered.⁶¹ One group remained Democratic, Iverson among them; one group turned toward the

⁶⁰ See, e.g., van der Bles et al. 2018; Bonikowski 2016, 2017; Gidron and Hall 2017; Lamont, Park, and Ayala-Hurtado 2017; Mudde 2016; Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017; Oliver and Rahn 2016.

⁶¹ On the racial realignment, see: Carmines and Stimson 1989; Schickler 2016

Republican Party, including Meriville; and another, including Williston, became “swing” counties, going back and forth in every presidential election.⁶²

Table 1 below shows the average demographic composition of all counties included in each cluster – Democrat, Republican, and Swing – in 2019. It also shows the presidential voting outcomes across each cluster, at three points in time between 1932-2016. Here and throughout the book, I only present statistics that preserve the anonymity of Iverson, Meriville, and Williston. In this case, I do so by presenting summary statistics for each cluster rather than for each county.

As Table 1 indicates, the clusters show little variation in their contemporary demographic characteristics: all are just at or below the median family income for 2019 of \$68,703, with about a third of their workforce employed in middle-class managerial and professional occupations, and 40-45% employed in working-class occupations including transportation, production, construction, maintenance, and service-sector work.⁶³ Swing counties are the most dense and Democratic counties, somewhat unexpectedly, are the least. The clear statistical difference between the groups is their politics: while all were safely Democratic in the 1932 presidential election, the Republican group offered, on average, only 21% of its vote to Hilary Clinton in 2016 while the Democratic group offered 50% and the swing group only 38%. Iverson and Williston are both somewhat more Democratic than the average of their groups.

⁶² Figure A1 of the Appendix maps all 462 counties that made up the White, working-class base of the New Deal coalition. Within this set of counties, I used a hierarchical clustering algorithm and Ward’s minimum distance to identify the three clusters of voting trajectories.

⁶³ Here I follow McVeigh and Sobolewski’s (2007) definition but add service-sector to the list of “working-class” occupations.

Table 1. Cluster Demographic & Political Characteristics

<i>Demographic Characteristics, 2019</i>	Republican	Democratic	Swing
Management (%)	12	13	12
Professional (%)	18	22	20
Service (%)	10	13	11
Health Support (%)	4	5	4
Maintenance (%)	4	4	4
Sales (%)	0	8	9
Office Admin.(%)	11	11	11
Farming (%)	2	1	1
Construction (%)	11	10	10
Production (%)	10	7	9
Transportation (%)	9	8	9
White, Non-Hispanic (%)	91	91	91
BA or More (%)	19	25	24
Median Income (\$2019)	\$63,018	\$68,487	\$68,873
Unemployment (%)	5	4	5
Density	64	29	106
<i>Presidential Voting Histories, 1932-2016</i>			
% Democratic, 1932	66	51	59
% Democratic, 1976	53	63	53
% Democratic, 2016	21	50	38

Overall, Iverson, Meriville, and Williston, like the three clusters of which each is a part, are very similar – distinguished primarily by the way residents cast their ballot every four years. They are also communities centered around small towns: not only are Iverson, Meriville, and Williston cities all similar sizes, with between 16-28,000 residents, but residents regularly refer to them as “small towns.” This definition is contested by those who live in the outlying communities of each county—sometimes places with just a few hundred residents—who consider their hometowns as the *real* small towns. But regardless of size, the communities that

make up Iverson, Meriville, and Williston counties all feel like small towns to the people who live there.⁶⁴

Fred and Janet, for example, live in an immaculately kept brick ranch in a quiet neighborhood at the edge of Meriville. It was all farm fields when they bought it forty years ago, they tell me. But between now and then, similar homes have multiplied out around them. They have both lived in Meriville all their lives—save five years, in Fred’s case—and are now enjoying retirement with their children living nearby. I’m seated in their sunny living room on a July afternoon, listening to Fred describe his community: “Meriville is a quiet Indiana town where everybody knows everybody’s business,” he says. And then he adds quickly: “Very conservative.”

Other Merivillians agree with Fred’s assessment: Meriville is a “traditional” or conservative small town. As Todd says, small-town life is what drew him back after a decade away. He and his wife “just wanted a nice little quiet town” to raise their kids. “So we decided to move back here. I quit my job [...] and found a factory job here with insurance and the time card. And that was that.”

Iversonians describe their community in similar ways. As Danielle tells me the first time we meet: “I would call us like a medium-sized small town. Everybody knows everybody. And that’s awesome.” It would be difficult to detect much of a difference in how Willistonians describe their community. Courtney, a local business owner, thinks about Williston in this way: “It’s a community where everybody knows everybody—or you know of people. So your family

⁶⁴ In sum, following Wuthnow (2013), I use the term “small town” to index this experience of living in a close-knit community rather than to refer to an objective size that makes a community small or large.

name could proceed you. [...] But I think it's a sense of accountability and shared responsibility for one another."

In sum, Iverson, Meriville, and Williston, are all small, Midwestern communities, and they feel that way to the people who live there. And as Danielle and Courtney indicate, residents' sense that they know all their neighbors—despite the fact that this is unlikely even in a community of just a few hundred—is a key piece of this. This suggests a kind of social order that is similar across the three communities, but that differentiates them from urban areas. And as residents of Iverson, Meriville, and Williston explain, they feel they know their communities because they regularly “hear” about local goings-on, even without trying. Again and again, residents will offer a detail about their community by explaining, “I heard...” something about And when they say this, they typically mean one of three things: they may have actually experienced something or heard about it from friends, family, or neighbors; they may have read about something in the local paper or watched it on local TV news; or they may have seen someone post about it on Facebook. These channels of information circulate stories, gossip, and news in much the same way in each of Iverson, Meriville, and Williston.

The result is that, even when residents don't “hear” about community goings-on directly, they still feel tied to them through a process that one resident likened to osmosis, because they are constantly learning about their towns. For example, with the opioid crisis top of mind in both Iverson and Meriville, several residents describe noticing a rise in drug use – not necessarily because anyone they know is involved, but because they've found needles in parks or seen an increase in drug arrests in the local paper. A surprising number even describe regularly checking the jail roster—as Isaac from Iverson explains—“just to see if there's people that I went to high school with.”

In Meriville and, to an extent, in Williston, it is particularly common for residents to learn about local social problems and community events through their churches and volunteer work. Tyler, for example, is a Williston resident who tends to be more focused on national politics than local issues, but he's heard about Williston's backpack program, which provides weekend meals for kids in local schools, because, as he tells me: "I think our church did it at one point."

And while social media may provide an avenue for some, including Tyler, to escape the confines of small-town gossip, it has also become an important route for other residents to learn about community life and local politics. This is because participants' social media networks are much like their face-to-face ones⁶⁵—i.e., overwhelmingly local. In fact, a majority of the people I spoke to report that more than half of their Facebook friends live in their county—and in Iverson and Meriville, most estimate that 75% of their friends are local. Within these networks, residents see friends and family posting about community matters and, occasionally, political controversies of local relevance. And local politicians—city and county councilors, state representatives, and representatives to U.S. Congress—also contribute to these information flows. In fact, most of their posts refer to local matters, such as community events, charities, small businesses, and Main Street development.⁶⁶

And because participants' virtual social lives generally share a great deal of local overlap with their in-person social lives, they often "hear" about their communities through some combination of in-person and online communication: residents might see local news articles posted on social media or hear from a friend about local events and later see them on Facebook as well. Brenda, for example, has kept off social media for the past few years, but she still picks

⁶⁵ See also Bond et al. (2012)

⁶⁶ This is based on my own analyses of local politicians' public Facebook pages. See Appendix for further information.

up bits of local “gossip” circulating on Facebook and Twitter. In one case, a friend took a screenshot of something a local elected official tweeted, “and sent it to us, [saying] like, can you believe this?” Similarly, Mallory from Meriville tells me about the local opioid crisis: “I do see often, like on Facebook, people will post pictures of finding needles in public places.” But she also hears about it from her husband who hosted a community forum about creating a needle exchange in town.

In sum, Iversonians, Merivillians, and Willistonians share the feeling that they live in relatively small, close-knit communities, because they also share the same web of connections—in-person and virtual social networks, local news, experiences, and observations around town—that tie them into those communities.

Postindustrial social problems

But Iverson, Meriville, and Williston also share a set of social problems common to small towns and postindustrial communities. Table 2 summarizes these challenges. To preserve the communities’ anonymity, I provide percentage ranges for contemporary statistics and actual figures for measures of change over time. As Table 2 shows, economic precarity, aging housing, and the opioid epidemic have touched all three places, although to varying degrees.

The opioid epidemic is particularly acute in Meriville and, to a somewhat lesser extent, in Iverson. In 2019, the national rate of drug overdose deaths per 100,000 was 21.6: as Table 2 shows, in Meriville it was over 30 and in Iverson between 20 and 25. And because of the way that residents of all three places learn about their communities, they are also all well-aware of their local challenges. For example, it was rare that I had to pose direct questions about opioids in either Iverson and Meriville: instead, residents brought them up immediately when I asked about the communities’ challenges.

Table 2. Evidence of Postindustrial Decline

	Meriville	Williston	Iverson	U.S. Avg.
<i>% Change Over Time</i>				
Median Household Income, 1980-2019	-1.12	-1.09	8.88	13.38
Labor Force Participation, 1980-2019	0.5	-0.9	2.7	1.9
Employed in Manufacturing, 1980-2016	-7.6	-7.7	-6.51	-11.5
Employed in Transportation, 1980-2016	-1.4	0.3	-5.4	-0.7
Employed in Services, 1980-2016	9.3	12.9	13.1	12.7
Population > 65 Years Old, 1980-2019	3.40	6.90	3.70	4.30
Total Population, 1980-2019	20.54	-16.15	-2.53	<i>n/a</i>
<i>Contemporary Indicators (rounded to preserve communities' anonymity)</i>				
Unemployment Rate (2019)	2-3	3-4	4-5	3.5
Unemployment Rate (Nov 2020)	4-5	5-6	3-4	6.7
Unemployment Change During COVID	1-1.5	1-1.5	0-0.5	3.2
Eligibility for free/reduced lunch (%)	50-55	45-50	40-45	52.3
Housing stock built 1939 or earlier (%)	15-20	35-40	20-25	12.2
Housing stock built 2000 or later (%)	15-20	5-10	5-10	19.3
Driving deaths w/ alcohol involved (%)	5-10	15-20	20-25	28.0
Opioid perscriptions dispensed (per 100)	55-60	<i>n/a</i>	15-20	43.3
Drug overdose deaths (per 100,000)	35-40	20-25	<10	21.6

Note: Employment and income data are from the U.S. Census Bureau as reported in Social Explorer. Industrial occupation figures have been normalized to pre-2000 NAICS classification codes using BLS crosswalks for comparability. Data on eligibility for free and reduced lunch, driving deaths involving alcohol, and drug overdose deaths are from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation's 2020 County Health Rankings, www.countyhealthrankings.org. Data on the rate of opioid perscriptions dispensed is from from Indiana and Wisconsin Departments of Health/Health Services. No comparable data exists for all counties in Minnesota.

In Iverson, residents share a sense that the community's long history with alcohol abuse—coincident with the over-developed bar scene that Elaine described—has now lapsed into a new crisis of drug addiction. It is often among their top concerns for the community. As Sybil tells me: “we have an extremely high issue or big problem with opioids, drugs, heroin, meth. A lot of drinking.” Sybil's stepson is in recovery, as is Sam's son and Elliott's friend whom he never knew had a problem until she started getting clean. Brenda's mother-in-law became addicted to pills before she passed away a few years ago.

The drug crisis is, as residents often remind me, a nationwide problem. It's not "just here" in Iverson, but it is in Iverson too. Even for those whom it does not touch directly, its effects are evident. As Danielle tells me:

We find needles more and more and more in public spaces. So we know it's becoming a bigger and bigger issue. What we can do about that? I don't know. It's an epidemic across the states, so we don't really know. Rehabilitation is huge. And I know that Iverson lags in that. They were looking at bringing an organization in. I don't think that there was the funding for it and that's statewide. There's just no funding for rehabilitation or getting people the help they need on any kind of addiction.

Iversonians bemoan this state of affairs again and again. They want a treatment center nearby, because as Sam explains, the window of opportunity to get people help is quite narrow: "we have nowhere around here for treatment. When my son was looking for treatment, you have a very short time, if they agree to go to treatment, to get them somewhere."

Just as in Iverson, a handful of people I spoke with in Meriville had direct experiences of losing loved ones to addiction, recovering from addiction themselves, or seeing others struggle with recovery. But for the most part, Merivillians learn about how the opioid epidemic has transformed their community in the same way as Iversonians: through the arrest records in the paper, needles in the park, and slow tears at the corners of the community's normal social life. As Kelly tells me: "Recently, there's a lot of drugs in Meriville County. You know, lots of arrests of, people blowing up their houses as they're trying to, you know, make meth. So it's a real issue."

For some, the negative effects of substance abuse are omnipresent. Patty, for example, is an elementary schoolteacher whose sister is in recovery, and she also sees the effects of addiction every day in her classroom: "I see an increasing number of kids who are not being raised by either parent, being raised by a grandparent."

In both Iverson and Meriville, the opioid crisis is not just a statistical fact they share—although it is—it is also part of residents’ lived realities and is starting to become a defining feature of their communities, thanks to the many ways that information circulates through town. Williston residents, in contrast, are far less likely to mention drugs of any kind as a challenge in their community. Although some more rural residents are aware of meth labs in their area, it is far less of a concern to most people I spoke with, and for good reason—as Table 2 shows, there are far fewer overdoses per capita in Williston than in either Iverson or Meriville. And community leaders are proud of this. At a community development meeting in the winter of 2020, a spokesperson for the Williston Development Association notes that one of the town’s strengths, according to the consultants they worked with on their Development Plan, was the fact that the opioid crisis was relatively mild: “It’s an issue, but it’s not as big an issue as it is in a lot of other places. So for us, that is not a hurdle that you’re having to overcome for economic development and having to say, How do we deal with that as well?”

Instead of worrying about opioids, Williston’s community leaders devote their attention to another key challenge: housing. Housing is a challenge in all three communities where, much like in other rural and ex-urban communities, the housing stock is aging, as Table 2 indicates, and it’s difficult to attract private development to build newer units.⁶⁷ Edgar, Williston’s Assistant City Manager, explains this challenge in detail when we meet at City Hall a few days after the community development meeting: “we need housing for people on every part of the income spectrum.” Through city, county, and school district tax abatements, they’ve been able to lure in developers who can turn a profit only by building homes at the highest-end of what Willistonians can afford. For the rest, the city searches for funds from the state, federal agencies,

⁶⁷ On rural housing challenges, see: Morton, Allen, and Li 2004; Pendall et al. 2016.

and nonprofits that help residents with “home loans, home repair, and that sort of stuff where we can improve our existing housing stock, which is definitely a need for us to address,” as Edgar explains.

For those at the lowest end of the income spectrum, the Williston County Housing Authority steps in. As Janet, the new Executive Director, explains, part of the reason for the extremely poor quality of housing available to low-income Willistonians is the historic underutilization of Section 8 vouchers. “Any time (a landlord) gets a voucher, the unit has to pass housing quality standards. This is not a high standard, so it’s basic health and safety,” she tells me. But the standards are still better than nothing. And yet, when Janet took her job at Williston County last year, she found that only a portion of their allotted Section 8 vouchers were being used and the property inspectors for those that were being used were “approving apartments from their desk.” As she concludes: “The issue with that is we weren’t keeping up the housing stock.”

In the market for homebuyers rather than renters, the situation is not much better. A joint study conducted by Williston County and the HRA concluded that the lack of affordable options for seniors to move into—the only growing demographic in Williston—meant that seniors were staying in their homes longer and longer but were unable to keep up with maintenance costs. As a result, by the time a younger family can afford to move into those homes, they are in short supply and those that are available require significant repairs. At the same time, the families who can afford to buy larger homes are staying longer in smaller, less expensive dwellings that could otherwise go to less affluent people. As Janet concludes, the housing cycle in Williston is broken and “there’s a shortage of housing.” What this means for Willistonians, practically speaking, is that “it’s the landlords’ market.”

And this situation has only worsened since the 2008 housing crisis. What Janet refers to as “mom-and-pop” landlords now dominate the rental market in Williston. Most live in nearby cities and hire local property managers to take care of their properties—or, based on what Janet’s seen from those receiving Section 8 vouchers—not take care of them. As Doug, a local retiree, tells me, he watched the housing situation deteriorate rapidly after 2008: “A good share of all the bad property was essentially bought up for peanuts. And now is out on the rental market for ...I mean some of these houses are literally being rented by the month for the price that they bought them for. And there’s no upkeep. I mean, they’re just, they’re trashed. You know, the plumbing doesn’t work. There’s black mold in em.” The result is that: “Small towns used to be inexpensive to live in. You know, two, three, four hundred dollars a month. And now that is that is absolutely gone, because we’re working with investments.”

And while few residents share Doug’s insight into the inner workings of Williston’s real estate market, many recognize the result. As Ashley, a recent college graduate who works at a daycare center, tells me: “It’s super expensive. Hence why I still live with my parents. They want \$700 for a one bedroom, trash apartment. And that’s before utilities and everything else. That’s nuts.” Ashley already works two jobs and has student loans to pay. Renting at that rate is not an option for her.

The broken housing cycle that Janet describes is a common problem in aging communities like Williston. And in Iverson and Meriville, the situations are similar. Throughout Iverson, regardless of the neighborhood, it is not difficult to find aging single-family homes whose paint is peeling off or front steps are sagging. This poses challenges to the supply of livable housing and, as a result, housing affordability, as Peter—a local carpenter—explains to me a few months later: “Per capita, we’re like second or third oldest (housing stock) in the

nation. And because of that, these homes fall into disrepair and they're picked up by slumlords. We got five or six just dipshit slumlords around here that need to get thumped." Table 2 confirms this point, as more than a third of Iverson's homes were built before the Second World War, making upkeep and maintenance an expensive endeavor whether the residents are tenants or homeowners. But as Danielle explains, tighter regulations would help the situation somewhat, because they would prevent slumlords from letting people "live in filth."

And in Meriville, dozens of people live in motels by the interstate on the edge of town simply to hang on to their jobs. Good quality and affordable housing—workforce housing—is, as in Iverson and Williston, in short supply. Carol, the director of Meriville's United Way, sums it up:

We definitely have a housing issue in our community.[...] Because slumlords are alive and well in this community, and they there are homes that are not maintained well or—in my opinion, aren't even habitable—that people are living in.

But the source of Meriville's challenge is somewhat different from Iverson's and Williston's: rather than suffering a roadblock in the normal housing cycle as elderly people age in place, the community is locked in a kind of growth-related stalemate. They have plenty of jobs, but insufficient infrastructure to accommodate anymore employees, resulting in an inability to attract more businesses until they can support more workers.

What Makes Iverson, Meriville, and Williston Different

But even as housing and opioids remain major preoccupations in Meriville, to the city's former Mayor, Ron Lubock, these aren't the biggest challenges facing the community:

Now obviously with the recession (in 2008) we lost quite a bit of jobs. But we've actually probably doubled the amount of jobs we lost based on the recession, since then. The economy is booming here. Our biggest thing is workforce. Everybody else can't find enough people. There's probably 2-3,000 jobs right now unfilled

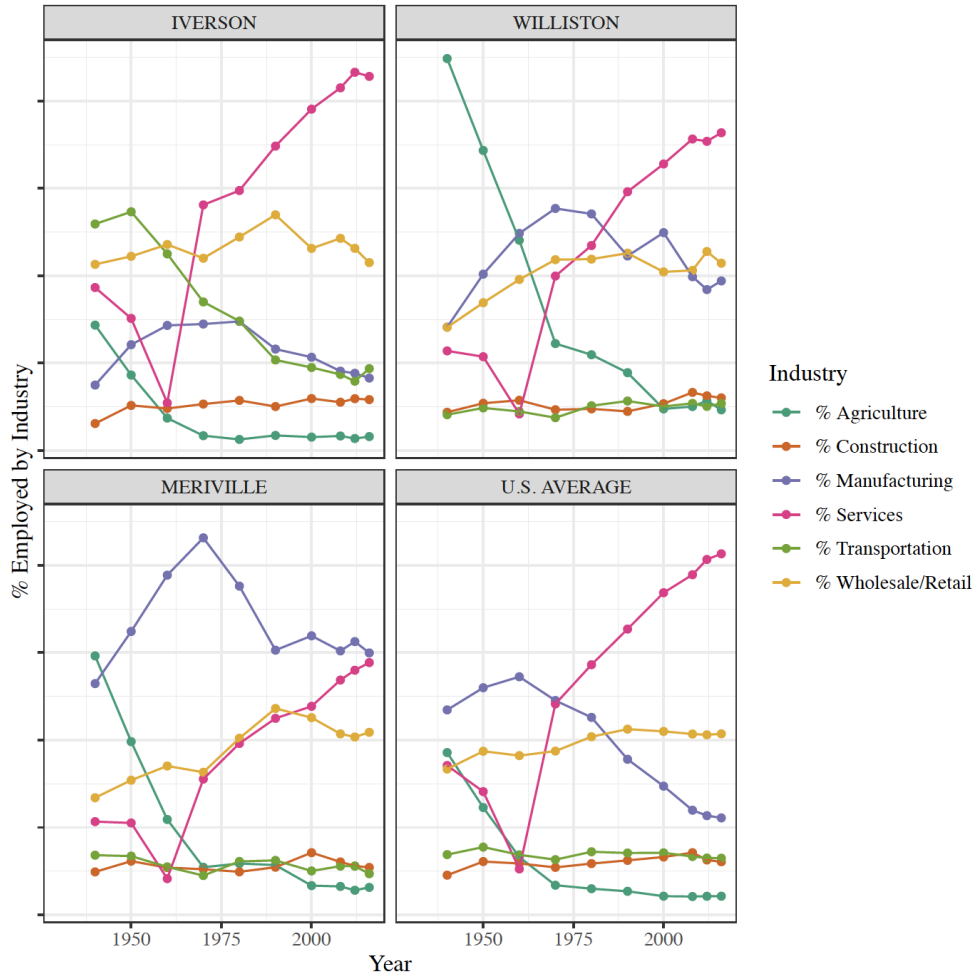
right here...Our economic department has created a Facebook page in Ohio, Illinois—and we just recruited a kid from South Dakota to come work at one of our factories as an engineer. Just because of Facebook.

To Mayor Lubock and, in fact, many of Meriville’s community leaders, finding people to fill the available jobs is *the* central challenge for the community. Meriville’s story is not, in short, a story of Midwestern manufacturing decline. As Figure 2 shows, Meriville did suffer a decline in manufacturing employment due to outsourcing in the 1970s—as did Iverson and Williston around the same time—but in Meriville it was halted abruptly in the late 1980s. And today, the local economy is thriving—at least based on standard metrics like unemployment and population growth, as shown in Table 2.

Pete Risher witnessed this turnaround firsthand. He’s the Director of the Meriville County Economic Development Association, and as he says, when he took over the role in 1986: “unemployment was double digits. The tax base was declining. There were absolutely fewer jobs for students graduating from high school.” The turnaround came just two years later, when he managed to “land” one of the biggest suppliers of tractor parts in the country, AgTrac, and convince them to build a factory in town. They are now Meriville’s biggest employer outside of the city and county governments and have helped Pete market the community as “business friendly” to other manufacturers.

Three decades after Pete’s success, Meriville City has now resorted to advertising their town on Facebook to fill the abundance of jobs in their community. In comparison with Iverson and Williston, Meriville’s economic trajectory is even more startling. When I mentioned Pete’s annual investment target to the head of the Williston Development Association, he gaped at me. But it was not just the size of the target that was shocking: part of Williston’s five-year development plan is simply to begin setting investment targets.

Figure 2. Industrial Employment in Iverson, Meriville, and Williston vs. the U.S. Average, 1940-2016



Note: The figure shows the percentage of the employed population working in the agriculture, construction, manufacturing, services, transportation, and the wholesale/retail industry across Iverson, Meriville, and Williston relative to the U.S. as a whole. The y-axis values have been removed to preserve the communities' anonymity.

Meriville, in short, is far from the typical small-town or ex-urban economy, caught in a postindustrial cycle of economic deterioration and population decline.⁶⁸ But this cycle does aptly characterize Williston. It is the oldest of the three towns – a “retirement community,” as many young people tell me. And it has also faced the most acute economic challenges of any of the communities. The largest industry in Williston throughout the 20th-century was metal manufacturing, and for most of that time, it was dominated by one plant, Rivervalley Foundries. From the post-war era through the early 1980s, the plant employed over 1,000 workers. In a town of about 20,000, this made them not just the largest employer, but an employer of outsized significance with respect to the community’s welfare. In 1979, Rivervalley filed for bankruptcy and sold the plant, then the new owners filed for bankruptcy again a few years later before selling to the plant’s final proprietor.

A decade into Rivervalley’s new stewardship, a group of workers closing shop for the day called 911 to report smoke coming out of the building. The plant was on fire. It took firefighters two-and-a-half days to put out the flames, and while no lives were lost, all the jobs were: the owners decided not to rebuild. “We were on vacation when it happened,” Rich, who worked as a mechanic at the plant tells me, describing how he and his wife reacted to hearing the news. “And we just looked at each other and said, I guess we better stop spending money!”

Residents still remember seeing workers walking up Oak St. with their lunch pails, headed toward the plant for their shifts. A row of small, square homes was built without garages near the plant, explicitly designed for employees who could make the short walk on foot. Like the empty lot where the plant once stood, the homes stand as a monument to the town’s traumatic past. For many, it feels like the community has never recovered. Even as a smaller foundry has

⁶⁸ Carr and Kefalas 2009; Johnson 2013

come into town and other local businesses have grown to replace the jobs lost in the fire—as Figure 2 indicates—it is not the same to Willistonians who can recall Rivervalley’s heyday.

In part, this is because of the town’s population decline, as shown in Table 2. This decline is something residents are well aware of: as Vanessa, a local Democratic Party activist tells me, there is “an overall sense of loss in rural communities like Williston ... we’ve lost about 20% of our population since 1970. So, the last 50 years, to lose 20% of your population...I mean that, I think, is a bit frightening. Or it’s, you feel the sense of loss, like the way things used to be.”

This sense of loss, which I will explore in more detail in Chapter 5, is unique to Williston. But Iversonians—unlike Merivillians—share some of Willistonians’ dissatisfaction with their local economy. Residents are, as Chapter 3 will show, fixated on Elaine’s understanding that the economy is “depressed” – despite the fact that incomes in Iverson have grown faster than incomes in Meriville, as shown in Table 2. And while Iverson has experienced some population decline, it has seen less of a brain drain of young residents than both Meriville and Williston, resulting in a slower growth in elderly population. It has also retained most of the basic industries that defined the community forty years ago, unlike Williston. In other words, while Iverson is not a stunning postindustrial success like Meriville, it is not in a spiral of decline like Williston, and its economy is healthy enough to support its population.

While these economic differences across the three communities matter in myriad ways—for residents’ health and well-being high among them—they are insufficient to explain their political differences. As noted above, existing research on postindustrial decline and right-wing populism would predict that the healthiest economy—Meriville’s—would provide a layer of

insulation against the appeal of the populist Right. And yet, it is here that the Republican Party has flourished.

Another possibility is that the steady growth in Meriville's immigrant population has spurred a backlash that led the community straight into the arms of Donald Trump.⁶⁹ Part of what is sustaining Meriville's economic growth also differentiates it from Iverson and Williston: immigration from Mexico and Central America. Between 2000 and 2017, Meriville's White, non-Hispanic population declined by over 10 percentage points, and its immigrant population grew by over four percentage points. But for several reasons, this is not a great explanation for Meriville's Republicanism. First, the influx of immigration in Meriville came decades after the community turned toward the Republican Party. And second, the fact that this immigration has fueled Meriville's job growth is well-known among the native-born White residents I spoke to: when I asked people what would happen if ICE swept through town and deported anyone without documents, I heard again and again that it would destroy the local economy. In fact, despite several probes, Merivillians almost never expressed concerns that immigrants were an economic threat to them or the community.⁷⁰

In sum, Iverson, Meriville, and Williston do differ in important ways, but these differences don't explain why their political differences—once they emerged—proved so durable over the following decades.

⁶⁹ Research on the relationship between local immigration contexts and attitudes toward immigrants is inconclusive (Fetzer 2000; Fussell 2014; Schlueter and Scheepers 2010). Group-threat theory (Quillian 1995) suggests that a larger presence of immigrants induces more negative attitudes toward immigrants among native-born residents, while contact theory (Tropp et al. 2018; Wagner et al. 2006) suggests that positive contact with out-groups can decrease prejudice among dominant groups.

⁷⁰ Immigrants might pose two kinds of threats to native-born people—economic (e.g., Malhotra, Margalit, and Mo 2013) and “cultural” (Buckler 2008). Native-born Merivillians offered little evidence of either, despite repeated probes.

Iverson, Meriville, and Williston are not just statistically similar, but they also feel the same to the people who live there: each community offers one version of the small-town Midwest in the postindustrial era, focused on downtown revitalization, maintaining aging housing, attracting employers, and staving off the opioid crisis. But despite these similarities, the communities are not the same: Meriville's economic success has led it to buck the trend of economic and population decline that characterizes much of rural and small-town America, while Williston finds itself snared in that trap, and Iverson hovers somewhere in the middle.

And yet, none of these differences matter for residents' partisanship in the way we might expect them to. Instead, as the remainder of Part I shows, what matters is how local organizational arrangements, or the lack thereof, help similar people across these similar communities understand and interpret local social problems and national party politics.

As I elaborate this argument, the differences across the three communities will appear again and again. We will see how Williston's spiral of decline has become a defining feature of how residents understand their community, while Meriville's economic growth has become one lens through which residents and community leaders understand theirs. But I will also show that these understandings do not follow directly from the state of the economy: as Table 2 shows, economic growth has not been accompanied by proportionate levels of growth in the standard of living in Meriville, while it has in Iverson. In other words, descriptions of Meriville's economy as a "success" and Iverson's as "depressed" are both subjective interpretations that are mediated by local organizational arrangements.

And it is precisely this mediation that provides the lens through which residents of each place experience social problems, come to understand their communities, and make sense of national party politics. The result, as we will see, is durable ties to the Democratic Party in Iverson, durable ties to the Republican Party in Meriville, and a politics in flux in Williston.

**CHAPTER 2. LOCAL ORGANIZATIONAL ARRANGEMENTS AND THE
EXPERIENCE OF POSTINDUSTRIAL SOCIAL PROBLEMS IN IVERSON, MERIVILLE,
AND WILLISTON**

The first time I meet with Mike, the head of the Political Action Team for the Carpenters' local in Iverson, it's an early summer evening in 2019. As we sit sipping beer at the same bar where I met Arthur a few weeks before, he recounts how the union changed his life: because of union wages, Mike—a single father and veteran—will be able to take his kids on their first vacation this summer. Now, he's dedicated to giving back to the union. And a big part of that, as he explains, is getting involved in local politics. It can be hard to convince his coworkers that this is important: "We work hard. I mean, all week I'm putting in 11-, 12-hour days," he tells me. "But then, like I go to a council meeting and show up in my work clothes. Nobody wants to do that. They want to go home. They want to have a beer." Even before he mentioned this, I already knew that showing up at City Council meetings was part of Mike's political repertoire, as I had met him during a protest he engineered during a meeting the week before. To get his members to those kinds of events, he works diligently to remind them of what the union has done for them and how they need to protect it politically. As he tells me:

And then when we do endorse (a politician), it's 100 percent. None of this bullshit where we're just going to give you money for your campaign. No, we're going to have our guys out there door knocking for you. We're going to have our guys at the Q and A's for you, we're going to have our guys at City Hall for you.

Mike is part of one of the most active unions in Iverson, but what he describes indicates the contemporary instantiation of Iverson's long history of union organizing: in a kind of 21st century patronage politics, unions work to elect local officeholders who support pro-labor policies. In other words, organized labor fights *economic* battles on *political* terrain. And in so

doing, they reinforce longstanding links, both symbolic and material, between the political and economic spheres in Iverson.

Contrast this to Meriville, where unions remain focused on the private sector and the public sphere is instead dominated by churches and nonprofits. Lauren, the chair of the Meriville County Republican Party, tells me this the first time we meet, munching grilled cheese sandwiches at a restaurant on Main Street: “If you drive around, there’s probably just about a church on every corner.” She pauses after she says this and points out the window: “Seriously, there’s a church right there around the corner, the Catholic church...Religion is very important to people in Meriville County.”

But churches are more than just a sign of Merivillians’ religiosity, as Lauren indicates later in the conversation. She’s mentioned that Donald Trump’s discussion of Christianity was an important part of his popularity in the area, and I ask her if local candidates talk about the same things. She considers this, and then responds: “I don’t know. When you’re running on a local level, I don’t think you have to talk about that...but if people know that you are affiliated with a specific church, that’s going to help you.” Lauren is only the second person from Meriville I’ve ever spoken to, and—confused about what she could mean by a “specific church”—I ask her to explain. She goes on:

Lauren: ...I’ll use Mayor Lubock as an example. Mayor Lubock grew up in Meriville. He went to Immaculate School. That’s the local parochial school just down the street too.

Me: Is that also where you went? (*Lauren had already mentioned this*)

Lauren: Yes.

Me: All right.

Lauren: So we went to school together. So that’s the thing, Mayor Lubock and I both got to say we attended Immaculate Lutheran School for eight years, and in turn, made a connection with every single person who has ever sent their child to Immaculate School or belongs to Immaculate Church (one of the biggest congregations in town). Lubock, he attends church at Immaculate Lutheran Church, the church affiliated with the school. Huge congregation. Huge. Connections that

never end. Just personal connections, financial connections. And I'm not going to lie, when I look for candidate, that's something I consider, like where you go to church.

Lauren is far from the only person who points to churches as a kind of lynchpin in Meriville's public life—not to tell me that churches are preaching politics from the pulpit,⁷¹ as she makes a point of saying the Christian rhetoric characteristic of national Republican politics is not necessary on a local level—but to tell me that they are at the center of *community life* in Meriville, stitching people together through their “connections that never end,” as Lauren says. And in Meriville, some of the most important connections they facilitate are the ones among other congregations, volunteers, and nonprofits, which create a kind of private, collective problem-solving network outside of local government.

Mike and Lauren are describing two distinct sets of *organizational arrangements*—or public and private entities and their relationships with one another—that structure public life and civic action in Iverson and Meriville. Unions are tied to local government and elected officials in Iverson—an arrangement I refer to as “union town politics”—while churches facilitate a network of volunteers and nonprofits in Meriville—what I refer to as “church town politics.” But despite their differences, Iverson and Meriville share the fact that these arrangements have long provided continuity and structure to community life and collective problem-solving. In Williston, this is not the case. Here, many of the older residents can recall the heyday of unions in the 1960s and 70s, and others reflect on the centrality of churches to the community back then. But now,

⁷¹ Churches can inculcate their members with political identities linked to one party or the other, or motivate them to engage in protest. But as research has shown among White evangelicals and Black Christians, the political meaning of a church is always contextual and contingent (see Bean 2014 and Fitzgerald and Spohn 2005).

neither unions nor churches are what they once were. In lieu of the structure they once provided to civic action, the community is in flux, unstable, and often drawing on multiple informal partnerships to solve problems—as Connie described in Chapter 1.

The differences in what these organizations do in Iverson, Meriville, and Willstion matter for how each place tries to meet the community’s needs. This is because local governments rarely get things done by themselves. Instead, they work in partnership with private entities—nonprofits, corporations, and foundations—to deliver the social services, housing, and community resources that residents need and demand. This partnership model is the result of historical changes dating back to LBJ’s War on Poverty, which saw the federal government increase its dependence on private nonprofits to provide social services as a way of combatting inequality. But these contracts were revamped under the Reagan Administration, which gave states the authority over how to distribute federal funding to nonprofits and municipal governments, and often made that funding contingent on the outcome of competitive grant-writing processes. Cities and nonprofits alike had to compete for the same funds that they were simply granted during the pre-Reagan era, and even when they won, they had less discretion over how to use them.⁷²

At the same time as communities were losing resources from federal funds, local economies were also facing a crunch: by the 1980s and 90s, even family-owned businesses were no longer safe from the wave of mergers, cutbacks, and lay-offs sweeping across the U.S. as corporations sought ever-higher profits by moving jobs across the globe.⁷³ And as

⁷² See Smith and Lipsky 1993 on the turn toward competition and marketization. The mix of public/private provision has much longer historical roots in the U.S. state. See: Balogh 2009; Clemens 2020; Mayrl and Quinn 2016; Morgan and Campbell 2011.

⁷³ On globalization and deindustrialization, see: Alderson 1999; Brady, Beckfield, and Zhao 2007. The causes of deindustrialization are multi-faceted, as Kollmeyer 2009 argues, but

deindustrialization set in, private resources followed public funds in draining from communities, particularly those in the formerly manufacturing-dense Midwest. In this context of scarce resources, partnerships—or coordination amongst multiple organizations within and outside of government—proved the best way for communities to marshal their talents and win the public funds and private capital they needed to survive.⁷⁴

Given these resource constraints, how do public and private entities in Iverson, Meriville, and Williston “get things done”? How do local organizations work together to solve social problems? And what role do unions and churches play in this? Existing accounts suggest that each of these communities was similarly at the whims of federal policymakers and global marketplaces. And because those extra-local changes favored one form of local reaction—partnerships between nonprofits, local government, and occasionally private corporations—Iverson, Meriville, and Williston should all have pursued similar strategies, lest they lose out on desperately-needed resources.⁷⁵ But this is not the case. And while I don’t contest that community governance shifted from political contestation to partnership in general, the cases of Iverson, Meriville, and Williston show us just how important local variation continues to be when we shift our outcomes of interest from economic development to residents’ partisan attachments. In other words, these communities are not just subjected to the whims of national policies; they also *produce* national politics itself.

globalization is one component of the decline in manufacturing employment. For shifts in firm management, see: Fligstein 2001.

⁷⁴ For studies that focus on how federal policies have favored models of partnership between the state (local, state, and federal governments) and civil society, see: Clemens and Guthrie 2010; Marwell 2007; McQuarrie 2013a; Pacewicz 2016.

⁷⁵ Josh Pacewicz’ (2016) historical analysis of two cities in Iowa shows how the turn toward partnerships can vary in timing and strategic orientation, based on different composition of business and labor interests in a city. But his core claim is that there are costs to deviating from the partnership model.

This chapter describes these local organizational arrangements, detailing how unions' ties to local government in Iverson ensure that community leaders understand government as a key resource in shaping economic outcomes, and how Meriville's churches facilitate a private, collective problem-solving network outside of local government. In both cases, the organizations at the center of the story—unions and churches—are dwindling in membership nationally and are not part of the prevailing account of community partnerships.⁷⁶ In fact, the relationship between local government and organized labor in Iverson looks a lot like a relationship common to the post-WWII period, when cities supported public sector employees' rights to unionize and municipal elections were targets of labor activism. This is the system that has been on the decline since the 1980s: as globalization and the outsourcing of supply chains decreased union power, employers began turning away from the post-war labor-capital "accord" and taking up increasingly hostile practices toward organized labor, and states began passing "right-to-work" laws, outlawing the union shop.⁷⁷ But, as we will see in Iverson, it persists because unions retain not just the numbers, but also sufficient organizing infrastructure that they remain the dominant

⁷⁶ The classic account of declining civic associations in the U.S. is Putnam's (2000) *Bowling Alone*. But as Theda Skocpol (2003) argues that decline only captures one portion of the change, as civic associations' shift to professional management and the particular declines in organizations with federated structures undermined the ties that brought people together within their communities and connected them upward to a broader national project. Regardless, it is clear that both union and church membership are in decline nationally. On unions, see Hirsch and Macpherson 2019. On church membership in the late twentieth and early 21st centuries, see Putnam and Campbell 2010. For recent surveys of church membership, see Jones 2021.

⁷⁷ On the implications of globalization, changing firm management, and right-to-work laws on labor strength, see: Bronfenbrenner and Juravich 2002; Clawson and Clawson 1999; Ellwood and Fine 1987; Fantasia and Voss 2004; Western 1997. On how these changes reshaped local politics, see McCartin 2008; Pacewicz 2016. Even so, Iverson is not alone in retaining this legacy of an earlier era of labor activism: cities across the country have increasingly become targets for labor-friendly policies as the possibility for favorable state or federal legislation have waned. See, e.g., Cummings and Boutcher 2009; Schragger 2009.

political force in local politics. This is true even as they suffer membership declines in the wake of Republican Governor Scott Walker's attacks on Wisconsin unions.

That said, Iverson does have many of the partnership components that characterize other communities. But focusing on these similarities elides the differences that are most important for how the community defines and solves problems, as we will see in Chapter 3. Similarly, Meriville's organizational arrangements also contain many aspects of public-private partnership, but the fact that churches are at the heart of the local problem-solving network is central to how residents come to understand their community's relationship to the government: church membership is so widespread that residents are well-aware of churches' activities in the community and, as we will see in Chapter 3, see little need for government intervention.⁷⁸ It is only in Williston that partnership is truly the defining feature of local organizational arrangements, and it is here, too, that unions and churches have receded from public life.

While postindustrial communities may have been forced toward similar modes of action in the resource-constrained environment of the late 20th century, the comparison across Iverson, Meriville, and Williston suggests that the long legacy of geographically uneven unionization, deindustrialization, church membership, and other durable facets of local political life, continue to shape how communities solve problems.⁷⁹ And to understand how local and national politics mutually create one another, this kind of local variation is central to the story.

⁷⁸ This stands in sharp contrast to the many Americans who know little about what government does (e.g., Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996). This is particularly the case for politics and government below the federal level. See McCoy 2019 on state politics and Oliver, Ha, and Callen 2012 on how a small group of well-informed people tend to dominate local elections in suburbs.

⁷⁹ Figures A2 and A3 of the Appendix map contemporary patterns of state-level variation in union membership (A2) and county-level variation in church adherence (A3).

Iverson

It is not uncommon to hear Iverson’s community leaders and residents say things like: “This town was built on the back of labor,” as Harry, the head of the Iverson’s local labor council tells me over coffee on one of my first mornings in town. In fact, I heard phrases like this all the time when I first arrived in Iverson. It’s a “union town,” as community leaders and residents kept telling me. But what does it mean to be a union town in the context of the 21st century labor movement, which has been in decline for decades?⁸⁰ Iverson’s Mayor Hayte lays it out for me as we sit opposite one another around a large conference table in his office:

Now, Iverson is a labor city. It is deep in this city’s history. And so there is still a great deal of organization, particularly among the construction trades, a lot of professions, especially teachers, public safety unions, those are still very strong. They still have some political muscle. I mean, they were in our council chambers two days ago. But it’s not nearly what it was. Labor bosses, even in the 1980s, could at a word, get a mayor elected, and that that’s no longer true. In fact, I lost my first election for mayor with full union support.

Mayor Hayte’s description of Iverson’s political history—although perhaps idealized—echoes the scholarly account of “labor bosses” in decline amidst changes in the way firms negotiated with organized labor in the 1980s, political attacks on unions, and Wisconsin’s particularly challenging labor history since the Governorship of Republican Scott Walker, who made union-busting a priority.⁸¹ But Mayor Hayte also suggests a difference in Iverson: although “labor candidates” do not always win these days, and labor’s political strength is not what it once was, unions still work to elect local officials in return for their support on pro-labor policies.

Unions engage in this kind of politicking for two reasons: first, because they can—as Mayor Hayte indicates, they have sufficient membership and are still sufficiently organized to do

⁸⁰ See Figure A4 of the Appendix, which charts national union membership rates from 1939-2019.

⁸¹ Kaufman 2015

so; and second, because current and former union members and labor leaders in Iverson understand the union as a fundamentally political project. The way to get better wages, as Mike explains above, is to get involved in politics.

But for this politicking to matter, elected officials like Mayor Hayte must care about union support. And in Iverson, they do. This is because in small-town politics, the kind of human and financial resources that unions provide to candidates are the only game in town. Unions are the *sole* organization that local elected officials can recall turning to for endorsements or support during their campaigns. In nonpartisan City Council races, even the political parties don't get involved. The result is that people think of councilors as in the "pro-labor" faction, or against it, rather than affiliates of the Democratic or Republican party.

In many ways, Iverson represents the kind patronage politics familiar to 20th century urban machines.⁸² But what matters most in terms of shaping residents' Democratic partisanship is that these relationships ensure that community leaders understand that the community's economic health depends in part on political contestation over control of local government, which can take action to bring good, union jobs as the bedrock of Iverson's economy. Below, I describe how this is accomplished amidst ongoing threats to organized labor.⁸³

Organized Labor as a Political Movement

⁸² Political machines are defined by repeated, contingent clientelist exchange between voters and politicians (Hicken 2011), which leads to what Susan Stokes (2005) refers to as "perverse accountability" in which voters are accountable to politicians for their vote. The literature is full of monographs of big-city machine politics in the U.S. during the middle of the 20th century (e.g., Biles 1987; Mladenka 1980; Stave 1970), but most urban politics scholars agree that this model of urban governance was largely dead by the end of that century (e.g., Trounstein 2008). And yet, the jobs-for-electoral support structure of local politics in Iverson retains the basic features of clientelist exchange and particularism that characterize machine politics.

⁸³ Hertel-Fernandez 2018

Organized labor is a longstanding player in Iversonian politics—as Mayor Hayte’s comments indicate—one that today is battered but intact. The persistence, and even revitalization, of the labor movement’s political engagement depends not just on membership strength and organization, but also on the legacy of labor’s political mobilization, and the individual leaders with experience in labor organizing and political activism who continue to participate in the movement today.

Within Wisconsin’s storied labor history, Iverson played a storied role. And for current labor leaders, politicians, and many ordinary residents I spoke to, those stories of Iverson’s labor history remain a defining fact of the community. This becomes evident when I talk to Margaret, a retired teacher who has been involved in the state’s teachers’ union—the American Federation of Teachers (AFT)—for decades and now volunteers for the AFT retirees. Over lunch on a sunny summer afternoon, she recounts the tumultuous years when she first joined the AFT in the ‘70s: the Iverson teachers went on strike six times between 1967 and 1977. At the time, labor disputes were spreading throughout the country, and Wisconsin, still at the forefront of the labor movement, was seeing an uptick in “teacher militancy.”⁸⁴

As Margaret tells me, the strikes were dramatic:

(During the last strike) I was served with summons to report to court. And as treasurer, they wanted me especially because I had the books. And if they could get a hold of me, they could confiscate the funds of the union. So the last one, the bargaining team moved every day for about two and a half weeks... And my mom lived with me...And she sat in the dark for two weeks so they wouldn’t try to serve her the summons.

At the time of Margaret’s hide-and-seek from the police in 1977, it was illegal for teachers to strike in Wisconsin and the Iverson school board took an oppositional stance to teachers on the

⁸⁴ Gatewood 1974. See Ozanne 1984 for a history of the labor movement in Wisconsin.

picket line. The animosity fizzled out after this, but only because the state passed a law forcing public sector employees into binding arbitration, rendering strikes moot.⁸⁵

Today, people like Margaret and other retired teachers and labor leaders continue to participate in the local and state AFL-CIO and remain actively involved in politics. They also give talks in Iverson and the surrounding communities at local schools and colleges, keeping the political history of Iverson's labor movement alive. And to do so, they are aided by the fact that Iverson has better movement organization than other communities. Unlike Meriville and Williston—and, in fact, unlike many places around the country—Iverson retains a local labor council, the Iverson Federation of Labor, or IFL. In the past, labor councils were responsible for organizing political cooperation among different locals in a geographic area and building connections between labor and the broader community, but today, most councils are “weak or moribund.”⁸⁶

In Iverson, according to the council's current President, Harry, the IFL has two roles: working toward “the benefit of labor as a whole” and acting as the “political wing” of its constituent locals so they can focus on community outreach. But the IFL, as with the broader labor movement, has also suffered in recent years. Harry estimates that the council represents between 30-40 locals, but attendance can be “spotty.” He can easily rattle off the most engaged locals: the teachers, electricians, laborers, plumbers, steam fitters, and firefighters. Others add the carpenters to this list. Lower attendance reduces the influence that the IFL has on its constituent locals and, therefore, in local politics. In recent years, the IFL has continued to endorse candidates for local office—they are the “labor candidates” that Mayor Hayte describes—but

⁸⁵ Chauhan 1979

⁸⁶ Clawson and Clawson 1999; Ness and Eimer 2001

they've offered little by way of material support during campaigns besides a bit of door-knocking. And yet, the very existence of the IFL means that there is such a thing as a "labor movement" that creates "labor candidates" for office and offers a space wherein labor leaders can discuss their community and plan collective action. Several retired members of the local AFT continue to participate in the IFL, bringing with them decades of experience in the political mobilization of organized labor.

After Wisconsin's passage of Act 10 in 2011 and right-to-work in 2015, the labor movement gained another battle story to add to the bookshelf. Act 10 revoked the collective bargaining rights first granted to public sector employees in 1959 and further required unions to hold an annual vote among all employees to re-certify the union. Those employees that do not cast a vote for the union are counted as a "no," and a 50% threshold is necessary for the union to be recognized. Despite these onerous requirements, the Iverson AFT usually maintains between 70-80% membership, according to their current President, Laura. This means they are one of the locals with the highest membership rates in the state. Their numbers are particularly impressive as only 47% of school districts passed the 50% threshold to vote in a union in 2017.⁸⁷ Even so, like all public sector unions in Wisconsin, those in Iverson were hurt under Scott Walker's governorship—the legislation ultimately decimated the local municipal workers' union, AFCSME.

But in addition to protecting their membership, Iverson's unions saw Act 10 for what it was—a political attack on their economic future—that necessitated a political response. And as the local newspaper recalls, it sent Iversonians into the streets and down to Madison to protest. The experience also re-invigorated labors' efforts to engage in local politics. As Mayor Hayte

⁸⁷ Beck 2017

describes it, a handful of “personalities,” led by the carpenters, began organizing their locals and encouraging state and national PAC money on behalf of labor candidates: “So now, whereas the 2015 mayor and council races had almost no union involvement at all,” he explains, “the 2019 mayor and council races had thousands and thousands of dollars of union PAC money funding them and dozens and dozens of union volunteers knocking doors.”

In sum, unions in Iverson are political organizations that have long viewed politics as central to shaping their economic fortunes. And while deindustrialization followed by Act-10 and right-to-work laws have diminished their membership strength, local movement infrastructure and individuals’ experience of political mobilization ensures that unions in Iverson continue to be political bodies, rather than merely economic ones.

Why Politicians Listen to Organized Labor

But labor’s involvement in local politics doesn’t necessarily mean that local politicians will welcome that engagement or seek their support. They do so because, as Mayor Hayte’s comments above indicate, union locals and the IFL connect Iverson’s labor movement to extra-local political resources. As such, a small advantage in membership and movement infrastructure relative to other communities multiplies into a much larger advantage in local political clout. And even though Iverson’s labor movement is not what it once was, union political power is not what it once was, and the labor council is not what it once was, maintaining some remnants of each allows labor to become an outsize force in local politics.

Take, for example, the carpenters in Iverson. They are an attractive choice for their state- and national-organizations to support because the community already has existing membership strength and labor infrastructure. State organizations look to these signals when considering

where to spend their limited resources. Christine, who formerly held a leadership role in the Minnesota state AFL-CIO, explains that in her home state they consider three factors when allocating money to regional bodies: budget, winnable races, and organization. As she sums it up, “Do we actually have an infrastructure in this place to start building off of that and turnout numbers for this tight race?” This means that, in Iverson, revitalization is aided not just by their own membership strength but their location in a community that is seen as conducive to labor organizing and political mobilization.

Similarly, the IFL benefits from extra-local resources simply by existing. Sally, for example, is a regional organizer for the AFL-CIO who is stationed in Iverson because her history of local labor activism with the AFT eventually brought her into this role—another example of how the political experience of individual labor leaders continues to shape labor politics today. As a result, she garners Iverson’s organized labor community more resources from the state: Sally reports regularly to the IFL about state and national political events, and during campaign season she connects various locals to state-level campaign resources. As early as October of 2019, Sally had begun coordinating dates with other labor leaders in the IFL for a state-run campaign training event to take place in February 2020.

For these reasons, local elected officials explain that a pro-labor stance is a prerequisite for election in Iverson. Brian, a Democratic City Councilor, describes local politics in this way:

Everybody who wants to get elected needs to say pro-business and pro-union....if you have a card that you’re going to hand out, it’d better have the union bug on it (meaning it was printed by a union printer). If it doesn’t have the union bug on it, people aren’t going to like it. It’s a symbol.

Other officials agree: getting the endorsement of the local labor council, the IFL, is among candidates’ first stop on the campaign trail. Losing that endorsement, another councilor tells me,

is not a nail in your coffin. But, he says, you probably want to win it. As a result, even the non-labor Council members, Brian explains, are generally “understanding” of labor’s issues.

Thus, while Iversonian labor no longer holds the keys to the kingdom, they have enough political clout to pressure city councilors and mayors to support pro-labor policies. And this garners them material benefits: Iverson’s mayors regularly sign Project Labor Agreements (PLAs) before beginning new construction projects, which means the city bargains collectively with the unions before hiring a contractor, and that contractor has to abide by the terms of the agreement. And when faced with specific challenges, the City Council generally votes in line with labor. Mark, a former City Councilor, was elected just before Act 10 was passed, and he recalls the drama-filled weeks of action on the City Council in the wake of its approval. As part of his campaign, he pledged to ratify new contracts with local public sector unions so that they would be effectively protected from Act 10’s effects on their bargaining power for the duration of their contracts. Once elected, he led the City Council in extending their contracts for two years, despite threats from the Governor’s office to curtail Iverson’s local aid from the state. He explains the decision as commonsense:

Iverson is like a Blue Dog Democrat type town. So the working-class labor people, union type people. And so the unions very much wanted somebody that was gonna be in there, that was going to support the labor side completely. So I supported whatever they want – not like blindly following them, but more, I agree with that.

It was thus not by coincidence that Iverson had a City Councilor prepared to fight the state to protect unions – he had been voted into office to do just that. It was also not by coincidence that the Council was able to rapidly agree to the contract extension. As was the case during my fieldwork, there was substantial overlap between local labor leaders and City Councilors at the time of Act 10’s passage in 2011.

There are other regular opportunities for the Council to take these kinds of actions that provide material benefits to organized labor, and they almost always do: in the fall of 2019, the IFL and City Council each unanimously voted in support of the *exact same* endorsement for a new energy project in town because it was being built with unionized laborers—despite the fact that it had drawn state-wide and even national controversy for its environmental impacts. In fact, local political conflict is often the result of the Council failing to do what organized labor wants. Recall that I met Mike, the head of political action for the Carpenters’ Local, because he organized a protest on a Tuesday evening involving over a dozen of his members and members from other unions. They were angry that the city had hired a non-labor friendly contractor to build a *portion* of a new public building, and they made their concerns public – local news cameras captured their silent vigil in the atrium of Iverson City Hall.

In other words, Iverson labor holds elected officials accountable to their promises. As a result, the government’s decisions bring union jobs and union wages to Iverson, ensuring that the unions retain the membership and financial resources that make political activism possible. There is a kind of localized virtuous cycle that—to some extent—buffers Iverson politics and organized labor from the national and global forces causing union membership to deteriorate. In other words, labor leaders are proved right: when they engage in politics and are able to win influence over local government, their economic fortunes improve.

In the following chapters, we will see how Iverson’s union town politics—it’s organized labor movement and their connections to local elected officials—as well as the county’s relationship with the state of Wisconsin, ensure that community leaders and residents define their community’s problem through as rooted in a lack of *good* jobs and look to political solutions for resolving their economic problems.

Meriville

In Meriville, by contrast, unions are absent from the public sphere. But this is not because there are no unions in Meriville: in fact, a former membership chair of Meriville’s teachers’ union estimates that they usually maintain a 90% membership rater, higher than Iverson’s teachers’ union, and one of the largest private sector employers in town has been unionized since the 1930s. But both the teachers’ union, which is an affiliate of the National Education Association (NEA) rather than AFT, and the private sector union, are decidedly apolitical. Mallory, a local NEA member, thinks of the union as a kind of insurance policy rather than a political body. And while the NEA did send a small contingent of teachers to the Indiana statehouse to rally for better wages in 2019, not a single political operative I spoke to in Meriville county—including from the Democratic Party—can recall unions being active players in local politics. The result is that, in contrast to Iverson where unions’ political activity ensures that government becomes a focal point for shaping economic outcomes, unions only reinforce the separation between market and state in Meriville. As then-Mayor Lubock told me in the late spring of 2019: “We’re not a union community, and that’s really been beneficial for (attracting and retaining business).”

Church Town Organization

But Meriville is, as Lauren suggests, a church town. And in Meriville, churches’ role in community life is multi-faceted: they are more than just religious institutions; they also form a crucial connection in a network of private organizations that work together to solve social problems as they emerge. And as in Iverson, this organizational arrangement is not reducible to

individual-level organizational affiliations, although these are important: nearly 60% of Meriville County residents are church members, and the comparable figure is about nine percentage points lower in Iverson.⁸⁸ This gap cannot nearly explain the 30 percentage-point difference in electoral outcomes between Iverson and Meriville in recent presidential elections, just as differences in union membership rates don't explain why Mayor Lubock thinks of Meriville as "not a union community" while Mayor Hayte thinks the opposite of Iverson.

Instead, what matters again are qualitative differences in the meaning of church membership between Iverson and Meriville, and how churches in Meriville facilitate connections among their congregations, volunteers, and local nonprofits. Their ability to serve this role depends in large part on the fact that Merivillians view church membership as much more than attending services every Sunday. For example, when I ask Linda, what role church played in her life growing up, she replies: "...we just kind of grew up, like that's just part of our culture and our family and just what you do." The same is true for how she raises her family today. Although Linda did not grow up in Meriville, her response is not uncommon among Merivillians, for whom church membership is a taken-for-granted part of their culture that structures the rhythm of the week.

As part of this culture, residents regularly describe volunteering through their churches, taking on leadership roles, running youth groups, and teaching Sunday school. And for some, church is also generational. Emma, a stay-at-home mom, describes the deep roots she has with her church:

And I still go to that church. And our church is...we're forming a youth group. I had a big youth group when I was going through church. And still great friends with some of those kids today. And then, you know...there was just nothing.... [So a

⁸⁸ These figures are based on the Association of Religious Data Archives county-level congregation and adherent data from 2010, the most recent year of the survey.

couple of years ago, a girlfriend and I] said, we either need to start looking at other churches or we just need to hope and pray that something happens here [...] And so, I talked about how it was easy to look at the bigger churches that have it all put together. Because there are some in this town. And think, I could just go there and it's all right there on a silver platter for me. But then the history of our church, and being basically born and raised in our church and... And so, we just decided to put the work in.

The quality of ties to their churches and the high membership rate in Meriville are not coincidental, as Emma's comments show. Even when changing churches would have made her life easier, she could not bring herself to do it. And even then, Emma was not considering leaving church altogether, but rather leaving her congregation. As a deeply faithful woman for whom church, religion, and service are an important part of her life, leaving church entirely is not on the table for Emma.

In this way, she is similar to most of her neighbors. Most churchgoers I spoke to expect the kind of reciprocal relationship between their families and their churches that Emma describes: they are willing to "put the work in," but they want to be part of congregations that offer vibrant youth groups and Vacation Bible Schools for their children. In contrast, even among the Iversonians who do attend church regularly, active involvement beyond Sunday service is rare.

Crucially, these differences in individual church involvement are also consequential for community life. First, church life in Meriville teaches a pool of volunteers that civic engagement is an important part of social citizenship and trains them to offer those skills elsewhere.⁸⁹ Merivillians—particularly churchgoers—believe that helping the community is central to the church's mission. In the same conversation that he lists numerous church-based

⁸⁹ See Beyerlein and Hipp 2006; Chaves 2004; Pattillo-McCoy 1998; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995.

services for food and homelessness in Meriville’s community, Fred reflects on his own congregation and sighs: “I don’t think we do enough. I honestly don’t.” To Fred, churches should be helping those in need, and even in a place like Meriville where churches regularly take up that task, he believes their efforts are insufficient. This means that Merivillians think regularly about how their activities, both inside and outside of church, are serving their community. As Veronica summarizes, being a good citizen “means doing my part as far as helping. [...] being involved with a church and using your resources that you can help.”

Second, a vibrant church community creates a wealth of private financial resources available for application to social problems and situates churches at the center of a network of nonprofits, enabling them to facilitate collective problem-solving as new issues emerge.⁹⁰ This is reflected in the distribution of public and private resources in Meriville and Iverson: relative to Iverson County, Meriville County collects only 85% of the tax revenue per capita and receives only 4% of the per capita funding from the state. Meriville County also reported zero expenditure on public welfare in 2017.⁹¹ But these differences in public funds are balanced out by Meriville’s private resources: Meriville County has nearly three times as many assets per capita housed in service-based nonprofits as does Iverson County, and they take in more than double the revenue each year. These figures don’t even include religious organizations, which do not have to report their assets and revenue to the IRS unless their gross receipts equal or exceed \$200,000 annually or their total assets equal or exceed \$500,000 at the end of the tax year. There are no churches

⁹⁰ As Chaves (2004) points out, this role of church-as-facilitator is fairly typical among U.S. congregations. Most churches supply only a relatively small portion of volunteers, but house or coordinate social service activities, usually in collaboration with other nonprofits.

⁹¹ Figures based on the Census Bureau’s 2017 Survey of State and Local Government Finances, using the “Government Finance and Employment Classification Manual” to aggregate revenues and expenditures (see <https://www2.census.gov/govs/class/classfull.pdf>).

that meet these qualifications in Iverson, but in Meriville two church-affiliated foundations had assets exceeding \$5 million each in 2017. These differences may also explain why Meriville County, despite having 2,000 fewer residents than Iverson, has 60% more congregations—they have greater financial support from their members to sustain them. In fact, pastors in Iverson explain that congregations of the same denomination have had to combine to save money on physical buildings, and some are considering sharing the costs of one full-time pastor—the result not just of declines in membership numbers, but in the kinds of members who used to consider tithing central to church members.

Thus, in Meriville, churches and nonprofits are source of collective, private resources, and church leaders also serve as visible community leaders who facilitate collective problem-solving. One way they do so is through informal ties between pastors and among pastors and congregants: with some congregations of 1,000 members or more, certain pastors have direct relationships with a large portion of community members. Pastor Brown, for example, preaches at Immaculate, one of Meriville’s largest churches. As he explains: “we have lots of members...who are actively involved in leadership positions in these other groups, whether there’s Drug Awareness Advocates, or one of our gals is the director of the Clothing Co-op, another one works with the homeless shelter.” As a result, he often learns about community challenges and organizations working to resolve them through casual conversations with his parishioners. These are the “connections that never end,” which Lauren referred to earlier.

But there are also formal mechanisms for facilitating inter-faith collaboration and community problem-solving: each month, Meriville’s pastors meet at the Meriville County Consortium of Churches (MCCC). According to Pastor Brown, the MCCC offers a monthly venue where county pastors can come together to: “Focus on a specific organization that’s doing

something helpful in the life of the community. [...] We look at things that are broader than our own parish and that probably affect all of us one way or the other, and we can all kind of cooperate with.” It was through these gatherings that Immaculate Church heard more and more about the lack of affordable childcare services in Meriville a few years ago—a challenge that Iverson and Williston share—and decided to open a childcare center.

In some instances, these church-based offerings amount to an alternative system of social provision from what the rest of the community can access. Meriville County, for example, boasts three parochial elementary schools and one high school run by the LCMS Lutheran churches, which fund a full 70% of their members’ school tuition if they choose to attend a Lutheran school. But members also tithe to their churches to fund those schools, making them an incredibly popular choice for Lutherans. Jacob, who is now a public-school teacher but attended a private Lutheran school growing up, resents that some portion of what he donates to his Lutheran church goes toward this alternate school system. But, he reasons, the feeling goes both ways: “I mean, then the other parochial parents can say, well, I want to send my kids to parochial school, but I pay taxes. And those taxes go to public schools. And I don’t think that’s fair.”

But in most cases, churches’ activities are geared not just toward their members, but toward the community. Among the litany of services churches fund or directly provide are support for the homeless, food shelves, hot meals, recovery programs, and ad hoc benevolence funds when people come knocking. And the fact that social needs are met in Meriville through this network of nongovernmental organizations is not only permitted by local government, but also encouraged. When Mayor Redner concludes his list of the many nonprofit- and church-based organizations that provide social services in Meriville, he adds: “As a city, we’re lending support to those organizations, but we’re not doing the work.” I follow-up, asking: “Do you feel

you should be doing something?” He answers quickly: “We need to be doing more.” But by “more,” Mayor Redner does not mean taking over the provision of services, but helping to further solidify the existing system of non-governmental provision: “I don’t know the exact answer to what need to be doing more means, but we do need to be still supporting them more so than we are. [...] It’s just a matter of bridging the gaps between some of these organizations.” Where there are county or state funds available, Mayor Redner sees his role in city government as helping to direct those resources toward the existing programs. In Meriville, even those in government see non-governmental solutions as the way to meet many of residents’ needs. Mayor Redner envisions an expanded role for the city as a kind of public-private partnership in which the public entity takes a back seat.

And as the following chapter will elaborate, when new social problems emerge, churches step in to coordinate with churchgoing volunteers, local elected officials, and civic leaders. Over repeated iterations of this process, Meriville’s private arrangements for collective problem-solving become further institutionalized. The result is that, when there is a social problem in Meriville, residents look to their community rather than government. We will see how this is a central component of why Merivillians’ partisanship differs from Iversonians. But the preceding sections have also revealed the similarities between the two communities: they both have reliable organizational arrangements that structure collective action in the public sphere.

Williston

And this is where Iverson and Meriville differ most from Williston. Despite the fact that Williston shares many organizational characteristics with both Iverson and Meriville—the community has a rich history of labor organizing and a strong foundation of church membership

among its residents— neither of these organizations do in Williston what they do in Iverson and Meriville. In part, this is because Williston’s labor movement has struggled for survival and church membership increasingly shows signs of weakness; but it is also because they are not integrated into coalitions of community leaders, as they are in Iverson and Meriville.

But this is not simply a story of subtraction—it’s about the instability that characterizes the way Williston confronts social problems, and churches and unions are just one piece of this. But they are also an important piece of Williston’s story: I was surprised to find that the history of these organizations—particularly labor’s history—came up so regularly in conversations with residents. In other words, I focus here on the story of Williston labor and churches in part to offer a comparison with Iverson and Meriville, but in part because these stories matter to Willistonians themselves. In Chapter 5 I take up the other losses that Williston has suffered and examine what has emerged to fill the gap.

A Former Union Town

Like Iverson, Williston was in many ways “built by union,” but with a meaningful difference: it was also a company town, as Chapter 1 described. And in 1979, when Rivervalley filed for bankruptcy and sold the plant, it began the process of the local labor movement’s near-terminal decline. I learn about this history in the late summer of 2019 when I happen upon a handful of retired foundry workers and other labor leaders who drink coffee together every morning at the local union hall. It’s a squat, brown building on a hill beside a highway that bisects Williston. I arrive there one morning to track down the retired president of the local USW, Charlie, on the recommendation of a recent Democratic political candidate. Charlie is among the men seated in a circle in one of the offices, cradling a cup of coffee. He’s been retired

for almost 15 years, but led the USW for over three decades, encompassing most of the plant's ups and downs.

He describes these to me a few days after we first meet, as we sit around a conference table in the union hall examining a 10-foot chart with hand-written dates on one side and dollar amounts on the other. It's the union's log of every annual wage increase they'd gained since their formation in 1941 through July of 1982, just a few years after Charlie became president. He sets it down beside us as he tells me the story of his time at the head of the union. In 1979, Rivervalley filed for bankruptcy on a Friday – “Black Friday” Charlie calls it. Up until that day, Rivervalley had been paying their workers \$10.69 base wage, plus a piece rate. By the Monday after the bankruptcy filing, Rivervalley had slashed wages to \$6 an hour. As Charlie tells me: “I was making \$14.32 cents an hour on a Friday, came in on Monday morning, I'm making six dollars an hour. They cut our wages by that much. That's something.”

While a 3-week strike succeeded in raising wages to \$8 an hour, this was a pyric victory: by 2005, when Charlie retired, the foundry workers were up to just \$11 or \$12 an hour, just over where they'd been before the 1979 bankruptcy declaration. And in the interceding decades, Rivervalley declared bankruptcy and switched hands multiple times before its fire in 2001, throwing employees into unemployment and economic insecurity. Though the USW now represents workers at other foundries in the area, its strength and popularity have waned. Alex, its current president, explains that he has trouble voting the union in at new plants due to a lack of enthusiasm among the “younger generation.”

In other words, Williston is no longer a union town, though some labor leaders still describe it as such. But even when local labor was at its height, it did not engage in the kinds of contentious political battles that characterize organized labor in Iverson—in other words, union

town politics never defined Williston's public sphere. Although the USW has recently begun endorsing candidates for state representative and state senate since Alex has taken over as president, they have never been involved in city or county races. Like Iverson, Williston has non-partisan local elections. And yet, Iversonians still find themselves with a Council divided over labor issues. In Williston, while some people know the partisanship of their Councilors, there is notably far less contention over local races.

Charlie does recall hosting phone banks from the old union center, but that ended when the building flooded and they moved to the new union hall where we first met. It was also then that the labor council died, taking with it the only political element of Williston's labor movement. But Charlie describes this incident with greater concern over the loss of the building than the loss of the organization: "It was a nice place. It's too bad we couldn't have moved it out here," he laments. This was, perhaps, because he recalls the body as serving more to inform the state AFL-CIO about local goings-on than one that intervened in local politics or community life.

As a result, local politicians do not have a beaten path to the unions' front door. Derek, who recently ran for state-wide elected office in Williston, describes his experience with local labor organizations in this way:

You know, I went in to see them right away, as soon as I announced. Because unions are such a big part of my family history. You know, when we would get together for Christmas and Thanksgiving and my uncles and aunts were all around. I mean, we would hear stories about going on strike. I mean, it was just part of telling stories in our family. So I went there right away and I was happy to go there and they were happy to see me. And I got the impression that most of the candidates in the past that have ran as Democrats have not gone in to see them. And I was so surprised and shocked by that. So they were very happy to see a candidate who embraced organized labor.

Even with Derek's enthusiasm for organized labor, there was little institutionalized process by which he could seek out labor endorsements.

The surprise that Derek encountered at the union hall was not because the USW doesn't have a process for endorsing candidates – since Alex has been around, they have. It was because, as others explain, candidates rarely seek them out. This is a very different political landscape from Iverson's, where local elected officials regularly make the IFL their first stop on the campaign trail. It is also different in that Williston lacks the dense personal ties between the Party and the unions. Recall that in my first days in Iverson, multiple people pointed me to both Democratic leaders and labor leaders as crucial sources of information if I wanted to understand local politics. It quickly became clear that the politicians in Iverson know the labor leaders – in many cases, they *are* the labor leaders. In contrast, organized labor in Williston has focused their energy relentlessly on collective bargaining, strikes, and workers' rights vis-à-vis employers. In other words, as in Meriville, they have focused on employment rather than community politics.⁹²

A Struggling Church Town

Williston thus differs from Iverson in important ways, as it does with Meriville: despite even higher rates of church membership than in Meriville, Williston lacks the longstanding, dependable network of churches to fund and facilitate the provision of public goods. This is in part because Willistonians' church membership has changed in quality. Despite the fact that more than two thirds of the people I spoke with in Williston, attend church regularly, and many describe volunteering for the church as they do in Meriville, a number of residents are concerned

⁹² This is not unlike the outcome that Ira Katznelson describes in American cities during the 20th century, in which the ethnic organization of residential life separated workers from their roles as union members at work and their life as ethnic immigrants at home. Although the mechanism here is different, the outcome in Williston is the same: “the radical separation in people’s consciousness, speech, and activity of the politics of work from the politics of community” (Katznelson 1981:6).

that local churches are struggling. To Kim, it is yet another symptom of the malaise in small town America:

But the small churches are going the way of the small towns. You know, I don't know how we're gonna keep going. We've got this beautiful church building and we share a pastor with, we're yoked with somebody else. But I don't know. Financially, too. You know, they're just dying all over now.

Opinions in Williston are divided over whether churches are a vibrant, influential part of the community, or if they're a dying institution. Whether you're on one end or the other depends on which church you attend and how well it's doing. For those who attend the large mainline and evangelical churches in town, they see that attendance is stable or even growing. But they don't see the flip side of that, which Pastor Taylor, a pastor at the largest Lutheran church in Williston, recognizes – that stability comes at other churches' expense.

But despite potential challenges on the horizon, Willistonian churches are indeed involved in many of the same social service projects as Merivillian churches: they rotate responsibilities for a local soup kitchen; they contribute to food shelves; and they have recently begun funding the school district's backpack program. Even so, the institutional framework for churches providing public goods and social services over the long run does not exist. This, however, may be changing. Over the past two years, county churches have worked together to fund the local "backpack program." In each of Williston's elementary schools the social workers slip discrete, Ziplock bags full of food into the backpacks of needy children on Friday afternoons. In Williston, the program got its start through the churches, when members of Pastor Taylor's congregation asked a social worker at the neighboring elementary school how they could help.

Pastor Taylor describes how it spread quickly from a small group within his congregation to the rest of the community:

I invited the other pastors and then the other leaders, the lay leaders, the congregational members, they were invited to talk about it with their friends who go to those other churches. It happened within three weeks; we had a meeting. It's easy. Kids are easy. Everybody loves kids.

From their first year serving students in one elementary school, the program has grown to encompass most of the churches in town serving 550 children across all five elementary schools and the middle school.

While the program has been enormously successful, this level of engagement and problem-solving is relatively new to Williston's churches, as Pastor Taylor recounts: "This was all new," he tells me, "It was kind of exciting to be a part of that." Churches for years have shared in the hosting of a weekly soup kitchen, but apart from that, their collaboration has been minimal. Pastor Taylor describes the local ministerial association as more of a "networking group" than a place where pastors get together to address local problems.

This means that Willistonians have not had the same experiences of problem-solving with and through their churches that Merivillians have shared. Moreover, because of this lack of institutionalized collaboration, community leaders worry about the program's longevity. Marge, a former United Way director, explains that while she thinks Williston's churches "can be" great partners in serving the community, and she applauds their work on the backpack program, she is cautious to rely on them too heavily: if one particularly dedicated congregant or pastor should leave, she fears the entire system could crumble.

Even so, Willistonian churches have worked together to create an extensive system of food provision in their community. This would not have been possible without many of the factors common to Meriville and Williston: a relatively robust membership that contributes financially and is accustomed to volunteering with their churches. Where they differ from Meriville is that community leaders do not think of churches as a key resource to fall back on

when new social problems emerge, in part because many people think they're dying along with the rest of the town, as Kim's comments above indicate.

In contrast, churches are indisputably dying in Iverson, as described above. But this generally does not bother Iversonians who, unlike Kim from Williston, do not see church decline as emblematic of their community decline. That's because Iverson is a union town, not a church town—and this has long been the case. Here, unions continue to hold substantial sway over local elected officials who work to win good, union jobs in return. As we will see in the next chapter, these close ties ensure that Iverson community leaders understand the community's central problem as a lack of "good jobs," a structural challenge that creates additional problems such as drug addiction. And to resolve a structural economic problem, the community does what it always does—looks to the state to step in. Organized labor in Iverson thus perpetuates a political system lost in many cities in the post-Keynesian era: one in which political conflict centers around government as the entity most suitable for sustaining a healthy community by providing "good union jobs."

Merville, in contrast, *is* a church town, in which residents' dedication to church life creates a private pool of financial and human capital outside of local government, which churches direct toward addressing emergent social problems through networks of other churches and nonprofits. Where union town organizational arrangements ensure that Iversonians see their problems as deeply-rooted in long-term economic decline, the next chapter will show that these church town features help Merivillians cohere around definitions of social problems as *community* issues, to be addressed through internal, community resources.

But despite their differences, both Iverson and Meriville have elements of stickiness in their organizational life: unions are part of a virtuous cycle of leveraging political power for good jobs that sustain their membership, and churches are part of a network that residents and community leaders alike call on to resolve their problems, as the next chapter elaborates.

Williston alone lacks this stability, as neither churches nor unions are as central to community life as they once were. But even despite recent declines, organized labor and church membership in Williston retain elements of strength and vitality: unions are still able to gain footholds in new factories, even if it takes a few votes, and to endorse candidates for state offices, and churches still attract a substantial portion of residents to create a pool of private, collective resources to address social problems. And yet, for many residents, unions and churches are both part of the story of Williston's unmitigated decline, rather than organizations that provide social order and continuity to community life, as they are in Iverson and Meriville. As the preceding section showed, only part of this has to do with *actual* declines—even in their heyday, unions and churches in Williston did not actually do the same things as they still do in Iverson and Meriville. As a result, they do little to prevent residents from thinking of their community as a dying town, a community identity that is laden with political meaning, as Chapter 5 will explore.

In sum, Iverson, Meriville, and Williston differ not just in the quantity of organizational resources each community has—although Meriville does have more and better-funded churches than Iverson or Williston and Iverson and Williston likely do have more union members than Meriville. The differences that really matter are those that characterize the *organizational arrangements* in each community: the qualitative, quantitative, and relational aspects of public and private entities. The way that organizations understand their role in the community is central

to this: that churches in Meriville see themselves as both civic *and* religious leaders, and that unions in Iverson see themselves as political powerhouses *and* economic equalizers, differentiates these communities both from one another and from Williston.⁹³ Those qualitative and relational differences are, of course, supported by quantitative differences in the financial health and membership of these organizations. Taken together, as the following chapters show, they provide the contexts in which residents make sense of their shared problems and national political crises. And when those organizations provide regularity and stability to local problem-solving, as in Iverson and Meriville, they also produce and reproduce place-based politics.

⁹³ See Safford 2009 on the importance of the structure of local organizational networks for community problem-solving.

CHAPTER 3. HOW LOCAL CONTEXTS PRODUCE (ANTI)-STATISM IN IVERSON AND MERIVILLE

Everyone who knows Pam sings her praises. As the director of Meriville's Downtown Redevelopment Group, or DRG, she presides over the community's revitalization efforts, often in collaboration with Pete from the Economic Development Association, Meriville's Mayor, and a small army of volunteers. I meet Pam for the first time at her office in the Meriville City building, which sits at the end of Meriville's Main Street. Pam is petite, with short brown hair curled into loose waves framing her face, and full of energy and enthusiasm for her hometown. She tells me later that she teaches aerobics at the Meriville senior center in her spare time, and I can imagine that she excels at this.

We're talking about her history at the DRG and how revitalization has advanced under her watch. As she explains, the biggest obstacles to restoring Main Street to its former glory are Meriville's workforce shortage and the opioid crisis, two issues which she sees as mutually reinforcing: "I think the biggest thing that as a community we're facing is the drug problem. I think that is going on in a lot of towns. It's the opioid crisis. And that's creating an issue with workforce, I would say." As she says this, she pauses and reconsiders, then continues:

Well, I think we have a drug problem, and so that's an issue on its own. And then workforce is another issue, and I don't know if they're directly correlated, but we have a really low unemployment rate here. It's about two percent. And so, for me, when I'm trying to recruit a business to come downtown, they say to me, "Am I going to have trouble getting help?" "Yes, absolutely." And then when you get help, is it going to be someone who's on drugs and you get them trained and they do it for six weeks and then they quit?

Pam goes on, explaining how the opioid crisis has taken root in Meriville: "I think everybody here knows somebody who's being affected by it," she begins, echoing a common refrain in both

Iverson and Meriville. And without prompting, she goes on to reflect on the way the community has sought to address the crisis:

And we have Home of Mercy. We have lots of support, I would say, but I know one of the big issues is (the support organizations are) siloed ...And you've got 20 different entities, but nobody's working together. And so I know United Way ...they're trying to bring these people together... I think that nobody's on the same page on how to deal with the problem because you've got your faith-based and then you've got people who want to throw money at the problem.

Pam is concerned about addiction as a problem unto itself— “everybody here knows somebody who's being affected by it,” she tells me—but also as a problem for businesses and industry. The solution, she thinks, is greater coordination among the many faith-based and other nonprofit organizations who are already working to care for people suffering from addiction. This would help them and their families, and as a happy byproduct, help the local economy. In the way she both defines Meriville's social problems and thinks about a viable solution, she is very much like the other community leaders I spoke to in Meriville.

But her take is vastly different from that of Iverson's community leaders. Where Meriville's elected officials and civic leaders tout the low unemployment rate as a sign of economic vibrancy, even amidst ongoing concerns about homelessness and addiction, their counterparts in Iverson beat the same drum again and again. The solution to the community's myriad challenges? “It's jobs,” as Wendy, the Iverson County Director of Zoning tells me. “Yes, the jobs with the benefits, the decent-paying jobs with benefits,” she continues.

Although Wendy ran as a Democrat to help get elected in Iverson, she has some Republican leanings, she tells me. She was also one of the first people I spoke to when I arrived in town, but her take on the local economy and other social problems was borne out in almost every conversation that followed. And in Iverson, as in Meriville, the other social problem that

preoccupies everyone in summer and fall 2019 is the opioid crisis. As Wendy tells me, echoing Pam's comments about Meriville, opioid addiction is so widespread at this point that it "affects anybody" in town. And given its pervasiveness, for many community members it is a top priority to get the county to address it. But, Wendy continues, "[The county is] extremely strapped and so we don't have the resources. And Wisconsin doesn't provide inpatient treatment. And the people that have mental health issues, there's no place for them to go, which is - it's really a struggle."

Wendy and Pam's accounts are indicative of broader patterns in their respective communities. In Iverson, ties between unions and elected officials ensure that community leaders define Iverson's problems as structural – related to long-term trends of deindustrialization and deunionization—and center public attention on government as a key vehicle in shaping local economic health. Other problems, the opioid crisis was chief among them in summer 2019, are construed as symptoms of the community's structural economic decline. Within this framework, residents and community leaders look to local, state, and federal governments to help redress a problem of such large scale. Merivillians define social problems related to poverty as *community* challenges, rather than individual or structural ones. And as a community full of churches with the financial and social resources to facilitate problem-solving, they can take action to address community challenges. Even when those problems are not resolved by objective measures, residents regularly deem community efforts successful—often purely because of their visibility, in contrast to the hidden ways that state and federal governments support middle-class families and extend

aid through local nonprofits. As a result, Merivillians rarely look beyond their county boundaries for assistance. They are a community that takes care of itself.

But what unites Iverson and Meriville and distinguishes them both from Williston is that their local organizational arrangements provide stable contexts in which residents learn to define their problems and who they are as a community. As such, the remainder of this chapter and the next will focus just on Iverson and Meriville, and Chapter 5 will return us to Williston. As we will see, in Iverson and Meriville, it is within these stable organizational contexts that residents come to learn which social problems are suitable for public or private intervention. In other words, they shape residents' beliefs about the appropriate role of the state in their lives and in their communities.

In many ways, this outcome conforms to the standard account about how citizens come to make demands on the state: they learn how governments should meet citizens' needs through living within an institutional context where that is already how things are done.⁹⁴ But because these arguments generally rely on cross-national comparisons, they tend to focus on what makes the U.S. context distinctive—or even “exceptional”—from similar advanced industrialized nations: the U.S. has historically provided welfare through a combination of means-tested programs that impose of deservingness criteria on the poorest of recipients alongside “hidden” government support in the form of tax credits for lower-middle- and middle-class families. These particular institutional configurations have enabled Americans' high degree of anti-statism and individualism, because even people who do benefit from public resources may be unaware of this benefit or distinguish themselves from the “real” welfare recipients who rely on means-

⁹⁴ For literature on policy feedbacks and how welfare state institutions shape citizens' normative ideas about how the state should function, see: Pierson 1992; Staerklé, Likki, and Scheidegger 2012; Steensland 2006.

tested programs.⁹⁵ And for White Americans like the Iversonians and Merivillians I spoke to, this distinction is symbolically important because of the way the media has racialized welfare recipients as Black. As a result, racial resentment toward minoritized others further limits Whites' support for state intervention of various kinds, even when they would benefit (or already are benefiting) from those kinds of policies.⁹⁶

But neither pure individualism nor racialized concerns about undeserving others explain why Merivillians prefer nongovernmental, community-based solutions to social problems, nor why Iversonians call on the government—at all levels—to resolve similar problems. And that's because researchers' focus on national institutional contexts has obscured the importance of local variation in social provision that, as the last chapter described, increasingly defines how the American government takes care of its people: when today's community leaders want to provide services they have to draw on local networks of nonprofits, foundations, and corporations to do so. Naturally, this means that certain places will have more resources than others.⁹⁷ But as

⁹⁵ On the relative underdevelopment of the U.S. welfare state and the public's inegalitarianism and individualism, see: Feldman and Zaller 1992; Lipset 1963; Svallfors 2007. Several scholars have argued that the U.S. welfare state is better understood through the lens of qualitative rather than quantitative differences with peer nations: because of both contracting with private sector organizations and supports for middle-class and working families through tax credits, many of the ways that Americans benefit from their government are “submerged,” or not visible to recipients (Hacker 2002; Mettler 2011, 2018; Morgan and Campbell 2011). As qualitative evidence has shown, this institutional arrangement has created a situation in which people who receive the Earned-Income Tax Credit, for example, draw boundaries of moral worth between themselves and recipients of means-tested programs such as TANF (Halpern-Meehan et al. 2015).

⁹⁶ On the media's racialization of welfare recipients, see: Gilens 2000. A longstanding research tradition links White racial resentment to low support for redistributive policies of all kinds, see (Bobo and Kluegel 1993; Hochschild 2016; Metzl 2018; Tesler 2012; Wetts and Willer 2018; White 2007). For a review of the literature, see: Hutchings and Valentino 2004.

⁹⁷ On nonprofits and spatial inequality in cities, see: Allard 2009; Allard and Small 2013; Marwell and Gullickson 2013; Marwell, Marantz, and Baldassarri 2020; Marwell and Morrissey 2020.

Chapter 2 argued, it's not just differences in quantity that shape how problems are defined and solved, it's also differences in quality: what local organizations do and how they fit together within a broader network through their connections with other public and private organizations. Today, as rural, ex-urban, and postindustrial communities grapple with mounting problems related to poverty, the way they take on those challenges increasingly depends not just on the availability of service-oriented nonprofits, local businesses, and unions, but on how those organizational actors are connected to one another and whether they are willing to engage in collective problem-solving.⁹⁸ In other words, organizational arrangements are defined not just by the quantity of organizations, but also by their quality—what they do in their communities—and their relationships to other organizations.

Each of these elements matters for local problem-solving in Iverson and Meriville, as this chapter will show. When residents confront a new problem in each case, they work within the organizational arrangements described in Chapter 2 to do so. This means that Iversonians are more likely to go to a City Councilor while Merivillians are more likely to go to a church leader, but also that the City Councilor in Iverson may *also* be a labor leader while the pastor in Meriville will *also* sit on the MCCC and may share that problem with a broader network of congregations and nonprofits.

Through repeated experiences of community problem-solving within these different organizational contexts, residents learn the community's answer to the question—what kind of

⁹⁸ On the particular challenges of meeting social service needs in rural and ex-urban communities, see: Carr and Kefalas 2009; Lobao 2004; Lobao and Kraybill 2005; Warner 2003; Warner and Hefetz 2003. On how local organizational resources different organizational ties lead to different kinds of public and collective action in both rural and urban communities, see: Flora et al. 1997; Lobao, Adua, and Hooks 2014; Morton, Chen, and Morse 2008; Pacewicz 2016; Safford 2009.

problem is this?—and the solutions that the community can offer. Existing ways of defining and solving problems become both *shared* among residents and *taken-for-granted*.⁹⁹ And by taking for granted that the City Council, state government, churches, or nonprofits should be at the helm of solving emergent challenges, residents in Iverson and Meriville reproduce existing organizational arrangements—centered around government as a terrain on which to battle for economic outcomes on the one hand, and centered around a private network of social resources, on the other.¹⁰⁰ For example, the very fact that Merivillians believe churches can and should serve as community problem-solvers means that they don't just look to their pastors in times of trouble; they also donate their time and money to their church, shoring up churches' capacity to serve as stores of private financial and human resources.¹⁰¹

The stability that these local organizational arrangements provide is a crucial piece of the puzzle to understanding why the political differences between Iverson and Meriville have persisted for so long. I have already argued that these arrangements do not just matter for local outcomes, but are also consequential for national politics: by shaping different ways of defining and solving problems, they are a crucial building block in shaping partisan ties among residents

⁹⁹ This argument draws on cultural sociologists' claims that beliefs emerge from repeated experiences within institutional contexts that support those beliefs. See: Lizardo 2017; Martin and Desmond 2010; Strand and Lizardo 2015. This conceptualization of beliefs as rooted in experience stands in contrast to prevailing accounts of public opinion formation, which instead argue that people form political opinions by following their party's stance on an issue (see Zaller 1992).

¹⁰⁰ What I am describing here is a shared mode of community-level *civic action* (per Lichterman and Eliasoph 2014) that is taken-for-granted among residents.

¹⁰¹ As Molotch, Freudenburg, and Paulsen 2000 argue, there is a degree of path dependency that renders the social meaning of places relatively stable: just as places affect everything from residents' health and education outcomes to their interactional modes (e.g., Sharkey and Faber 2014), so too do residents' actions reinforce the meaning of place each time they draw “on the configurations of place that have so durably come down” (Molotch et al. 2000:817) and act toward others with the assumption that they will do the same.

in both Iverson and Meriville. But in this chapter I extend these claims, showing how the persistence of these arrangements is part of a cycle that reproduces residents' beliefs about the state and, as a result, perpetuates the communities' political differences.

Meriville

As Chapter 2 showed, Meriville's churches are more than just the sum of their parts: they bring together an active and engaged set of volunteers and a pool of private financial resources, which they offer to nonprofits and other churches to solve local social problems. In other words, they are critical community actors that facilitate a broad, loosely knit, and longstanding network of nongovernmental social provision that permeates Merivillian community life. In this chapter, we will see how these organizational arrangements are perpetuated over time, as new social problems emerge, residents look to churches to solve them, and churches step in alongside other local nonprofits. The community deems these efforts successful and repeats this process each time they encounter a new challenge. As a result, residents come to take for granted that social problems can and should find church- and nonprofit-based solutions; not necessarily without effort from the community, but in coordination with churchgoing volunteers, local elected officials, and other civic leaders.

Defining & Solving Problems in a Church Town

This process often begins with the way residents view churches' role in the community. Kyle, for example, is a young Independent in his second year of college, who describes Meriville's churches in the following way: "I mean, (churches) give people their religion, of course, and they go to them for that. But, in the community [...] A lot of the churches, like if

there's a need in the community and they need help, the churches are the first places that people contact." Kyle recognizes that churches are, of course, religious institutions first and foremost. But in Meriville, they're also the place to go "if there's a need." And he is not alone in thinking this way. Regardless of their own church membership status or denominational affiliation, Merivillians reiterated again and again that they would turn to the churches if they encountered a new problem in the community.

This understanding of churches' role as part of the bedrock of social service provision in Meriville comes from both everyday ways of sharing information and particular moments of civic action. Residents regularly learn about the many services churches provide to the community through their own volunteer work or hearing about church ministries from their pastors, Facebook, or the local news.¹⁰² Even local politicians post on Facebook regularly about community service events and activities; in fact, this was the third most-common type of post among Meriville's politicians during the 2020 election cycle, despite the COVID-19 pandemic and political mobilizations in the wake of George Floyd's murder.

Through these channels, residents come to see churches as central to community problem-solving, and this view is also reinforced each time a new social problem emerges and churches are part of the solution to that problem. I observed one portion of this problem-solving cycle during my fieldwork. At the time, the community was still reeling from events that took place a few years prior, when a homeless man was found frozen to death in his car. In response to the tragedy, a local pastor came up with the idea for an organization called "Winter Church Shelters" (WCS). Taking the lead from models in other communities, she suggested that

¹⁰² This is a fairly typical experience among U.S. churchgoers, who hear from social service groups or learn about their churches' civic projects at Sunday services (Brewer, Kersh, and Petersen 2003; Chaves 2004).

churches sign up to house the homeless for one week a month from December to April.

According to then-candidate and now-Mayor Redner: “Their goal was just to make sure nobody freezes to death.” Over the following winters, they succeeded.

And they did so through the churches, and more specifically, through the MCCC—the Meriville County Consortium of Churches. With its past track record of addressing local challenges, it made sense as the starting point for WCS. The program was able to garner enough support among local congregations to ensure that, for the two following winters, no one froze to death in Meriville County. Even so, the church-by-church shelter operation placed a heavy burden on the congregations who participated: during their week, they had to staff volunteers from 6 p.m. to 6 a.m. The fact that Merivillians were able to sustain this level of volunteerism speaks to the deep roots of civic engagement in the community.

But WCS’ greatest legacy was that it served to raise awareness that homelessness was indeed a pressing challenge for the community. Those who were involved describe feeling shocked to learn just how many people in Meriville needed a place to sleep at night. At the same time, some residents were aware of how difficult it would be to house the homeless with this temporary action. This led residents to coalesce around an organization better-suited to the task: Service & Action Ministries (SAM). SAM began when, as its founder Karla tells it, “God gave us a vision for a ministry plan that had a whole lot of different things in it,” which amounted to a “continuum of care” for local people in need. SAM is intensely focused on, as one volunteer describes it, doing “charity wisely.” Now, in addition to providing a street ministry that serves meals each Wednesday evening and constructing a permanent homeless shelter in Meriville, SAM is also building an organization that will operate as the centralized clearinghouse for

churches and other nonprofits to provide social services to the community. As Karla describes it, this is the “benevolence side” of SAM:

So this is where churches can give their benevolence money and we work with individuals and do some screening, do some follow-up and after-care, and just some responsible stewardship of money and a little bit more than what the normal church is able to do, because they just don’t have the training and the time that we do. So our navigators will also work with the people and take them to jobs ...(and) appointments and help them fill out forms and help them to access what we already have in Meriville County.

As was the case with WCS, local churches were pivotal to SAM’s success. Not only do they fund SAM’s benevolence work through donations, they also helped SAM grow from just a handful of volunteers in their Wednesday evening street ministry to over 40 regulars.

As with WCS, SAM’s founders spoke in front of churches and the MCCC. But the informal networks linking pastors and nonprofits also helped SAM to gain local support quickly. Pastor Brown, for example, explains that while he’d heard of SAM through the MCCC, he really got acquainted when one of his parishioners married a woman who was actively involved in their Wednesday evening ministry. As he described in the last chapter, he learns a lot about different community organizations in this way. Ultimately, churches began offering financial and human resources to support SAM and the organization grew.

SAM’s emergence crystallizes years of private problem-solving efforts in Meriville within one organization. Before SAM, Meriville maintained a loose network of organizations who had the resources to provide social services as needs arose in the community. But with SAM, Meriville now has a further institutionalized, centralized care network that operates outside of the city, county, and state governments.

The Community as Problem-Solver

SAM's origin story illustrates a more general social process that takes place in Meriville: when a new social problem emerges residents fall back on private, collective resources to solve it. When churches and nonprofits take action, residents deem their efforts as successful at meeting many of the challenges related to poverty, such as hunger and homelessness, and they continue to volunteer for and donate to those organizations. In doing so, they not only perpetuate their existing organizational arrangements—as SAM's emergence shows—but also confirm their belief that problems related to poverty are *community challenges* rather than structural or individual ones. As such, they can and should be resolved through community-based efforts.

Merivillians' belief in their community's success at meeting problems related to poverty is overwhelmingly evident. Many residents, for example, describe homelessness as a key challenge for their community, but they often do so in the same breath as they praise SAM and local churches for working to resolve the challenge. And more generally, residents believe their network of nongovernmental provision is successful at providing for local social needs—regardless of whether they are, by objective measures, resolving issues related to hunger, housing, or drugs. Patrick, for example, is a non-churchgoing Democrat who lists the various organizations working to care for the hungry and homeless, and then concludes: “So I feel like people wouldn't go hungry if they had a need in our community.” Many others I spoke to agreed. When Meriville has a problem, local churches and nonprofits step up and resolve it. Patty, who also does not belong to a church but does belong to a union, simply says: “You know, our community really does a good job at that (providing resources for people suffering from addiction or homelessness)” and then goes on to list four ways the “need is being met” by local churches and nonprofits.

And because Merivillians view these problem-solving experiences as successful, they categorize a whole range of social problems as appropriate for private, collective response rather than state intervention. Mallory, for example, is a teacher and Republican who has lived in Meriville County her entire life. When I ask her how she would go about addressing a new social problem in Meriville, she explains:

As far as like the housing issue, I think ...that's something like churches do help with. And food. I mean, I think churches and those type of organizations, and other volunteer (groups)...I think they kind of rally together to address those type of issues of basic needs.

Mallory's thinking here is hypothetical—but she imagines the churches could take care of a future community challenge because she knows they have actually done so in the past.

Moreover, many residents explicitly recognize that churches and nonprofits are a substitute for local government action, and for them, their preferred substitute. For example, when I speak with Katherine, a local retiree and Republican, about how the community can best respond to local challenges, she launches into a long list, and concludes: “most of these places [someone] could get immediate relief.” In contrast, she explains: “If they went to a government agency or something, you know, they've got to fill out paperwork and then sometimes they have to wait to get help.” Katherine echoes several of her neighbors in concluding that, relative to the government, churches and nonprofits are a better, faster way of getting people the resources they need. In fact, when I asked Merivillians explicitly who could best respond to any challenges that arise in town, 13 people mentioned churches or nonprofits. And they do so because they are familiar with Meriville's highly visible, private problem-solving arrangements, and they deem those efforts as successful in addressing many of the community's social problems.

And yet, Meriville's problem-solving is, by many measures, *not* successful. Take, for example, the opioid epidemic: by objective measures of overdose deaths (as shown in Table 2 in

Chapter 2), Meriville is not resolving the drug crisis, a fact that many residents recognize. In fact, Meriville is suffering from a far more severe crisis than both Iverson and Williston by standard metrics of drug overdoses, hospitalizations, and prescription rates. But even when Meriville's local problem-solving network does not "work" in this instance, residents rarely experience it as failing. Instead, Merivillians tend to conclude that addiction is an individual problem, and they don't blame the community's response for failing as they don't think addiction is the community's responsibility in the first place.

This became clear in my second round of conversations with Merivillians, in March 2020. After hearing residents concerns about the opioid crisis again and again during summer and fall 2019, I started to ask about it more directly: had anything changed, was it still a concern for them, and were they aware of anything Meriville was doing to address the crisis? When it came to that last question, few residents could pinpoint any meaningful action. Patrick, for example, is the same person who applauds the community's ability to feed the hungry, but when I ask him if the opioid crisis is still a concern for him in March 2020, he tells me: "I haven't seen really any kind of major movement in that area. I know that there are a lot of groups still working on working on it, but there really hasn't been a lot of action taken. So, it is still a problem." Others offer similar responses, noting school DARE programs, needle drop points, or the NARCAN that police officers carry with them. But only one person, a local law enforcement officer, is aware of specific actions taken by the police force and feels Meriville has materially improved the local crisis during the early months of 2020.

Even so, hardly anyone blames local government, the community, or its constituent organizations for this. Instead, they tend to recategorize the problem as an individual rather than collective one. Katherine, for example, recently participated in a NARCAN training that a local

business owner and nurse have coordinated. She did so because her cousin recently died of an opioid overdose. As she explains, during those seminars the coordinators do advocate for people to go to rehab and “get help.” But, she concludes: “Some people are ready and some people aren’t.” Note that Katherine’s conclusion, while individualizing the crisis, is not an effort to distance herself from those struggling with addiction. In fact, given how much it has cost her family, she is full of compassion for anyone suffering in this way and volunteers with a church that provides meals to that community. In this respect, she is similar to many Merivillians I spoke with: while not necessarily blaming addicts whose names and faces they know, they tend to recategorize the problem as one not suitable for collective problem-solving at all. This kind of recategorization helps explain why Merivillians’ belief that the current problem-solving arrangements work remains intact even when they objectively fail to solve problems.

As a result, residents continue to articulate beliefs in the value of church- and nonprofit-based social provision when they imagine dealing with hypothetical challenges, and they also enact those hypotheticals by volunteering with organizations like SAM and their churches. Through those volunteer networks, church activities, and social media posts, church and nonprofit efforts to resolve community challenges are highly visible to residents—the state, in contrast, is nowhere to be found. In large part because of this visibility, the community then declares these efforts a success, and residents reach out to those same networks, leaders, and organizations when a new challenge arises. In other words, their beliefs “work.”¹⁰³ Each iteration of problem-solving thus reproduces both the organizational arrangements and residents’ beliefs in their efficacy. Eventually, as the successes pile up, this becomes the taken-for-granted way that residents think of to solve all social problems.

¹⁰³ Lizardo and Strand 2010

From Community Challenges to Anti-Statism

But for these processes to matter for Heartland politics, they must also shape how Merivillians think about national issues. And as this section shows, that is indeed the case: when Merivillians think about how to solve problems on a national scale that have similar characteristics to those they confront locally, they apply a similar logic to what they've seen work in their community. For example, when I ask Mallory, the teacher quoted above, how she thinks society *writ large* can best take care of people's needs, she tells me: "I think the things we're doing now." She then goes on to again describe local churches and nonprofits, and the work she sees them doing in their community. In other words, local experiences serve as a reference point for political beliefs on both the local and national scale.

As a result, when Merivillians consider the kind of role they want their government to play in their lives, they express a distaste for state intervention a preference for churches and nonprofits to take over. And while residents do see a clear distinction between those who are "deserving" and "undeserving" of assistance, they also distinguish between the kinds of social problems that are suitable for private and public intervention.

Cal, for example, is a retired Republican who explains his own attachment to the Republican Party the first time we meet by saying:

Republicans, I think, are more independent, and people doing things instead of government doing it. Individuals or local things. Food stamp programs and free lunches and all of that. You know, I don't think a government should be involved in any of that. In this country, I can't believe if you're able bodied [...] that you can't make it if you're not worthless and lazy. But I also believe that in this country - and they don't do it as much as they, I understand, used to or what they should - is churches and social organizations and all should take care of that kind of thing rather than the government taking care of it. And they would do a much better job.

Cal's reasoning here offers insight into how Merivillians' local problem-solving experiences produce a particular kind of anti-statism. First, he articulates a language of deservingness, explaining that healthy people should take be able to take care of themselves unless they are "worthless and lazy." This type of language is not uncommon among Merivillians. As Sophy, a Republican who works in an office job at a local manufacturer, tells me: "some people are just waiting for their handout." Given the media's racialization of welfare recipients, it's possible that Cal, Sophy, and other Merivillians are thinking of Black Americans when they refer to "some people" as "worthless and lazy." And if concerns about undeserving people of color benefiting from federal welfare provision were driving most of their beliefs about state intervention, there would be little indication that place plays any role in this.

But this is not the case. The key point here is that even when Cal recognizes a "genuine" need, he prefers to meet that need through non-governmental entities. More specifically, Cal notes that his preferred mechanism for providing social welfare is either "individuals or local things." Like many Merivillians, he has a tendency to equate "local" with non-governmental. Hugh, a local law enforcement officer and Democrat, elaborates on this view:

And I think by giving stuff away, it's pushed people away from what our country was built on. Our country was built on small communities taking care of each other. And now everybody thinks the federal government's got to take care of it. And that's not the case. I think the states need to take care of their states with a little assistance from the federal government. But it's not like that.

Hugh, like Cal, tends to equate federal government with "government" and all other entities – including state and local governments – with "not the government." Although not all Merivillians draw this same equivalency, their prevailing anti-centralism comes from a similar place as their anti-statism, as Hugh's remarks show. As a result, residents often have far less of an issue with their local or even state governments involving themselves in local challenges than

they do the federal government. And that's because, for Merivillians, hunger, homelessness, and other social problems are *community* challenges rather than individual or structural challenges. As such, these challenges can and should be resolved locally and privately.

Moreover, the pervasiveness of the local, nongovernmental preference among Merivillians is so strongly linked to everyday experience living in a church-going community that it cuts across party lines, even in such a hyper-polarized era. Hugh, for example, is a lifelong Democrat who ardently believes in communities taking care of themselves. In other words, Merivillians' anti-statism is just that—Merivillian.

Iverson

Iverson is a different story from Meriville. As Chapter 2 showed, it does not have nearly Meriville's level of private and collective resources to address social problems. And although church leaders describe ongoing efforts to serve the community amidst limited resources, Iversonians are less likely to be aware of these efforts than are Merivillians—in part because of differences in church membership, but also because of differences in what people talk about. In Iverson, for example, local politicians rarely post on Facebook about community service activities. Moreover, even when residents *do* see churches or nonprofits helping out, they do not deem their work successful. And that's because close ties between organized labor and local politicians in Iverson shape how the community both defines and solves social problems, as this section illustrates through the lens of the opioid epidemic. The political activities of organized labor help ensure that Iversonians conceptualize their problems as rooted in structural economic declines that have disadvantaged their community, and they center public action around government as a driving force shaping the community's economic health. Unlike in Meriville

and Williston, Iversonians view other social problems as symptoms of their community's structural disadvantage, beyond any one individual's or the community's control, and they turn to local, state, and occasionally federal governments to help them combat these structural challenges. Although the outcome is different from what we saw in Meriville, the process is similar: each community learns to interpret social problems related to poverty and economic precarity through their experiences within stable organizational arrangements. And just as church town politics produces anti-statism in Meriville, union town politics produces statism in Iverson.

Defining & Solving Problems in a Union Town

During my first few weeks in Iverson I spent much of my time in the offices of elected officials and civic leaders. Through those conversations it quickly became clear that Iverson's community leaders agree that declines in domestic manufacturing are at the root of all the community's challenges. As Elliot, who sits on Iverson's Business Industrial Development committee, tells me: "We struggle in this area. We were built on manufacturing and transportation and that sort of started to shift and move away. We haven't fully recovered from that. We found some other ways to do it, but not fully." The way to recover, leaders like Elliot explain again and again, is to bring good jobs back to the community. Ed, a City Councilor elaborates on this. The Council, he tells me, often finds itself trapped in discussions about whether to focus on attracting new retailers, growing local tourism, developing homegrown businesses, or trying to bring in new industry. But amidst all of these options, he concludes: "I think it's more important to have *actually* good jobs." And on this, Iverson's elected officials are united.

In other words, despite some areas of disagreement, Iverson's community leaders agree on one thing: their problems are rooted in a long-term drain of good jobs from the community, due to both deindustrialization and deunionization. And, as Wendy describes above, it is these structural factors that are at the root of the community's other social problems. And in summer 2019, the problem of greatest concern to Iversonians was the opioid epidemic. Solving that crisis required bringing back good jobs. And for Iverson's community leaders, this solution is pursued not just through the private sector, but also through the public sector, as both local and state governments are understood as key players in shaping the community's economic outcomes.

This way of understanding the community's problems as rooted in structural economic decline, linked to the political sphere, stems from relationships among local union leaders, elected officials in Iverson, and the Wisconsin state government. Tight ties between the City Council and organized labor ensure that community leaders are intensively focused on the quality rather than quantity of jobs as a metric of economic success and center political contestation around local and state governments as central to shaping the community's economic health. As the former City Councilor Mark explained in Chapter 2, elected officials understand their job, in part, as using government resources and power to help further the goal of bringing good quality jobs to town and supporting unions. Recall that this is in fact what elected officials do when they sign PLAs and unanimously support projects that bring good union jobs to the community—as they did with the new energy project described in Chapter 2. And local officials' understanding of the state as an arbiter of economic outcomes was further reinforced during the years of the Scott Walker administration when, as community leaders recount again and again,

the state government took a hammer to unions. Labor leaders, civic leaders, and elected officials in Iverson have learned that economic goals can and must be pursued through political action.

The importance of this understanding becomes clear when Iverson's community leaders confront challenges that pose trade-offs between good jobs and other outcomes that are consequential for the community. And in Iverson, a place where the economy is deeply dependent on fossil fuels and Democratic residents are hunters and fishers who love the environment, one such trade-off that emerges with some regularity is that between good jobs and the environment. In such instances, as with the energy project, elected officials work to carefully avoid community debate that would force residents to consider their biggest employers as posing an environmental threat.

A particularly vivid example of these efforts took place just before my fieldwork began, when a train carrying crude oil through town derailed, caught fire, and exploded. Everyone has a story of where they were when it happened. Elaine saw the cloud mushrooming over the train while she was driving. Danny had to be evacuated but snuck back home in the middle of the night. The blast knocked Sybil's mother-in-law off her chair. Fear rippled through the community over night until local authorities announced that the explosion had been contained and evacuees could return home.

In the wake of this incident, the railroad sought to rebuild. This was not uncontroversial, as it had likely harmed residents' health, polluted the air and soil, and of course, put thousands of peoples' lives at risk. When the mayor in the neighboring community called for the rail line to permanently stop carrying crude oil and other hazardous chemicals through town, Iverson's Mayor Hayte—who ran for office with organized labor's support multiple times—stood in support of it. As he explained his decision to me in summer 2019: “No brainer over here,

everybody supports the railroad.” Even in saying this, Mayor Hayte acknowledged some contradiction in his stance: personally, he considers himself a staunch environmentalist, but as Iverson’s mayor, he also recognizes that he cannot pursue environmental goals at the cost of good quality jobs for the community. And that’s because, like other elected officials, Mayor Hayte understands that part of his *raison d’être* as mayor is to use local government to maintain and grow the community’s good jobs.

Moreover, the consequences of this are not just financial to Mayor Hayte, because he views the long-term drain of jobs as underlying the community’s other challenges, as he later explains when describing the community’s opioid crisis in summer 2019:

We get almost no assistance from the state of Wisconsin. [...] some of the lowest Medicaid reimbursement rates in the country lead to a massive addiction crisis, one of the worst in the entire country. And our area with our much higher poverty rates is among the worst hit for addiction...

Mayor Hayte’s comments echo an overwhelmingly common refrain among Iversonian community leaders during the summer and fall of 2019: their lack of resources is compounding, as a dearth of good jobs leads to poverty, poverty increases the prevalence of addiction, the state does not help address the addiction crisis, and the community languishes further.

In other words, Iverson’s community leaders understand their problems as structural, rooted in a shifting political economy over the past several decades that has cost the community good, union jobs that provide “family-supporting wages.” In fact, they view their challenges as so deeply interwoven that people often describe them in the same breath. One question might elicit a response that moves quickly from the decline of some of the best-paid industries in town, to residents’ turn toward the bars to resolve problems, to further declines into meth and opioid addiction. For example, when I ask a local Democratic Party activist, Jordan, if he can describe any challenges the community is facing, he replies:

...like other parts of America, we don't have - our manufacturing is disappearing...there's a lot of low paying jobs that are kind of medium-paying jobs in the healthcare industry and hospitality and stuff. But there's not a lot of kind of the things that really created wealth. And, you know, also, stuff like opioids. I mean- just I mean, a million issues that plague really all of America, but can be especially when you're (pauses) when it's kind of, very susceptible to that, I guess.

As Jordan explains, Iverson is a place—because of its economic decline and the lack of wealth-creating employment—that is susceptible to addiction. This is often how residents and community leaders alike describe Iverson's challenges—like “other parts of America” they have issues with opioids, but these issues are particularly acute here because of the lack of good jobs.

And as several community leaders see it, this symptom of poverty and economic precarity is not a new one for Iverson: before opioids it was meth, and before meth, it was alcohol. Sally, for example, is the labor leader described in Chapter 2 who tells me: “This town has always been plagued with alcoholism because of the seasonal work and sometimes poverty. We've always had a little poverty in this area. It's always been the lower end. Going from alcoholism to just a new drug...” Pastor Arnold, who preaches at an evangelical church, summarizes this view succinctly: “It's trading one addiction for another.”

And amidst these worrisome symptoms of economic decline, Iverson's leaders point to the neglect—often seen as malignant—of the Wisconsin state government. As representatives of a unionized, Democratic stronghold during the Scott Walker administration, many of Iverson's community leaders are used to maintaining an antagonistic relationship with the state, fighting tooth and nail *against* Act 10 and Right to Work and *for* more public funding. And in the case of the opioid epidemic, Iverson has several specific issues with the state. Not only has Wisconsin failed to provide adequate funding for mental health and addiction treatment and declined to take the Medicaid expansion under the Affordable Care Act; the Republican-led legislature has limited municipalities' ability to levy their own taxes, requiring that tax increases be

proportionate to new development. In Iverson, this is an especially frustrating box to be in given that residents have already passed a referendum to raise taxes, but the state will not permit it.

Even amidst the state's ongoing obstinacy, Iverson's elected officials continue to appear annually in Madison to lobby on behalf of Iverson and Iverson County. But for the most part, it is to little avail. As Luke, from the County Board, tells me, even their successes are inadequate. A recent agreement that procured \$15 million extra for county Health and Human Services departments across the state of Wisconsin would mean, based on his estimates, a couple hundred thousand dollars for a county of Iverson's size. "It sounds like a lot," he says, watching my face as I react to the \$15 million number. "Remember, we're \$2 million over budget," he concludes. As intended, he effectively tempers my excitement.

But even as the state fails to address the opioid crisis in the way that Iverson's community leaders have asked, they continue to recognize the importance of state resources and power for their community's well-being: the Walker Administration's actions only reinforced community leaders' understanding that the political sphere is central to shaping outcomes in the economic sphere. And the outcome that Iverson's community leaders want more than anything is a healthy community, which they believe must be built on good quality jobs.

This objective may seem somewhat unsurprising, but it stands out in contrast to Meriville, where people repeatedly affirm in the summer of 2019 that their biggest problem is *too many jobs* for their population, as former Meriville Mayor Lubock and the DRG Director Pam recounted in Chapter 3. Even those whose job does not entail worrying about Meriville's workforce echo these concerns. Pastor Ron leads one of the largest congregations in Meriville, and as he explains, Meriville currently has: "Probably the lowest unemployment this place ever seen." He continues:

And people who say that they can't find a job or are just fooling themselves. They don't want a job, because there's plenty of jobs. We've got business owners in our congregation who are begging for workers and they have to increase their starting salaries just to compete with other business is in town.

It's difficult to imagine a community leader in Iverson speaking similarly about wage increases with the kind of concern that Pastor Ron invokes; in fact, the byproduct that concerns Pastor Ron is the goal for Iversonians. And in contrast to Merivillians' unmitigated pleasure in their low unemployment rate, even as Iversonians estimated that the town had 300 unfilled positions when I began my fieldwork in summer 2019, no one characterized the economy as "booming."

Moreover, many of the local leaders I spoke with in Meriville conceive of their community's challenges—housing shortages and the opioid crisis in particular—as exactly the inverse of how Iversonians think of them: they are barriers to attracting and retaining employers, rather than symptoms of deeper social and economic issues. But this is not because Merivillians don't recognize the human cost of drug addiction or homelessness; given their faith-based and civic volunteerism, even those who have not been affected personally by these social problems are all too aware of the toll they are taking on their neighbors. And Merivillians care deeply about this. But recall how Pam from the DRG thinks about the opioid crisis—it is both a challenge in its own right—one that is touching almost everyone in the community in one way or another—and a challenge for employers. Both can be true, and are true, for Meriville's community leaders. But providing better jobs is not the solution for either.

And as the tables and figures in Chapter 2 showed, these differences in the way that the communities' problems are defined—as a lack of *good jobs* in Iverson and a lack of the right mix of *attractions for business* in Meriville—are not easily explainable by economic and demographic measures. Iverson's residents have already seen better wage growth than Meriville's, and Meriville has seen more jobs than Iverson. In other words, the community's are

already succeeding—at least in relative terms—on the metrics they set out for themselves, so we might expect Merivillians to focus more on raising wages and Iversonians to focus more on economic growth.

But that's not what happens, because it is only in Iverson where elected officials see bringing good jobs back to the community as part of their *raison d'être*, in part because Iversonian labor works hard to ensure that they do. But oftentimes, labor doesn't have to work hard. Most community leaders already agree with unions' definition of the community's challenges and with the notion that politics shapes economic outcomes. Recall how Mark, the former City Councilor, caveated his obligation to local organized labor who helped elect him: "So I supported whatever they want – not like blindly following them, but more, I agree with that." Relationships between organized labor, local elected officials, and the state of Wisconsin thus ensure that Iverson's community leaders understand their problems as rooted in structural economic challenges, and that political contestation is centered around local and state governments as key players in shaping the community's economic health.

The State as Problem-Solver

Perhaps most importantly for electoral politics, ordinary residents in Iverson overwhelmingly agree with their leaders' assessment. Brenda, for example, is in her mid-30s and works three part-time jobs, most recently as a teachers' aide. In summer 2019, she describes feeling shocked by the amount of poverty and addiction she saw afflicting children in the local public schools. As she explains her view of the situation, she echoes Mayor Hayte's comments: "So I am concerned because, again, if there is not a lot of good jobs and you are concerned about that, besides drinking, opioids are gonna be really cheap...And so I can understand that, you

know, these things just kind of keep this horrible cycle going.” Later in the conversation, Brenda continues, also referring to the opioid epidemic: “And again, like what resources do we have, which isn’t a lot, to deal with that?” Crucially, for Brenda, those resources are public, not private. And other Iversonians agree with Brenda and their community leaders: Iverson is struggling under the weight of structural challenges that require better jobs and more resources from the state of Wisconsin.

As in Meriville, this way of diagnosing problems and identifying solutions is reproduced through both everyday experiences and specific moments of community problem-solving. But in contrast to Meriville, where social problems go hand in hand with church- and nonprofit-based solutions, Iversonians lack similar experiences of successful problem-solving: community leaders’ efforts have only partially sheltered Iverson from Scott Walker’s attacks on unions, deindustrialization, or the challenges of the opioid epidemic. And as Brenda’s somewhat-exasperated comments indicate, residents recognize these failures. And yet, they continue to define and redefine their problems as rooted in structural economic decline and imagine the state as a vehicle for redressing this.

In part, this is because of specific actions like those taken by Mayor Hayte in the immediate aftermath of the railroad explosion. By rapidly coming down on this side of the issue, Mayor Hayte helped prevent residents from having to think about the railroad as posing a trade-off between good jobs and environmental or public health. This is particularly important in a community where many people I spoke to consider themselves environmentalists and there are several active environmental activist groups in surrounding counties. And yet, members of these groups, whose advocacy I observed at city and county meetings when they spoke on behalf of other environmental issues, also told me that they were not involved in any coordinated response

to the explosion. As a result, residents could continue to think of the railroad merely as a big employer and less as an environmental or public health risk. The result was that it's rebuilding was not a controversial issue among Iversonians. Nearly everyone I spoke to supported the railroad because, as Spencer told me, "it's one of the biggest and best-paying players in town." In Iverson, unlike in similar communities that are dependent on extractive industries, unions' links with local government ensure that citizens are not forced to view jobs and the environment as a zero-sum game.¹⁰⁴ And when residents continue to elect leaders with labor support, like Mayor Hayte, they ensure that this continues.

But just as in Meriville, Iversonians' shared understanding of their community's problems is reproduced not just in these relatively rare, but meaningful, experiences of collective problem-solving: it is also reaffirmed in everyday social interactions, the way people speak about their community, and how they interpret their own and others' experiences within the local economy. Residents regularly tell themselves that their own challenges finding good jobs—and those of their friends, family, and neighbors—are not their fault, but the fault of the local economy. In other words, they refuse to individualize the problem. Again and again, from people with and without college degrees and across various industries, I heard similar experiences: Elaine, who does not have a college degree, bounced from temporary work to bartending when she first came back to town; Kayce worked as a waitress for months after graduating from a

¹⁰⁴ In key swing states like Pennsylvania, managing the trade-off between jobs and the environment is often understood as a critical challenge for Democrats who support both climate change mitigation policies *and* organized labor (see, e.g., Meyer 2021). And as Arlie Hochschild (2016) has shown in Louisiana, when issues come to be understood through this zero-sum framework, it often forces people to choose their livelihoods over their physical well-being or local environmental health. These counterfactuals suggest the power of union politics in Iverson where, as one City Councilor told me, elected officials might bicker for hours over their pet projects but have no problem approving large environmental projects that invest in protecting their wetlands.

nearby college and finding her degree less-than-employable; Brenda continues to work three part-time jobs despite having a college degree. Renne is a county employee who watched many of her friends leave town even as she stayed after graduating from the local community college.

When I ask her to describe Iverson's challenges, she reflects on her own experiences:

Earlier when you asked why I had stayed (while others left), it was because - part of it was because I had found a good job. I feel very lucky to have the job that I have because I don't think a lot of people do. And I think there's a lot of people who struggle financially. So, you know, trying to get those nice jobs with good benefits is so important (for the community).

Like other Iversonians, Renne explains that good jobs – those with benefits, wages that can support a family, and union protections – are hard to come by in Iverson. When you can find one, you don't let it go.

All four women offered similar stories and explained that the community's economic situation, rather than they or their friends as individuals, were at fault. And this is not simply because they are union members and believe in a union message about the importance of a living wage: only Brenda and Renne have union ties, and Brenda's is through her husband, a former union member who lost representation after Act 10.

Moreover, among ordinary Iversonians, like their leaders, this dearth of quality employment is at the heart of many of the challenges the community is facing today. This includes, as Brenda suggested above, addiction of various kinds. And as residents tell each other and themselves these stories, they return again and again to the need for jobs that “create wealth,” as Christopher tells me the first time we meet in summer 2019. This, again, may seem unsurprising: people want to live in a community with good jobs, both for themselves and for their friends and family. And yet, this is not how Merivillians think about their local economy or how it fits into a broader system of social relations. One of the most common refrains among

Merivillians in the summer and fall of 2019 is: “anybody wants a job here, they can find one,” as Harriett tells me. As a small business owner the low unemployment poses a challenge for Harriett, who worries about retaining employees. But even residents on the other side of the employment contract agree with her assessment. Shannon and Ken, for example, are a couple living in Meriville County who are self-employed and often piece together odd jobs that keep them working long hours. When I ask them about the community’s challenges, Ken tells me:

Ken: One of the things that’s really good about Meriville is they have a lot of employment here.

Shannon: They do!”

Ken: I’ve told her that I could go out every day of the week and get a different job every day of the week

Shannon: Mhmm. Factories.

Ken: We have plenty of economy and work.

Although Ken himself would prefer not to work at a factory because of how they treat their employees, he is one of the only people who mentions job quality at all. But even for Ken, Meriville’s economy is defined by the glut of jobs, not their poor wages. As a result, Merivillians somewhat contradictorily see poverty, homelessness, and drug addiction as a feature of their community even amidst a booming economy. To Merivillians, these challenges are *not* symptoms of structural issues, such as the proliferation of low wage jobs and growth of income inequality amidst union decline.

But to Iversonians, they are. And to resolve their structural challenges, Iversonians argue that they need help “from higher up,” as Quinn tells me. In other words, they need the state. In the case of local challenges like the opioid crisis that means, specifically, the state of Wisconsin. Sybil, for example, is a lifelong Republican who, when faced with the deleterious consequences of the opioid epidemic in Iverson, argues: “We need more money from state governments for

treatment.” This is in fact the most common refrain I heard among Iversonians regarding the opioid crisis: the state of Wisconsin needs to provide for in-patient treatment closer to home.

In part, this is because they feel the state of Wisconsin owes them. Much like Katherine Cramer (2016) identifies in her work, Iversonians feel a kind of rural resentment the state of Wisconsin has long neglected rural communities and small towns outside of Madison and Milwaukee. Tucked away in the middle of the state, Iversonians feel like they are “ignored state-wide,” as Isabelle says. She continues: “So when there’s a politician that’s out, they don’t come out here, not to Iverson.” But Iverson is also different from the communities that Cramer studies: while they articulate a similar rural resentment grounded in a feeling that the state does not treat rural residents equally to urban ones, their solution is different. Rather than linger on feelings of anti-statist populism, Iversonians follow their community leaders and turn *toward* the state. This, despite the fact that they believe the Wisconsin state government has only harmed their community in recent years. So why do they continue to advocate for the same problem-solving strategies—in this case, calling on the state for more public funds—when residents and community leaders alike overwhelmingly agree that those strategies have never been successful?

For many, the nearby examples of Illinois and Minnesota stand out as salient models of a better way—and importantly, a more public way—to do things. Tonja is an apolitical Independent and a social worker with no ties to unions, who explained the situation to me when we met in the fall of 2019: “So, resources are really, really bad here, and it’s really funny cause when I worked in Minnesota and I came to Iverson, what they said is - what you have to realize is, there’s no resources in Iverson. Across the border there’s a wealth of resources. [...] They have a different human services, they have different funding.” Tonja’s work brings her into direct contact with the services, or lack thereof, that Iverson offers to people struggling with drug

addiction, but she is not alone in drawing these comparisons. While Iversonians may not have a local model that successfully resolves their social problems, they do see that public resources can help ease structural challenges.

But there is also the more fundamental reason that Iversonians continue to turn toward the state: they view their challenges as symptoms of structural economic decline, which can be redressed in part by leveraging state power and resources. This is evident in the way they talk about private, collective problem-solving efforts in town. Although nonprofits and churches rarely figure into Iversonians' descriptions of their community, some do point to private organizations as places they would send someone in need. But many also note that they would only do so reluctantly. Jamie, for example, is one of a handful of people who is familiar with the local Catholic Aid Society's work to provide temporary shelter and assistance to people in need of it. But as she tells me when I ask her how our society can best take care of people's needs, that is not actually the way to address homelessness. Rather: "Well, if we had something preventative, I guess would be the best way to find a way to keep people from becoming homeless. If we have the social structures in place, that helps people to stop people from becoming homeless or food insecure, why do we not have that?" Jamie, like many Iversonians I spoke to, does not just advocate for root-cause solutions, she also sees other efforts in the community—even those led by an organization she trusts and admires like the Catholic Aid Society—as band-aids rather than solutions.

This chapter has shown how local organizational arrangements make certain ways of defining and solving problems more likely in Iverson and Meriville. When residents of each

community apply these local logics to similar kinds of problems, related to poverty and economic precarity, they arrive at different solutions: Merivillians turn toward their community and Iversonians turn toward the state.

Within the church town arrangements of Meriville, residents see social problems related to poverty as *community* challenges, which can and should be resolved through their local network of churches and nonprofits. In fact, these links are so tight in Meriville that residents often identify community challenges by describing the nonprofit or church that is working to address it – in other words, social problems go hand in hand with community-based solutions. Underlying residents’ belief in the efficacy of community problem-solving are their experiences, in which nonprofit and church-based efforts are highly visible, while the myriad ways that the federal and state governments support middle-class families and local nonprofits remain hidden from view.

In contrast, in the context of their union town arrangements, Iversonians see their problems as structural, symptomatic of long-term economic decline and a drain of good jobs from the community. As a result, they look to the government to redress these structural issues. And in the case of the opioid epidemic, they specifically to the state of as the “higher up” power, to use Quinn’s language, that can help address their challenges.

Throughout the chapter I have also provided evidence that these processes are rooted in community-level factors, not just individual organizational affiliations: for example, Iversonians like Brenda, Christopher, Tonja, and Jamie think the same way about their community’s problems, but only Brenda has any recent ties to a union. And Merivillians agree that their community can and should take care of their own, regardless of church membership or

denominational affiliation: Patty and Patrick, quoted above, both articulated this belief repeatedly despite the fact that neither attends church and Patty is a union member.

In sum, while the outcomes are different in each place, the community-level mechanisms linking local organizational arrangements and routine ways of defining and solving social problems are similar in Iverson and Meriville: local organizational arrangements make certain ways of defining and solving problems more likely; residents and community leaders eventually come to take for granted that their community is characterized by a certain set of problems; and each time they confront a new challenge, they draw on these understandings and reproduce their local organizational arrangements – as the emergence of SAM in Meriville illustrates.

This means that local organizational arrangements and routine ways of defining and solving problems provide both an active and passive constraint on residents' orientation toward the state:¹⁰⁵ Iverson, for example, simply couldn't solve problems the way Meriville does because it doesn't have financially healthy churches, an active volunteer population, or longstanding connections among local churches and nonprofits. But even if we were to introduce those organizational elements to Iverson, it would take many experiences of successful problem-solving and a shift in the way people talk about social problems for both community leaders and residents alike to come to the same conclusions as Merivillians.

For this reason, distinctive local organizational arrangements help perpetuate political differences between the two communities. But for local contexts to shape the communities' *partisan* differences, these place-based, (anti)-statist beliefs must also be linked to residents' partisanship. The next chapter shows that this is indeed the case: these two place elements—local

¹⁰⁵ Clemens and Cook 1999; Sewell Jr 1992; Thelen 1999

organizational arrangements and routine ways of defining and solving problems—form the building blocks on which partisan identity is built and reinforced in each community.

CHAPTER 4. FROM PLACE TO PARTISAN IDENTITY IN IVERSON AND MERIVILLE

Meriville used to be a Democratic county, a fact that sweetens the Republican Party's overwhelming victories every election cycle: even in local races, Democrats no longer stand a chance. Judge Meyer, an elected Republican in Meriville County, explains her understanding of how this came about when we meet at her office inside the county courthouse. A poster of Ronald Reagan adorns the wall above us as we speak:

I mean, traditionally, even probably as recently as 20, 30 years ago, Meriville County was a Democrat county. And it just swapped hard...I think it's because the Democratic Party has moved so far left. The Democrats here are what I refer to as old-style, labor-type Democrats. They were farmers and laborers that—you know, New Deal-type Democrats. And when (the) Democratic Party started moving into so many –what they would refer to as like far-left social issues—that's when I think they lost this county. I think the whole, you know, co-ed bathrooms in schools. People are just like, what? I mean, people are just really old-school Midwestern (in Meriville). Like, what? Yeah, girls are girls and boys are boys... that kind of stuff is super confusing to people here.

Later, she adds: “I think probably primarily what makes this community more conservative than a lot of other communities—both socially, fiscally, and religiously—is the tie to the church.”

Judge Meyer's summary proves insightful: Merivillians overwhelmingly agree that issues such as abortion and LGBTQ rights—what they consider moral issues—are fundamental to partisan divisions.

In contrast, many Iversonians would disagree with Judge Meyer's characterization of the Democratic Party. When Iversonians think about what is at stake when they cast a vote for one party or the other, they think about the divide between the “haves” and the “have-nots.” Megan, who sits on a local industrial development board in Iverson, explains why she thinks Iverson is a Democratic town in this way:

All of my family was hardworking, hands-on industry, union family, right? So, I just grew up with—and I think a lot of—I can't say for sure for all families (in Iverson)—but I feel like there was this, what's going to be best for us, what's best for our community, and what's best for their families? ... (Iversonians) had a voice and I think because of those unions, too, of how to come together to have those conversations.

For Megan and other Iversonians, the Democrats still feel like the “labor-type” party that Judge Meyer thinks of as a bygone institution. And even residents who are no longer blue-collar, union workers—Megan, for example, is college-educated and works in a white-collar job—often continue to identify themselves and their community with the working-classes and organized labor.

Throughout this book, I have argued that distinctive organizational arrangements in Iverson and Meriville are central to understanding why Iverson is so stubbornly Democratic and Meriville is so thoroughly Republican. Chapters 2 and 3 showed how unions' integration into local politics creates a shared commitment among Iversonians to bring good jobs and public resources back to the community in the wake of structural economic decline, and how churches' role in facilitating private problem-solving in Meriville ensures that residents define their problems as community challenges, to be resolved locally. The differences between Judge Meyer and Megan capture the remainder of the explanation as to why Iversonians tend toward the Democratic Party and Merivillians tend toward the Republican Party: the two women understand partisan politics to be organized around different battle lines, and they locate their communities on different sides of those divides.

Judge Meyer and Megan are not alone in their conceptualizations of what the Democratic and Republican parties represent; rather, each articulates some subset of the many meanings contained within the contemporary parties. To an extent, the Republican Party *is* the party of

Christian morality; business interests; White racial conservatism; and local rather than federal control, while the Democratic Party is the party of women’s right to choose; the workers’ side of the business-labor divide; racial equality; and federal intervention. These positions do not naturally go together: for example, there is no reason why one party should stand for both organized labor and a woman’s right to choose. But these diverse stances came to be bundled together over decades, as social groups—defined by racial, class, gender, and religious divisions—mobilized politically and advocated for their inclusion into the two political parties, as described in Chapter 1. Over time, certain connections were made, others were broken, and the parties adopted issues that were important to their members so that they could gain and retain elected office.¹⁰⁶ Although scholars may disagree on the exact nature of the relationship between parties and groups, they tend to agree that the Democratic and Republican parties of today advocate for issue bundles not because of politicians’ inherent policy aims or ideological purity, but because of the social groups they represent.¹⁰⁷

What this means for the American public is that individuals form party attachments based on which party is home to their “kinds of people”—or others who share their social identity—

¹⁰⁶ This is true of both classic, post-war accounts of political parties (see, e.g., Eldersveld 1964; Key 1947; Schattschneider 1942) and the most recent scholarly accounts of party evolution, but there are alternative perspectives. Most notable, rational choice accounts that parties are coalitions not of social groups, but of individual legislators (see Aldrich 1995). For a summary of both sociological and political science theories of American political parties, see: Mudge and Chen 2014.

¹⁰⁷ There is some disagreement about the causal relationships between parties and groups. Political scientists in the UCLA school argue that parties evolve as social groups advocate for inclusion in a party coalition or press their existing party coalition for change (see Bawn et al. 2012; Karol 2009; Schlozman 2015). On the other hand, sociologists in the political articulation school argue that political parties can actually shape the formation of social groups themselves (see De Leon, Desai, and Tuğal 2009). In both accounts, “ideology” may not be the driver, but it can play a role in justifying diverse issue bundles within one party. On the role of ideological entrepreneurs in bringing these varied issue positions together within each party, see Noel 2013.

rather than through a careful consideration of each party's policy programs and how those programs affect their well-being.¹⁰⁸ And according to scholars who argue that local and regional variation in the political parties has waned in recent years, the question of which groups belong to which party should be easier and easier for Americans to answer, regardless of where they live.¹⁰⁹

And yet, this is not true of Iverson and Meriville, as Judge Meyer's and Megan's comments. In many ways, the party evolutions generally thought of as *historical* processes, as described in Chapter 1, appear here as a contemporary difference in the parties' meanings across *places*.¹¹⁰ As this chapter illustrates, this is because each community's local organizational arrangements provide the context in which residents make sense of national party politics and their place in it.

We can understand this process through two distinct phases—the construction of social identities and the way that those identities are mapped onto the party system.¹¹¹ First, despite

¹⁰⁸ In fact, one of the most classic and oft-reproduced findings in studies of American political behavior are that Americans' issue positions are relatively unconstrained by an underlying ideology (Baldassarri and Gelman 2008; Converse 2006; Kinder and Kalmoe 2017) and their voting behavior is relatively unconstrained by the policies that would benefit them financially (Kiewiet and Lewis-Beck 2011; Kinder and Kiewiet 1981). What drive political behavior is partisanship, and what drives partisanship is social identity (Achen and Bartels 2016; Green et al. 2002).

¹⁰⁹ These claims are part of a broader argument about the “nationalization” of American politics (see Hopkins 2018). Much of that argument has to do with the decline of the incumbency advantage and the rise of partisanship as a predictor of voting in subnational elections (Jacobson 2015). My data do not speak to these questions, but do shed light on what the political parties mean to residents of Iverson and Meriville.

¹¹⁰ There are some exceptions to the claim that scholars see political realignments as historical rather than spatial. Most notably, there is a large literature on the Southern realignment in the wake of the Civil Rights era (see, e.g., Black and Black 2003; Fleisher 1993; Shafer 2009), but there has also been research on other spatial patterns in realignments (Darmofal 2008; Darmofal and Nardulli 2010; Nardulli 1995).

¹¹¹ Political scientists have criticized the discipline's standard assumptions about how voters' social identities immediately translate into political identities. As Taeku Lee (2008) writes, these

sharing similar social group memberships based on their race, occupation, education, and even religion, residents of Iverson and Meriville view their communities and themselves through different lenses: Merivillians understand their community as a German Lutheran town that takes care of itself, and Iversonians understand theirs as a struggling working town that would benefit from state intervention. In other words, place shapes the way residents of Iverson and Meriville understand their social identities. Local problem-solving experiences partially explain this link, as residents locate their towns within stories of successful problem-solving—as in Meriville’s case—or within stories about the accumulation of disadvantage—as in Iverson’s case.¹¹² The other part of the explanation, as scholars have shown in other communities, is how local social milieus—everything from the physical landscape of businesses and organizations to encounters with other residents who identify themselves in certain ways—remind residents that their community is a certain kind of place, and therefore, that they are certain kinds of people.¹¹³

And second, community organizations help produce distinct, local interpretations of the political parties and which social groups they represent. This means that even if residents of Iverson and Meriville were to share similar understandings of their social identities, they would disagree on which party best represents them. In Meriville, people have learned through their church-going community that Republicans are the party of religion and local control in a political system divided by morality and the extent of federal government intervention. The Republicans

assumptions are rooted in old models from Black political identity during the Civil Rights movement. Now, he argues that scholars need to study how collective social identities are cultivated and then directed toward political action rather than, say, economic or cultural ends. Here, I take up Lee’s call and argue that place is an important part of both the construction of social identities and how they are translated into political identities.

¹¹² See Somers 1994, for a discussion of narrative identity.

¹¹³ On place and LGBTQ identities, see: Brown-Saracino 2018. On rural identity, see: Cramer 2016. On Orthodox Jewish identity, see: Tavory 2016.

are the party for them. And in Iverson, people have learned through experiences in their union town that Democrats are the party of the have-nots in a political system divided by economic inequality. Democrats are the party for them. The result is that union town politics create working-class, Democratic voters out of much the same demographic material in Iverson as church town politics create Christian, Republican voters who can take care of themselves in Meriville.¹¹⁴ Place produces—and reproduces—politics.

This is not simply an argument about Iverson containing more union members, who see the world in one way, and Meriville containing more churchgoers, who see the world in another way: if churches, and particularly White evangelical churches, have increasingly become sites of Republican partisan identity formation since the 1980s, and unions have long been sites of Democratic activism (although waning in recent years), then communities with more churchgoers will have more Republicans and communities with more unions will have more Democrats.¹¹⁵ And quantity does matter in both Iverson and Meriville, where union members on the one hand more frequently articulate a Democratic attachment based on their class identity,

¹¹⁴ This is in many ways similar to claims made by sociologists in the political articulation school, who argue that any individual *may be* interpellated as a multitude of political subjects, and that political parties choose which identity to emphasize and link to a particular “imaginary” cause (De Leon et al. 2009:198). These scholars’ highlight that political parties are at least semi-autonomous from social structure (in contrast to Lipset and Rokkan 1967), allowing them this room to maneuver. There is a party-based account that elucidates the contingent process of political identity formation from social group membership, per Lee (2008). My argument is a place-based account that serves the same ends. Although I do not claim that political parties are irrelevant to the formation and politicization of social groups, I am arguing that place is *also* an important factor in this process.

¹¹⁵ See Wuthnow 2012 for an account about religion and politics in the American Heartland. Although the links between Christians and the Republican Party still appear strong, the links between Democrats and unions have weakened steadily over time. See Figure A5 of the Appendix for my own analysis of ANES data on union voting from 1948-2016.

and church members on the other hand more frequently articulate a Republican attachment based on their religious identity.

But as this chapter shows, Iverson and Meriville's community-level political understandings extend far beyond individuals' direct organizational ties to churches and unions, and also extend well beyond the realm of narrow, issue-based voting. But in a standard national survey or public opinion poll, the voices of Iversonians and Merivillians might appear as just one among many possible interpretations of what the political parties mean. It is only once we meet Iversonians and Merivillians where they live that we see how these interpretations are deeply rooted in place. The local contexts that I have described in previous chapters solidify and perpetuate the partisan ties that ultimately produce an image familiar to most Americans from November election nights every four years: red and blue squares scattered across a map of the U.S.

Meriville: The Republicans are the Party for Us

The previous chapter documented how Merivillians' particular form of anti-statism emerges through their experiences of addressing hunger and homelessness from within their community. These experiences also shape their community identity: they are a churchgoing town, where, as Todd tells me, "we always take care of our own." This self-understanding is central to Merivillians' Republicanism, but it also suggests an important boundary—between those who are *excluded* from the community's care, and those who are *included*.¹¹⁶ And to Merivillians, their community is defined explicitly and overwhelming along ethno-religious lines: they think of themselves not just as a churchgoing community or a Christian community,

¹¹⁶ See Lamont 1992.

but as a German Lutheran community. The Republican Party, home to White Christians and small communities who want to maintain local control without federal interference, is their home too.

A Community of German Lutherans that Can Take Care of Ourselves

On my very first day in Meriville, I spend the afternoon in the passenger seat of Wayne's pickup as he gives me tour of Meriville County. Wayne is a former County Commissioner who grew up in a county north of Meriville. We're making our way along the winding roads, surrounded by corn and soybean fields, as he repeatedly picks up the same thread of conversation: "This is a heavy Lutheran—*German* Lutheran area," he tells me. "You drive through Meriville (City) and you're gonna see a lot of Lutheran churches. You drive through the country, and I can show you a lot of Lutheran churches." And he sticks to his word. A few hours later, as we come up a hill, he teases: "Guess what kind of church it's gonna be up here on my right?" "Lutheran?" I ask. "Ding, ding, ding!" he says. We head back south, and he points out the cemeteries and farms with German names. Although I had spent just a few hours in town before meeting Wayne, he was not the first person to point out this defining feature of Meriville: it is a German Lutheran place. This way of understanding their community is so pervasive among White Merivillians in part because churches are central both to individuals' daily lives and routines and to the community's way of solving social problems, as we have seen. But they also serve as social stratifiers, such that the continued preeminence of German Lutheran congregations perpetuates the community's identity as a White, European place, even as the local demographic make-up changes amidst growing immigration from Mexico and Central America.

The importance of church membership within every day social interactions regularly calls to mind Merivillians' Christianity and denominational identification.¹¹⁷ As a result, residents in Meriville are likely to describe themselves as Christians without being asked, just as they are likely to identify their community as a Christian community without being asked. Kyle, for example, summarizes his hometown succinctly: "I think it's very Christian-based." And at their maximum, the pervasive church ties in Meriville lead to a kind of social pressure, such that church membership becomes a requirement for social citizenship. Oftentimes, the first question people ask newcomers to town is, "Which church do you go to?" During our conversations, many residents asked me a corollary version of this question, along the lines of: "What's your religion?" Generally, the assumption underlying this question is that religion is limited to Christianity.

The social pressure on church attendance is clearest among those who buck the prevailing trend. This becomes evident when Patrick, a non-churchgoer, "confesses" his status to me at the end of an interview, after I've turned off the recorder. He only does so after asking me about my own politics. Finding out that I register as a Democrat, he breathes a sigh of relief, and then he spills the details. When I first asked him if he attends a church in town, Patrick told me: "My wife goes to church, takes the boys there, (they) go as a family. I'm not practicing." At the time, I thought little of this response, only later realizing this was a carefully chosen phrase, as he explains:¹

'When you asked me about where I go to church, I got a bit nervous,' Patrick tells me. 'Really?' I ask him. 'Yeah,' he says, 'I think I might be a closet atheist.' I laugh at the phrase, but he continues: 'Honestly, it might be harder to be an atheist around here than to be gay!' He tells me that when he first came back to town after graduating from college, the first thing everyone asked him was where he was living; the second was where he was going to church. 'For some people, the church

¹¹⁷ See Tavory (2016).

question was the first question!’ he adds. ‘And some people specifically asked if I was a Lutheran, because they know some members of my family are. I never wanted to lie,’ he explains, ‘so I always tried to avoid the question.’ He explains that citing his wife’s church became a useful evasion tactic. ‘But,’ he concludes, ‘I really think there’s a bit of a Lutheran mafia around here.’ He tells me the story of how two people he knew from school used to attend the biggest Lutheran Church in town, and when they stopped going, the church announced it in their bulletin. They were small business owners and Patrick felt this was the Church’s way of telling people to stop shopping at their business.

Although Patrick is the only person in Meriville to express this degree of social pressure surrounding church membership, he is also the only person I spoke with who grew up attending a church in Meriville and has since ceased practicing. The other residents I spoke to who no longer attend church grew up elsewhere. Patrick is, further, the only Merivillian in the study who identifies as an atheist (although notice he still prefaces this identification with the caveat, “might be”). His status thus raises questions among family, friends, and acquaintances, as he describes above. Others don’t feel such a pressure because they do belong to churches and participate in church life—just as Linda describes in Chapter 2, it’s a taken-for-granted aspect of their daily routines and social practices.

But Meriville is not just a community that prizes Christianity and church membership: as Patrick’s and Wayne’s comments indicate, it’s a Lutheran community – and, even more specifically, a German Lutheran community. And as with their understanding of the community as “faith-based,” Merivillians’ recognition that this is a German Lutheran community is about more than just the number of people who attend Lutheran churches in town or who have German heritage: while adherents of Lutheran Church of the Missouri-Synod churches (LCMS, or “German Lutherans,” in Merivillians’ parlance) do make up about one third of all religious

adherents in the county, the ethno-religious composition of the county is changing as largely Catholic immigrants from Mexico and Central America have joined Meriville's ranks.¹¹⁸

Amidst these objective changes in the county's ethno-religious composition, residents reminded me again and again that Meriville is a German Lutheran community, despite the fact that I never asked anyone about the community's denominational or ethnic make-up. For example, when I ask Larry what church he attends, before answering he recalls the exact number of Lutheran churches in the county – 13. There are also physical markers, in addition to churches, that remind residents of their community's ethno-religious identity: street signs and park names in German; large signs as you enter town from either direction proclaiming the names of the largest German Lutheran churches; and an annual festival celebrating the community's German heritage. And as Wayne did during our first drive through the county together, residents occasionally reference these physical markers when explaining how Meriville is, in part, defined by its German Lutheran character.

This community identity is also reinforced because residents regularly use church membership to locate each other within a local social hierarchy. Patrick is not only person in Meriville to describe something like a "Lutheran mafia" in town: several people explain that, just as big Lutheran churches matter for members' access to resources like parochial education, they also matter for social status. Fred, for example, is a member of Immaculate Lutheran Church, a German Lutheran congregation and the largest in Meriville. When I ask him where he and his wife attend, he answers the question and then cites their impressive membership numbers. A few days later, I join him at the daily Burger King breakfast, and within a few moments of meeting

¹¹⁸ Based on 2010 data from the Association of Religion Data Archives survey of church adherents.

the group, he pauses the conversation to announce: “You know, all of us,” he begins, gesturing toward himself and three others seated around a cluster of tables, “Go to the same church. Immaculate. It’s the biggest church in town. The current mayor goes to our church.” As Fred points out each member, they smile and nod. A few months later when I return to have coffee with the group, another Immaculate churchgoer repeats a nearly identical routine.

The flip side of the Burger King crowd’s pride is the experience of social exclusion among those who do not share the prevailing ethno-religious identity. Lori, for example, grew up in Meriville but feels she’s never quite fit in. She wears her dark brown hair short and neatly coiffed and when I first meet her in mid-summer, her skin is tanned. She describes Meriville as “hardcore German Lutheran.” Her kids just came back from a Baptist Bible camp in Georgia and she said they were shocked at how different everyone was – they had brown curly hair and freckles! In Meriville, this is not the case, as Lori explains: “Everybody, all the farmers marry another farm girl that went to the same Lutheran church and then they raise little blond haired, blue-eyed babies and then they go to the same Lutheran church.” Among the “diverse” crowd at Bible camp, Lori’s kids felt like they fit in for the first time. “Fitting in” in Meriville requires not just Whiteness or Christianity, but a particular combination of both.

There are also, of course, elements of overt racism and prejudice in Meriville – just as there are in Iverson and Williston. But in Meriville, a former sundown town, it was legalized and institutionalized for much of its history. James, an older Black man and one of the retired Burger King attendees, recalls the segregated neighborhood he lived in growing up, the fact that he wasn’t allowed to eat at a local diner, and his exclusion from the local Boys and Girls Club. While these experiences are seared into James’ brain, they were news to the White members of the Burger King club. Fred in fact was shocked and horrified by James’ account when he first

heard it during one of these early morning meetings – despite the fact that they’d grown up going to school together. In some ways, this should not have surprised Fred, whose mother was of Italian heritage and who also described feeling that he was different when he moved to Meriville at the age of five and found himself among so many Germans. And yet, America’s system of racial oppression seemed far-off to Fred in the Meriville he grew up in, because it was 99.5% White at that time. Instead, he saw the community as one characterized by White ethnic and religious denominational divisions, as did many other residents of his generation. And while some of those tensions have eased, their ongoing importance as community identifiers is revealed in both Lutherans’ own feelings of social status and non-Lutherans’ feelings of exclusion. Even today, as Merivillians grapple with a new color line amidst the community’s growing and highly segregated immigrant population, this ethno-religious identity persists. In fact, it’s not uncommon to hear the same people ponder over how to achieve greater integration between native-born residents and the immigrant community, while also touting the annual Oktoberfest and the German street signs.

The persistence of this community identity despite the growth of immigration may be one reason why White Merivillians articulate almost no feelings of racial threat associated with people of color in their own community, despite their concerns about threats from Muslims and “riots” in urban centers. In fact, most White residents I spoke to understand immigrants as the backbone of the local economy, even though they overwhelmingly support Donald Trump as a presidential candidate.

This also means that when Merivillians think about taking care of their community without government intervention, it is possible that they maintain a racialized imagination of who would be excluded from such efforts. But what is clear is that they certainly have a

racialized understanding of who would be included: a community of White Christians. In other words, racial politics in Meriville is about more than just racism—as it is elsewhere in the U.S., it is also about group identity—and, in this case, community identity.¹¹⁹

The Republicans are the Party of Christianity, Local Control, and White People

As a result of the multi-faceted role that Meriville’s churches play as community problem-solvers, social stratifiers, and, of course, religious edifiers, Merivillians understand their community as a place where churchgoers—namely, White ethnic Christians—take care of themselves. And as described above, this identity is about more than just individual organizational affiliations, as it is shared across lines of church membership and denominational affiliation. In sum, it is a place-based identity. And living in a community defined in this way also informs how Merivillians understand what’s at stake in national party politics: to them, partisan divisions center around race, Christian morality, and the appropriate role of the state. And amidst those divides, Republicans are the party of White Christianity and local control. In other words, Republicans are the party for Merivillians.

This is not an argument about churchgoers voting for Republicans because they only care about abortion as an issue—although many churchgoers I spoke to *do* care deeply about this. Instead, these understandings are clearly linked to place: what distinguishes Merivillians from Iversonians and Willistonians is that, regardless of partisanship, political knowledge, or church attendance, Merivillians tend to agree that Christianity is one of the centers of organized political conflict. Linda, for example, is a Republican who tends to stay away from politics, and giggles with embarrassment when I ask her to describe the differences between the two political parties.

¹¹⁹ See, e.g., Doane and Bonilla-Silva 2013; Jardina 2019; Lewis 2004.

Even so, she concludes that political divisions are rooted in Biblical differences. As she describes the issues that most divide people:

Again, I think it's those things that are like issues of faith. You know, like life issues, lifestyle choices, things that hundreds of years ago, when probably more of the nation was a Christian nation that people just took for granted [...] And now I think you're seeing more people saying, well, just because the Bible says this is true doesn't mean that it's true. And so I think going away from those Biblical values is what's pulling people apart.

Many Merivillians like Linda see “issues of faith” as the central fissures of American politics.

And when it comes to putting formal labels on those divisions, Merivillians further agree that the Republican Party represents the Christians—and, by extension, them.

And to a somewhat lesser extent, Meriville voters also see Democrats as representing the opposite of Republicans: un-Christian values. Amy, for example, identifies as a Republican but tends not to pay much attention to politics. She voted for Obama in 2008 and 2012 and Trump in 2016. When she describes what she sees as the dividing lines of politics, she explains:

I think a lot of it's more personal. It's not really what's going on in our in our country with like our finances or with other countries. I think it's more a lot of personal issues, like the how I want to be perceived as a female or male or transgendered and other groups. [...] What people argue about in politics are like abortion and the gender things and more personal stuff instead of like what our country needs.

To her, the Democratic Party stands for those groups. “It's like everybody's entitled. You know, and I don't feel like people are entitled to feel like you should justlike that's the way things are. Like hey, you're born a man, you're born a woman. That's what God.... I feel like they try to take God out of our country.”

This understanding that Christianity drives political divisions is so pervasive in Meriville that it creates a particular kind of counter-politics: a handful of Democrats and Independents reject the Republican Party specifically for this reason. Kyle, for example, grew up in Meriville

and has just finished his first year of college when we meet for the first time. Although politics is not a core concern of his right now, he has picked up a few observations from his hometown. Republicans, he tells me, “stand for religion.” This is the reason, he explains, that Meriville is so Republican – it is a very Christian community. This single connection shapes a lot of Kyle’s politics: if he could change one thing about the country, for example, it would be to “keep religion out of politics.” Other Democrats I spoke to in Meriville similarly describe how their partisan identity emerges in part because of this desire to disassociate themselves from the party of “Christian conservatives,” as Jacob says. In other words, Democrats in Meriville are not drawn to that party for the same reasons as are Democrats in Iverson: in Meriville, religion is at the heart of party identification for both Democrats and Republicans. It is a feature of *Merivillian* politics rather than a feature of individuals’ politics.

We can further see the importance of place in shaping these understandings through the handful of cases where individuals changed their party identification. Marie, for example, is a devoutly Christian Merivillian who decided not to vote for Joe Biden in 2020 after a lifetime of Democratic partisanship and voting. As she told me repeatedly during our conversations, she is someone who tends to avoid talking about politics, and the differences between the two parties had long seemed somewhat “blurry” to her. But that was not always the case, as she told me in fall 2020: “When I was very young, I would have been listening to my dad more than anything.” And according to him: “The Democrats were more for the little person. The Republicans were for the big corporations and the more wealthy people.” But that was decades ago. And just a few months prior to this conversation, Marie had remarried and begun discussing politics with her husband after years of avoiding it. In the place of class divisions that had dominated party politics during her youth, her husband explained that moral divisions were now paramount: in

particular, he told her that the Democrats are pro-choice and Republicans are pro-life. To Marie, who had long been concerned about the *personal* immorality of abortion, this became a deeply troubling *political* problem for the first time. As she approached the 2020 election, she decided that she could not bring herself to vote for a pro-life candidate again—a decision that she now understood took Democrats out of the equation for her. Although Marie still does not consider herself a Republican, and she refused to vote for Donald Trump, the suddenness of her disaffection from the Democrats is striking. And it happened because she started talking politics again after 40 years, and the people who were surrounding her—other Merivillians—told her that politics was about Christian morality, not class.

And for most Merivillians living in a Christian community, the Republican Party feels like their home. But Merivillians are not just Christians: they are German Lutherans. And in Meriville, party politics does not just express moral divisions in society, it also expresses an essential racial division: that between White people, whose home is in the Republican Party, and people of color, whose home is in the Democratic Party. This understanding, however, is not specific to Meriville. In fact, residents of Iverson, Meriville, and Williston—both Democrats and Republicans—routinely describe the parties in this way. Republicans, for example, occasionally argue that Democrats “use” people of color for their votes or lament Obama’s presidency because he stoked “racism” against Whites, while Democrats refer to Trump’s racism as representative of the Republican Party and describe the GOP as the party of racial oppression. But what this means for Merivillians is that, while there is no political party that represents *German Lutherans* specifically, there is a party that clearly represents White Christians: the Republican Party.

And if this were not sufficient reason for Merivillians to find a natural home there, they have one more. Many Merivillians also view Republicans as the party to represent towns like theirs, communities that wish to take care of themselves without interference from the federal government. As we heard from Cal in Chapter 3, this is exactly why he identifies as a Republican. And for many Merivillians, the understanding that Republicans are the party of *local* control coincides with their view of Republicans as the party of Christian morality.

Katherine's description of the GOP exemplifies this combination. When I ask her what the Republican Party stands for in summer 2019, she tells me:

... they've always kind of believed, keep the government out of it as much as we can, that everything should be more or less on a local level. Let the states or the local level take care of things and let the... let the federal government take care of things that nobody else can, like our national security [...] And I think they believe in protecting the unborn. Definitely.

As Katherine's comments indicate, to Merivillians Republicans are the party that will defer control to the local level and follow "Biblical principles," as another resident tells me. And for a White, Christian community that prefers to take care of itself, this is the party that best represents them.

Iverson: The Democratic Party is the Party for Us

Living in a church town thus shapes the way Merivillians make sense of who they are and where they fit in national party politics. Place helps construct their social and political identities. The same is true in Iverson, but here a different organizational setting produces a different outcome. As the last chapter revealed, the Iversonians I spoke to tend to agree: their community is struggling under the weight of structural challenges that require better jobs and more resources from the state of Wisconsin. But as this section will show, this is more than a belief; it is also

part of how the community understands itself and the structural inequalities foundational to U.S. society. For Iversonians, the community's challenges are not just challenges, they are indicative of who they are: a community of *have-nots*, through no fault of their own. Like many other people and places, they are caught in a trap of structural inequality that allows a few "haves" to hoard most of the wealth while the "have-nots" *like them* struggle to keep up with cost of living and pay for things like healthcare and housing. And the Democrats are the party that will wield the state to help them in that struggle.

From Structural Problems to a Community of Have-Nots

As Chapter 3 described, Iversonians' shared understanding of their community's problems is reproduced through moments of collective action to address social problems, and through everyday experiences, as residents interpret their own difficulties finding good jobs in the local economy through the lens of community disadvantage rather than personal failing. And in Iverson, these experiences reaffirm to residents that they are a community of *have-nots*.

Part of this shared understanding about their community identity is rooted in positive reflections that Iverson is a place that has always organized to fight against the "haves": Iverson is a *working town*, built on the back of organized labor, as Harry, the president of the IFL described it in Chapter 2. This is not an uncommon refrain among Iversonians. Echoing Harry, Isaac, a union member with the railroad, explains: "Iverson's always been a big union town." Even those who have never been in a union, like Carl, echo Isaac's assessment, explaining that Iverson is "a strong union area."

The pervasiveness of this community understanding reflects both the quantity of union members in Iverson and the fact that they regularly raise issues related to workers' rights in the

public sphere. The Iverson Tribune is just as likely to cover labor disputes, strikes, and labor-related decisions by the City Council as the Meriville Gazette is to cover churches taking services online during the COVID-19 pandemic, or gathering to house the homeless. And just as local politicians in Meriville post on Facebook about church and nonprofit service activities in town, Iverson's politicians post about labor issues—much more so than politicians in either Meriville and Williston. During election season in Iverson, yards are dotted with campaign signs that carry the endorsements of various labor unions. Outside of election season, the IFL has their own booth at the town's annual Labor Day picnic which takes place on May 1st to signify their alliance with the international labor movement.

Even Iverson's built environment reflects the image of a working town much more so than Williston's and Meriville's. Regardless of which direction by which you arrive in Iverson, it is impossible not to be awed by the towering elevators that lift grain onto the Iverson River and the collection of ships huddled nearby to transport it. The railway that cuts through town regularly disrupts the rhythms of daily life—a reminder that it is one of the community's largest employers. While Meriville and Williston also have rail lines that snake through town, neither has a depot, making the tracks little more than a nuisance. Moreover, most of the manufacturing and processing in both communities takes place in industrial parks containing long, flat, buildings that give away no sign of what goes on inside. While I had to go searching for the sites of the largest employers in Meriville and Williston, I could see them the moment I arrived in Iverson.

As a result, beyond identifying Iverson as a union town, residents also describe it as a blue-collar town, defined by its hard-working residents. Luke, for example, is a lifelong resident who has recently moved to the neighboring town. He offers this summary when I ask him to

describe Iverson the first time we meet: “It’s a good blue-collar town, you know, especially in comparison to Medford [the neighboring city]....we have factories, we have processing, you get all that. So if you think like almost the standard, like Midwest American town, it really does encompass a lot of Iverson.” The other Iversonians I spoke with overwhelmingly agree with Luke’s definition. And when they offer their own, they similarly refer to the visible signs of the town’s industrial and blue-collar employment or list the large union employers that remain in the community.

Iversonians thus share a pride in their blue-collar, union roots, but they also recognize that times have changed in ways that are not favorable to the local economy, as described in Chapter 3: residents regularly recount the difficulty of finding *good jobs* with good benefits in Iverson, and as they do so, they shift the blame onto the economy rather than themselves. But it is not just that many people describe being stuck with less-than-satisfactory employment; it’s that Iversonians generally agree that this experience is a defining feature of the community, as they weave their own experiences into a broader narrative of national manufacturing decline and rising income inequality that have battered Iverson. Christopher, a young professional, exemplifies this narrative practice. During our first conversation during which we moved from one bar to the next down Main Street, he told me his view of the community’s economy, weaving his story in as he went along:

I mean, there’s just the overlying theme that there’s just a lot of people that live in Iverson and that have just been down and on the out for so long, that it’s just rough. The general livelihood of a lot of the people that live here—not all, but a decent chunk—is just really not good, always has been.

Later, he continues, drawing on his own experience:

I can tell you from trying to find a job in this market, in this area, it’s really hard. It’s very hard to find jobs. And anyone that will tell you, oh, it’s super easy, no it is not. Because just due to the way this area is, your typical college level or non-

educated level, entry jobs are usually getting filled by people that have much more experience.

Christopher describes his own challenges in finding a good job—at that time, he was doing a menial data-entry job which was both unfulfilling and offered low pay and expensive health insurance—as linked to a broader problem facing the community.

Christopher’s view is shared by the overwhelming majority of Iversonians I spoke with: not only do they agree that they are a community of have-nots, but they agree that these are not the products of any one person’s individual-level failings, but of forces beyond their control. This leads some, like Tonja, to think of the county’s economy as “depressed.” As she summarizes: “There’s not a lot of opportunity.” Recall, however, that Iverson is in fact *not* a depressed economy by standard measures of unemployment; and yet this has little bearing on how residents define their community.

And for Iversonians, like their leaders, this dearth of quality employment is at the heart of many of the challenges the community is facing today. This includes, as Chapter 3 described, addiction of various kinds. Recall how Elaine from Chapter 2 introduced me to her hometown through the bar scene: as a former bar-hopper who no longer drinks, the community’s troubling underbelly of addiction is something she returns to throughout our conversations. And much like Elaine, others see alcoholism and drug addiction as the same symptoms of poverty. Just as Wayne from Meriville pointed out the German Lutheran churches, Elaine took me to the bars because this was the best way that Elaine could think of to teach me about her community. As Japonica Brown-Saracino (2018) has described, it is precisely through these kinds of interactions that newcomers are socialized into a community and learn what a place is all about. And what Iversonians learn is that they are a community of have-nots, through no fault of their own.

Bringing the State in to Level the Playing Field

As a result, Iversonians understand the country's prevailing social challenge as a divide between the haves and the have-nots—a profound economic inequality—that has made it difficult for them and their neighbors to thrive. And Chapter 3 showed, they see the state as the vehicle to redress these structural economic challenges. But as in Meriville, their community identity is central to understanding their particular form of statism: it is because Iversonians understand themselves and their neighbors as among the have-nots that they imagine themselves as beneficiaries of future state intervention to level the playing field. Danielle, for example, is a city employee from Iverson who describes the situation as she sees it when we first meet in the fall of 2019. I ask her what she would change about the country if she had a “magic wand,” and she moves quickly from universal healthcare to inequality. As she concludes:

It's so divided between people that have money and people that don't have money. And then there's people like me who are in the middle where I'm making money, I'm middle class, if you will. But I cannot get any sort of benefit that the people that are making less money can. So I'm constantly struggling as well. I feel like everybody's struggling, except maybe the very, very top tier. And that is a huge issue in our country as well. Which kind of all of our issues come from that. We could have better health care, we could have better housing, we could have better rehabilitation, we could have better prison systems instead of there even being prisons. It all comes down to that, in my own opinion.

I quote Danielle at length here because her comments are indicative of a widespread and enduring worldview among Iversonians. The country is profoundly unequal and “everybody's struggling” – even the “middle-class” like Danielle, who, without a four-year degree still has a good city job with benefits. Fixing that inequality would, as she explains, fix “all of our issues.” And the government is the key to accomplishing this.

Crucially, Danielle places herself among the struggling, something that many of her neighbors do as well. They are not just living in a community of have-nots or a country of have-

nots, but they are part of the have-nots themselves. For younger people, this is often articulated through the lens of a generational inequality. Danny is in his late 20s and laments that the cost of housing and student loans have made him give up on the hope of having children: “But like financially, I can’t see myself having a kid in the next decades, which kind of puts me off from having children, which is fine. I’ve accepted that.” It’s just not like it was for our parents’ generation, he tells me, but not because of any individual failing on the part of millennials, but because of structural shifts in the economy.

Danielle and Danny are both Democrats or Democratic-leaning Independents. But the tendency to apply a lens of structural inequality to the country’s problems extends to others in Iverson as well. Colton, for example, is an Independent in his early 20s who wrote-in Marco Rubio when he voted for president in 2016 and voted for a third-party in 2020. In spring 2020 he’s explaining to me why he *doesn’t* like Bernie Sanders, but ends up concluding he does favor a number of his policies, including Medicare for All and raising taxes on billionaires: “I think the income inequality is pretty ridiculous. The top earners in our country are earning a lot of money, a lot of money, so much money, you don’t even know what to do with it. So I think they definitely should be taxed more.” Moreover, as Danielle and Danny’s comments indicate, because Iversonians see this kind of inequality as systemic, they view the state as the only vehicle to rectify it. As Colton suggests, we should tax the billionaires more and, as Danielle says, use the extra revenue to pay for universal healthcare.

Many others in Iverson offer the same solution to the country’s challenges, regularly calling on the state to provide for their citizens, including through policies like Medicare for All, help with student loans, Universal Basic Income, paid parental leave, and greater assistance with childcare. But part of the reason they do so is not just because they view inequality as a problem

that can only be addressed through state intervention, but because they see themselves and their community as the likely beneficiaries of that intervention. For example, in my first conversation with Christopher in the summer of 2019, I ask him to list the top two or three issues he'd like to see the presidential candidates discuss over the course of the campaign. First, he lists the things that would help him. Between his student loan payments and health insurance, "I can't afford shit," he says. He would love the government to step in to address both of these issues—it's not his fault the cost of education and healthcare have skyrocketed. And for his community, he'd like to see the same. Medicare for All, in particular, would help a lot of people who "can't go into the hospital to get a checkup because it's 300, 400 dollars a visit." As Christopher's comments indicate, Iversonians as individuals and a community are among the have-nots. Even when they feel middle-class, as Danielle says, they are still struggling. As such, they imagine that state intervention to balance the scales would help them.

This belief also imposes limitations on some Iversonians' willingness to call on the state: when residents see the state as a vehicle to right systemic inequality, they favor state action; but for some, when the state is helping those who haven't helped themselves, they are against it. Isaac exemplifies this stance. Throughout our conversations, he explains that he favors increased taxation to rebalance economic inequality and provide for social services like healthcare. But the first time we meet, he follows this statement by describing the situation of a woman at his mother's nursing home who can't afford the \$5 van ride to the ice cream parlor. He relates this to the broader issue of elderly Americans having to choose between healthcare and food, something he wishes to see resolved:

There was an article in the paper today about how cheap that insulin is in Canada for people that are diabetics [...] Something that costs \$4,500 in the U.S. they can get it for \$425 [...] I mean, but, I'm not saying it's 100% the government either. I know people should've...you know, in the 1980s, maybe you shouldn't have had

two Cadillacs and a really, really nice house. You should have been saving money for retirement. And a lot of people didn't do that. Cause my dad, he would be in trouble without his pension. He didn't save anything.

Isaac is more than happy to call on the state to tax the rich and redistribute it among the working- and middle-classes when he believes it would redress factors out of any individual's control, like the cost of pharmaceuticals. But he also suspects—based on his own experience with his father—that there are some people who just *don't* help themselves. This suggests the limits of Iversonians' belief in state action: when they don't see those actions as righting a systematic wrong that would benefit themselves, their community, or a broad swath of “struggling” Americans, they are far less likely to support it. In other words, some residents apply criteria of deservingness as well as need.¹²⁰

This is not true of all Iversonians—younger residents in particular often express a belief that state intervention is a right rather than a benefit for the deserving. But within these boundaries of disagreement, Iversonians still tend to support a wide array of state intervention because they see themselves and their community as struggling with challenges as a result, not of individual failings, but of structural problems, and they imagine themselves as the beneficiaries of state intervention.

The Democrats are the party of the worker

¹²⁰ The U.S. is distinct from most of its advanced industrialized peers in that it provides welfare not on a universal, rights-based principle or solely on the principle of need, but often on the principle of deservingness, determining which social groups are worthy of which kinds of social services (Esping-Anderson 1990; Katz 1986). And because citizens tend to make demands on the welfare state based on the kinds of things their country's welfare state already does, this question of who is deserving of welfare tends to shape Americans' opinions about welfare policies (Katz 2013).

But Iversonians' belief in the state as the vehicle to resolve inequality does not *necessarily* indicate Democratic partisanship. For that link to occur, they must further understand Democrats as the party more likely to wield the government to level the playing field. And this is, in fact, the case across all three communities. Iversonians, Merivillians, and Willistonians agree that the Democratic and Republican parties are fundamentally divided on whether they prefer public or private solutions to social problems. As Carl, a retired teacher and Democrat from Iverson tells me when I ask him about the biggest differences between the two parties:

I think certainly with Obama and Clinton, you saw an effort to try to use the resources of government sometimes the private sector as well, to try to help people try to make people's lives better. I think Republicans are largely interested in letting the private sector do that work. And I think that's the big difference.

Although not everyone I spoke to shares this understanding of the two parties, there were few differences across the three communities. Where Iverson does differ is that residents tend to see the Democrats as the party of big government *for the purpose of helping the disadvantaged* in an unequal system. The Democrats, in sum, are the party of the have-nots, and the Republicans are the party of the haves. As Kate from Iverson tells me, liberals are the ones who “want to even out the playing field” by providing good public education, infrastructure, and access to basic necessities like food. Given that this kind of intervention is precisely what Iversonians think would benefit them, they see the Democrats as the party for them and their community. Democratic partisanship *makes sense*.

And even when they were not discussing the role of government, Iversonians regularly articulated an understanding that class differences are expressed in party politics. And this understanding of what's at stake in politics—the exacerbation or redress of the class divide—extends from several experiences that Iversonians share because of where they live. An important component of this place-based understanding is the political nature of union

membership in Iverson, as described in Chapter 2. Iverson’s union workers articulate a political stance that they see as commonsense, given their membership: Democrats protect workers. Isaac, who as you’ll recall is a member of the railroad union, thinks of a Democratic voter as “someone that’s hopefully more labor, kind of like a labor-orientated person, obviously.” This, to Isaac, is obvious. More generally, he explains, the Democratic Party stands for the people “that maybe weren’t born on third base.” Other union members agree. It may seem unsurprising that union workers themselves would take on this understanding of the party system: it is a defining feature of the New Deal coalition that dominated American politics for four decades. And yet, unions’ capacity to deliver voters to the Democratic Party has severely declined in the past few decades.¹²¹ And relative to those in Meriville and Williston, Iverson union members are much more likely to share Isaac’s worldview.

But what truly distinguishes Iverson’s politics from Meriville’s and Williston’s is not just the unions’ ability to shape their members’ politics, but rather, the fact that this worldview extends far beyond current and former union members themselves. It does so in several ways: first, many residents have parents, parents’-in-law, or siblings who were part of unions and have instilled in them the belief that Democrats represent labor. Isabelle, for example, was only briefly part of a union when she worked as a retail clerk in high school—she is now in her 70s. But when I ask her if she knows which political party her parents preferred, she tells me: “Democrats. Oh, I can say that very quickly, very easily. My father would have never voted for anybody unless they were a Democrat. He was a union man, true and true. And the Democrats protect the unions, so....” This kind of long tail of union politics—extending over time or across

¹²¹ Based on my own analyses of American National Election Studies (ANES) data from 1948-2016. See Figure A5 of the Appendix.

multiple family members—is not uncommon in Iverson where unions have long been prominent in the public sphere.

But the idea that Democrats represent the workers and Republicans represent businesses and the rich also circulates beyond people like Isabelle, as residents see unions' active role in politics and regularly comment on the idea that they are connected to the Democratic Party. Many residents, regardless of partisanship, connect two widely-held understandings of the community—that it is a union town and a Democratic town—when they think about what the parties stand for. Republicans, for example, bemoan the fact that the town has been “brainwashed” with “union values,” as Bill tells me, while Democrats like Kate proudly state that it's because Iverson is “a town that respects unions.”

Even Scott Walker's anti-union measures cemented the union::Democratic connection among Iversonians. Renne is a case in point. She grew up in Iverson and now works for the county. Prior to Act 10, she was a member of the local AFCSME. After Act 10 was passed, her union fought for their collective bargaining rights back and the county at first chose to recognize them. They later rescinded that offer. “Do you feel like people are still upset about it?” I ask her. She replies:

Absolutely. That stripped away our protective retirement. So we're not covered by that anymore. So that definitely increased our retirement age and things like that. And we have to contribute a lot more into our retirement than we used to. So, yeah. People are still really upset about that.

Later in our interview, when I ask her what the Republican Party stands for, her experience with Scott Walker colors her response: “I grew up in a Republican home,” she tells me. “I still hold onto some of those values. But like, through things like Act 10, some of my opinions have changed.” Those values she originally held tended to focus on Republicans as being individualistic and responsible when it comes to social welfare provision; now, after Act 10, she

sees them more as union-busters. Not everyone in Iverson is fond of their union nor were they upset, as Renne was, by their dissolution after Act 10. But the widely publicized attacks by a Republican Governor and legislature on the unions cemented for many Iversonians the notion that Democrats are, as Isaac says, more “labor-orientated.”

And beyond describing the specific ties between the Democratic Party and organized labor, Iversonians broadly agree that Republicans represent the “haves” and Democrats the “have-nots.” This comes up again and again in conversations over the course of a year and a half of interviews. Kayce, for example, is in her late twenties and has recently registered to vote for the first time (as a Democrat). As she tells me: “the Republicans are like business and money-driven,” while the Democrats care more about “humanity.”

The most striking part of Iversonians’ shared understanding of the parties is that it appears across people with widely different levels of political knowledge and trust in media which, as I will show in Chapter 7, can create barriers to political learning and engagement. Quinn, for example, is someone who trusts very little the media tells her, whether she finds it on TV or the internet. She’s passionate about the environment and making sure everyone has their basic needs met—homelessness, for example, is a problem she thinks the American government should just take care of—but she’s often not sure how to map these concerns onto the party system. This, in combination with her uncertainty about the “truth,” can make it challenging for her to form a political opinion. For example, in the fall of 2020 she tells me: environmentalism is more Democratic from what I’ve learned as well – which, I don’t really know why because that should be everyone’s concern. But that’s just what I know.” As in many cases, she caveats this political understanding with the phrase “that’s just what I know,” to indicate that she may be wrong on this point, as it seems to contradict commonsense. But amidst mounds of uncertainty

about her political opinions, she tells me twice that she sees the Democrats as the party of the have-nots. For example, in March 2020, when I ask what she thinks is the biggest difference between the two parties, she says:

I tend to lean more towards the Democrats just because—again, I don’t know that much, but the Republicans to me are just, it seems, this is a stereotype, but the rich people. That’s what it seems to me like usually the Democrats are the middle-class people who are trying to get fairness for everybody and then the (sic) Republicans seem like the opposite. But again, maybe I could be wrong.

Even here, Quinn caveats her statement twice, concluding “maybe I could be wrong.” But she returns to this point a few months later when we speak just before the presidential election, telling me that the Democrats are “more for the people, for middle-class and lower.”

In sum, Iversonians—regardless of political knowledge and, to an extent, partisanship—see party politics as an organized battle to perpetuate or mitigate inequality, in which Democrats are fighting for the latter – often by calling on the state or supporting unions. And this solidifies the community’s Democratic partisanship – Iversonians understand themselves as a community of have-nots through no fault of their own, advocate for state-led solutions that will help them, and believe that Democrats will champion their cause while Republicans fight for the 1%.

A Counterfactual in Meriville

Without this shared understanding, Iversonians might be more like Fred, from Meriville, the retired Republican who is part of the Burger King club. The first time I spoke to him and his wife Janet, he told me he was concerned about growing inequality:

You’ve got to look at income equality. We keep hearing that you have the haves and have nots. And when I was in Cuba, I saw that the haves had it all and the others were struggling. So that gap between the haves and have nots. You know, I always consider ourselves middle-class. So I think that is shrinking.

Fred and Janet were able to build their middle-class lifestyle without college degrees, in part because of a housing market that was much less expensive relative to the cost of living, which Fred also recognizes – in fact, it’s a challenge he worries about for his grandkids. But note his reference to Cuba. He traveled there on a mission trip a few years ago, and he still carries one important lesson with him, which he mentions multiple times throughout our conversations: socialism and communism take away opportunity from people who want to work and better themselves. As a result, they exacerbate inequality.

And when I ask him what the Democratic Party stands for, he agrees with many people across the three communities who say that the Democrats want to provide more public goods to people. But in Fred’s case, he refers to them as “freebies.” Regardless of the name, this won’t solve the problem of income inequality because, as he explains: “I just really think that that you can’t bring people up from where they are to a better standard of living by just giving them things.” Republicans, in contrast, will help by cutting taxes to businesses, which will spur on growth, and the rising tide will raise all boats. This exact rationale, in fact, leads a handful of Merivillians to conclude that “the Republicans are for the working people,” as Art tells me. A sense that economic inequality is a growing problem for the country, while foundational to Iversonians’ Democratic partisanship, is thus insufficient to secure it; they must also see the Democrats as the party to rectify that inequality.

And for many Merivillians, Fred included, place factors are unlikely to create a tendency toward Democratic partisanship for several reasons. Residents rarely imagine themselves or their community as the people implicated in a broader, structural economic crisis. And even if they might occasionally worry about economic inequality and how it will affect their family, as Fred indicates, they do not see the political sphere as the place to resolve that inequality. In a Christian

community that takes care of themselves, politics is about upholding Christian morality and protecting local control – not shaping economic outcomes.

Chapters 3 and 4 have argued that place shapes partisanship by informing how residents identify political solutions to their social problems and how they map their social identities onto party politics. This creates a tendency toward Democratic partisanship in Iverson and a tendency toward Republican partisanship in Meriville. But as I've also discussed throughout the book, it is challenging to identify a distinctive role for place relative to individual-level factors in producing these outcomes. In Chapters 2 and 3, I offered evidence that the communities' organizational arrangements and beliefs about how to solve problems are not reducible to individual organizational affiliations, as they are shared across residents with different memberships in unions and churches.

Another way of understanding the distinctive role of place in shaping and perpetuating partisan attachments is to understand how being a Republican in Iverson is different from being a Republican in Meriville, and vice versa. For example, Democrats and Independents I spoke to in Meriville almost universally express the same kinds of anti-statist, anti-centralist tendencies as do Republicans. Hugh, quoted in Chapter 3, is a lifelong Democrat who ardently believes in communities taking care of themselves. In 2020, he voted for a Republican presidential candidate for the first time in his life, in part because he believes that Democrats' spending plans are not in line with what communities like his actually need. He now considers himself more of a Republican than a Democrat. But even those Democrats who haven't made the switch in Meriville share many of the community's anti-statist beliefs and, as we saw above through the

cases of Kyle and Jacob, they also agree that party politics is organized around Christian morality—even if they abhor this fact. In sum, Merivillians’ local, nongovernmental preferences and interpretations of national party politics are so strongly linked to their experiences within a Christian community that “takes care of one another,” that these beliefs cut across party lines, even in such a hyper-polarized era.

This view also stands at odds with Iversonians, for whom—regardless of political party—the notion of state or local control was rarely mentioned until I asked them directly about the shared distribution of power between the federal government and the states during the pandemic. Instead, Iversonians are open to a wide range of government intervention to provide for their citizens in ways that are also capable of crossing lines of party affiliation and political knowledge—though to a lesser extent than in Meriville. Colton, the Independent quoted above, is an example of this.

In sum, what the comparison between Iverson and Meriville shows is how the meaning of the political parties, and the meaning of an individual’s partisanship, are co-produced by local and national factors: organizational arrangements distinctive to each place create shared definitions of social problems; as residents define their community and its problems through experiences of collective problem-solving, those identities are also reinforced through social interaction; and ultimately, these place-based experiences shape how residents understand which political party is best-suited to help them. Iverson, as a result of its enduring union town politics, creates a working-class, Democratic community out of much the same demographic material that Meriville creates a Christian, Republican one.

But what does this tell us about partisanship more broadly? Both political sociologists and political scientists agree that the Democratic and Republican parties have come to take on

their contemporary meanings by politicizing different social groups and incorporating them into their party folds. Although these accounts don't imagine that voters are infinitely malleable amidst changes in party tactics, they do center political parties themselves as a key source of variation—usually over time—in how voters come to find their place in politics. But what Iverson and Meriville show us is that voters also make sense of who they are and where they fit into the party system from within their communities, which are organized around specific, local, and durable forms of meaning-making and problem-solving. And although I focus here on community life as a key factor mediating between social position and party identity, my broader claim is that social organization—whether at the level of local community approach offers just one way of understanding political identity as emerging from within social contexts that are reproduced over time.¹²²

This is not to say that political parties don't matter, because these cases also clearly indicate that they do: Iversonians and Merivillians do not imagine infinite possibilities for the meaning of partisan divisions; rather, residents of each community latch on to one of a limited set of meanings that are offered up by the political parties. This means, as we will see in the case of Williston, that both local and national factors can create shifts in the relationship between place and political outcomes.

¹²² See Bonikowski 2016 and Brubaker 2006.

CHAPTER 5. POLITICS IN A DYING TOWN: ORGANIZATIONAL INSTABILITY AND POSTINDUSTRIAL POPULISM IN WILLISTON

Connie is the head of Williston's Tourism Board. As we chew on sandwiches in the back of Crosstown Café on Main Street in Williston, she explains how the public-private partnerships that helped revitalize the main drag have served as a model for all her work in Williston:

That's what you see with our community, because there's a lot of different partnerships, and I think you see a lot of passion. Rather than some communities, (where) they have maybe one big huge corporation and they go to them for everything. And that's the beauty of having maybe more of a diverse community with businesses and so forth, because you can partner with them, and everybody gets something.

To Connie, what many Willistonians view as one of the community's greatest weaknesses—its lack of one large corporation—is also an opportunity for strength. This is because she and other community leaders have found ways of scraping together the same outcomes through piecemeal means that better-resourced communities can accomplish more quickly.

Willistonians' response to emergent social problems is indeed best-characterized by the metaphor of scraping: as many of the organizations that used to structure community life—including Rivervalley, its unions, and countless local churches—have begun to decline or have disappeared altogether, Willistonians now scrape together whatever resources they have available to solve social problems. This means that the community lacks the kind of stability and coherence that provide Iversonians and Merivillians with taken-for-granted understandings of their social problems and identities, and which political party best represents them.

But this also means that Williston may be more like other small, postindustrial communities in the Midwest than either Iverson or Meriville. Myriad studies trace the scars wrought across the

American Heartland. As described in Chapter 2, during the Regan years the federal government reformed its way of investing in its citizens' lives, restructuring the organizational resources that communities had available to resolve social problems just as greater responsibilities were thrust onto local governments by federal authorities. These were national changes that rippled through communities across the U.S. But for those in the Midwest and Rust Belt, where local economies were dependent on heavy industry and manufacturing, deindustrialization meant a dual drain of both public and private resources over a period of several decades at the end of the 20th century.¹²³

And just as factories disappeared, people stopped joining the many civic organizations whose federated structures had connected their members within and across communities and trained them for democratic citizenship. Union membership, church attendance, and participation in voluntary associations all declined precipitously—though beginning at different points—between the post-war era and the end of the millennium. Losses were particularly severe among exactly those membership associations with local chapters, such as trade unions and chapter-based voluntary associations, that had previously connected people within their communities.¹²⁴ This means that

¹²³ This political-economic restructuring is so severe that it has created a public health crisis in which “deaths of despair” are increasingly concentrated in middle-aged White residents of rural counties whose economic prospects are dim and racial privilege feels threatened (Case and Deaton 2020; DeVerteuil 2021).

¹²⁴ See Putnam 2000; Skocpol 2003. Americans continue to attend church and participate in charity organizations at relatively high levels in comparison with Western European and OECD nations (Ammerman 2005). According to the World Value Survey's seventh wave conducted from 2017-2020, 32% of U.S. respondents are active church members, second only to Colombia (at 38%) among OECD countries sampled in that wave. The U.S. led OECD nations in the 2017-2020 survey in active membership in charitable organizations. But the way that Americans participate has changed. From the 1940s to the early 1960s, the universe of voluntary associations primarily consisted of religious, fraternal, and civic organizations that often crossed occupational and class lines (though less so gender and racial lines). But by the 1970s and 80s, rights-based and citizen advocacy groups that depended on members' donations to sustain professional management rather than their participation proliferated (Pierson and Skocpol 2007; Skocpol 2003).

Iverson and Meriville are, in many ways, outliers relative to other postindustrial communities across the Heartland.

This narrative of decline—described as a “trauma” that “left behind” postindustrial and rural America—and Americans’ interpretation of it, has been recounted again and again in recent years.¹²⁵ Katherine Cramer (2016) has offered perhaps the best-known of these accounts: as she argues, rural resentment has fueled the rise of Republican Party support in Wisconsin because rural residents view the Democrats’ government largesse as a means of propping up urban centers at the expense of outstate communities. Others, like Arlie Hochschild (2016), have argued that this kind of populist anti-statism is the result not of rural resentment, but of racial resentment, as Whites in postindustrial communities come to view the government as a vehicle for supporting racialized minorities at their expense. But both accounts agree that the decline of White, postindustrial communities has fomented anger at the government as part of the problem, not part of the solution.¹²⁶

And yet, as we have already seen, this explanation of contemporary Heartland politics does not fit either Iverson or Meriville. In Iverson, residents regularly echo Cramer’s interlocutors and express frustration that the Wisconsin state government focuses on urban

¹²⁵ These are the titles of recent publications on the subject by Gest (2016) and Wuthnow (2018), respectively. But while scholars often conceptualize rural America as “left behind” metaphorically – as in, lacking a place in contemporary geopolitics – rural residents are also literally left behind by a rural brain drain: their smartest and best-educated peers leave for metropolitan areas, making the notion of the left behind all the more apt (Domina 2006; Weber et al. 2007).

¹²⁶ There has been some debate about the extent to which this kind of populist anti-statism is driven more by White racial resentment (e.g., Bobo 2017; Mutz 2018) or postindustrial/rural resentment, but the most plausible explanation is that it result from a combination of both factors (see, e.g., Gidron and Hall 2017). As the case of Williston illustrates, these factors are deeply interrelated: the Republicans’ rhetorical alliance of socialism and immigration as twin threats to White, postindustrial communities ensures that Willistonians’ right-wing populism is shaped by feelings of both economic and racial threat.

communities at the expense of rural ones, but the local organization of union politics turns residents *toward* the state and the Democratic Party, not away from them. And in Meriville, residents' belief that local churches and nonprofits are solving their social problems provides a layer of insulation against the kind of resentments that accumulate in Iverson and Williston; here, problems are solved with no need for the state.

But as this chapter will show, Williston does conform to an account of racialized, postindustrial populism. As we saw in Chapter 2, the community is struggling with the spiral of economic and population decay described in many rural counties since the 1980s: low wage growth that leads to out-migration which presents further challenges for economic development professionals.¹²⁷ In light of these challenges, there is one thing that Willistonians can agree on: and that is the fact that they live in a dying town. Each time a new problem emerges and goes unresolved, they integrate it into their existing narrative of decline. As a result, social problems are not just stand-alone issues, but further evidence of the fact that Williston is dying and there is little they can do about it. They are the “left-behind community” *par excellence*.

But when we consider Williston in comparison with Iverson and Meriville, it becomes clear that the community's right-wing populism is *not* a necessary consequence of deindustrialization, rural dislocation, or Whites' feelings of racial threat in an increasingly multiracial society.¹²⁸ Just as in Iverson and Meriville, Williston's politics are the product of an interaction between local and national factors, as residents make sense of political and economic transformations from within their community. And in Williston, what matters is that residents lack the organizational stability that in Iverson and Meriville provides a coherent framework for

¹²⁷ Carr and Kefalas 2009; Johnson 2011

¹²⁸ On the role of racial threat in exacerbating the link between Whites' racial resentment and anti-statism, see: Tesler 2012; Wetts and Willer 2018.

understanding their social problems. As the community has suffered loss after loss, Willistonians have searched for new ways of getting things done: through partnerships, as Connie describes above, and more generally, through the community itself, as I detail below. But these solutions are always partial and temporary, unlike the longstanding organizational arrangements in Iverson and Meriville.

The result is that Willistonians often feel they are a community on the precipice of death, without any viable pathways forward. And as their sorrow and anger multiply, some residents are increasingly preoccupied not with solving their current problems, but with staving off future threats. When politicians, like those in the Republican Party under Donald Trump, embrace a populist rhetoric that implicates socialism and immigration as threats to the “great” (White) American way of life, those threats feel very real to this contingent of Willistonians. As a result, what was once a swing town, with various elements of the union and church town politics we have seen in preceding chapters, is now an increasingly Republican town.

“The Demise of the Small Town”

Almost everyone I spoke to in Williston locates the story of their terminal decline with Rivervalley. Although many point to the fire as the town’s death knell, others look further back, to the 1979 bankruptcy declaration that lowered wages by more than 25% in one fell swoop. Rob, a retired police officer, explains: “with the loss of union power since Reagan’s time, (workers in Williston) don’t make the wages that they used to. And they were difficult labor jobs too. But, you know, 40, 50 years ago, the people who worked at the Rivervalley plant where the high wage earners here.” Rob’s synopsis of the town’s economic trajectory captures much of its labor history as well, as we saw in Chapter 2.

And at the same time as wages were slashed in town, farms were struggling in the countryside. Scott, who lives in the countryside in Williston County, describes how farm agglomeration has sucked the resources out of rural communities and small towns:

There was so many farmers when I was a kid, there used to be three to four farmers in every section. You know what I mean, everybody had cows. Everybody had something. [...] And there was more people in the rural area. And the farming has gotten so big that there is no more farms. [...] And all these farmers (all) went to Williston township to do business. Went to the creamery with their milk, went up to the elevator and bought feed, go to the shoe store - and Shirley O had the shoe store in the township for years, and people from miles around come an' bought shoes, you know. And now there's no small farmers around anymore. There's probably [...] probably 90 percent less farmers now than there was when I was a kid.

Scott himself tried to sustain a small farm when he was younger, but ultimately gave it up – it was not enough for him and his family to live on and yet too much work to maintain alongside his full-time job in construction for the county. Now he and his wife live in a house surrounded by corn and soybean fields, none of which they own. Most of the homes dotted throughout the countryside surrounding Williston are like Scott and his wife Lisa's: “acreages” carved out from the harvestable land and sold as family homes while the fields around them were bundled into larger and larger farms.¹²⁹

The result is that the generation that came of age with Scott—now in his 60s—and the one below him could no longer sustain themselves by farming, just as it became more and more difficult to find good-paying jobs in Williston. Ray's working years were splintered by these shifting dynamics. He grew up on a 160-acre farm outside Williston and hoped to have his own farm as an adult. Like Scott, he found small farming was not economically feasible by the time

¹²⁹ Williston, of course, is not alone in this. Farm consolidation has been a defining feature of the U.S. agricultural industry over the past few decades. See MacDonald, Hoppe, and Newton 2018.

he was old enough to try it. Instead, he moved to town to work at Rivervalley, where he benefited from just a few years of the foundry workers' high wages before they were slashed in '79.

Although the decline of Rivervalley and family farms were long, drawn-out processes, for most people it is the fire that marks Williston's turn toward irrevocable decay. Most residents mention it the first time I meet them – it is a defining feature of the town, a piece of history that Willistonians view as essential learning for newcomers if they are to understand their community. Marge, the former United Way Director, thinks of it as a community trauma that has still not healed.

As any number of residents would say, that's in part because the site where the plant once stood still sits vacant – a testament to Williston's struggles with revitalizing its economy.

Michelle, for example, describes how her hometown has changed since she was “little:”

Well, our big companies closed. I mean, when I was a kid, well, we had more than the foundry. And that's where my best friend, her parents both worked there. They were a huge employer in Williston. There was a fire - you probably heard about that already - several years ago. And they just never reopened. And they had gone through several different ownerships at the time [...] And I think that was a real blow to the community. And I wasn't living here at the time, but I mean, you still drive through town and you see the big open space where that factory used to be, and the parking lots. And it's just a big open space that for several years they couldn't build anything on because of the pollution that was on it. Now it's...Nobody's doing anything with it. Yeah. So. It's sad to a lot of people who lived in Williston for a long time to see that big open space.

Michelle's focus on the “big open space” is echoed in a Community Development meeting in February 2020, during which residents continually bring the conversation back to the Development Corporation's plans for the old Rivervalley site. It's a physical monument to the town's past economic vitality.

But even as residents begin their stories in the same place—with Rivervalley—they often earmark different components of the community’s decline along the way. And for many, the decline of both churches and unions is an important piece of the story: for Willistonians they are symbols of the community’s successful past, and their loss indicative of its current state of disorder. Derek, a Democratic politician and farmer quoted in Chapter 2, summarizes the connection between the Rivervalley fire and union decline the first morning we meet on his farm, in summer 2019. “Our community has been through some trauma,” he begins, and then continues:

(Rivervalley) finally burned down accidentally, but starting in about the mid-70s when the union started to become weaker, it was a period of about 25 years of just this drawn out—until eventually the fire was just a whimpering death of this plant. So, the apex, the high point was probably mid-70s when all the families in Williston were just doing great. You could see it in the high school and there was just this big middle-class and all the needs were being met of all the families in Williston. Everybody was fed well, weren’t coming in school in rags—(from) pretty much a one-income family. It was a very simple lifestyle but it was a golden time for poor raising families in Williston. Then, the union was busted and wages dropped and it was just a slow, slow march. When I graduated, there were 515 students. I think four years before me there were 600 students in the graduating class. In 2012, there were 180.

This is the story, as Derek refers to it, of “rural economic demise:” the fire may have capped it off, but it was decades of “union busting” that undid the town’s prosperity.

Kim is a retiree who lives in a small town of a few hundred on the outskirts of Williston City. When I ask her what has changed in the county since she grew up there, she offers a similar view to Derek’s, but instead she weaves in the story of church decline with the story of small town decline:

Well, of course, the demise of the small town. You know, our town went from having a very busy restaurant, businesses all up and down Main Street to ...two businesses in town.... Whereas with Williston City, it’s a sad town. They lost the foundry. And the land Williston sits on, and they haven’t done a goddamn thing. [...]. There’s just no leadership. And that is very distressing to all of us. [...] And

the churches are just about empty. I mean, except well, kind of the ones that do the entertaining.

Kim, Michelle, and Derek, all born and raised in Williston County, each offer a story of “demise” in response to an open-ended question about how their community has changed. Each begins with the story of Rivervalley’s fire, and Kim also thinks about declines in church attendance as indicative of the community’s decay, just as Derek incorporates the loss of union power in his story of rising poverty and a declining middle class. It is a town defined, as Mary tells me, by “a lot of loss.”

As a result, each time a business closes or jobs leave town, Willistonians incorporate these incidents into their narrative of decline—it becomes *yet another* loss, rather than an isolated occurrence. On my third visit to Williston I watched as residents invoked this storytelling practice to explain how they felt about the fact that one of the town’s two supermarkets, FreshFoods, was closing for a few months in order to reopen in a smaller space. Despite these plans, no one was certain that the reopening would go forward.

And for weeks, I heard plenty of concern about what was going on at FreshFoods, despite never bringing it up myself. During Sunday fellowship after services at a country church, congregants worried about where they’ll get their doughnuts and rolls once FreshFoods goes out of business. At a local coffee shop, a group of retired friends pondered its fate. In interviews it was one of the only things people could think of as a “change” since I was last in town. For example, when I asked Ken what had been going on since I saw him last, he told me: “Oh, just more things closing. You know...”

But for Williston residents, the closure of a grocery store is not just a single incident – it reminds them of all the loss they’ve experienced in the last two decades, with the plant fire being

chief among them. Since that time, even much smaller losses like this one bring people back to the fear that's been eating at the edges of the community: that this town is dying.

Williston, in other words, is a town under constant threat of extinction – at least this is how its residents feel. Even in casual encounters with folks around town, people regularly tell me that this is a dying town, forever changed since the fire. At the YMCA pool one morning, an older man asks what's brought me to Williston and I tell him I'm doing a research project on Williston. "Are you studying what it's like in a dying town?" he asks me.

Problem-Solving in a Dying Town

In some ways, these stories mirror those of Iversonians, who locate their community's challenges in structural economic decline and deindustrialization. Willistonians are similarly apt at connecting their community's changes and challenges to forces beyond their control—whether farm consolidation, union busting, or deindustrialization. But where Iversonians overwhelmingly agree that the solution is to return good jobs to the community through state intervention if necessary, Willistonians disagree: some see a possible future in tourism, retirees, or even those wanting to live in a small-town environment and work remotely or commute to nearby metro areas as they expand—in other words, they imagine a *jobless* future.

The result is that ordinary Willistonians face challenges beyond their counterparts in Iverson: not only was their loss particularly traumatic, but the empty lot reminds residents that, as Michelle said above, "nobody's done anything with it." This is a feeling that several residents express throughout our conversations: "the powers that be," as Melissa calls them, don't seem too engaged in helping the community survive, let alone thrive. And as Kim repeats again and again in her story of Williston's demise: "There's just no leadership."

This is not to say that Williston actually lacks leadership: as we saw in Chapter 2, churches engage in social service provision and labor leaders continue to advocate for their workers. And city and county leaders—whether elected officials or full-time administrators—are as dedicated, hard-working, and well-meaning as those in Iverson and Meriville. People like Connie regularly seek out partnerships to garner public grants and attract private enterprises to Williston, but every time she does so it is a novel configuration—rather than a well-worn path of solving problems with a shared goal in mind, as is the case in both Iverson and Meriville. As a result, Willistonians conceive of their community as a place that is dying without any clear sense of how to prevent this from happening.

But in 2019, in the face of *yet another* loss, Willistonians scored a meaningful victory. Two years earlier, the town’s primary care clinic – owned by a state-wide group, MinnReg – announced that it would be consolidating its Williston-based healthcare services with those of another clinic in a town 30 miles away. MinnReg’s rationale was that it was no longer financially feasible to keep the clinic open in a community as small as Williston. This, despite the fact that the clinic chain is a registered nonprofit.

The clinic was home to primary care physicians and low-cost mental health treatment, and Willistonians were overwhelmingly concerned about this loss of services, as it raised both symbolic and practical concerns for the community. The common refrain, “Williston is losing its doctors,” echoed through the town when I first arrived in late-summer 2019. And the 30-mile drive to the nearest clinic severely restricts healthcare access for Willistonians and those in the surrounding areas. For Jennifer, a young attorney who practices in town, this is of acute concern. As she explains: “...you have rural communities that don’t have access to what they need. I mean, if my child struggles with mental health at some point, I’m driving hours to find them

help. Which is crazy to me.” To most Williston residents, the idea that they have to travel so far for essential services that have always existed within their community is hard to accept.

The clinic’s departure also hit a nerve as *yet another* loss for the community, which some residents directly linked to the other processes that threaten Williston’s survival. Scott, for example, tells me that to him, what happened at the hospital is not unlike what happened with the decline of small shops in Williston township and the growth of one-stop shops like Wal-Mart: the vitality of the rural economy was struck a devastating blow in the last few decades as both farms and corporations got bigger and bigger and eventually made the rural way of life obsolete.

For others, the clinic’s closure reminds them not of farm agglomeration but of the Rivervalley fire. Mary, for example, sums up the community’s challenges this way: “In the last five years, we’ve lost two of our major employers. The clinic and the foundry.” Although she’s inadvertently shortened the timeline between the two incidents, which were closer to 20 years apart, they are clearly linked for her. As most Willistonians would agree, the external resources that used to infuse community life with good jobs, necessary services, and the materials to sustain family farms are slowly withdrawing. Now any new loss feels like it carries the potential to pull the rug out from under the town.

It is thus unsurprising that the loss of the clinic triggered a groundswell of anger in the community. But it also triggered a groundswell of activism. As soon as the clinic consolidation was announced, a handful of people—business owners, school board members, and other concerned citizens—called a meeting in the high school cafeteria. The meeting gave rise to “Protect Williston’s Clinic” (PWC), an informal organization built to fight the clinic’s decision. The first time I drove into Williston I was immediately struck by the blue signs proclaiming PWC’s logo, which were stuck into lawns and pressed against windows all throughout town.

In PWC's fight, ordinary Williston residents were a crucial resource. Every week for two years after the conglomerate's announcement, Natalie, the head of community engagement for PWC, lead a group of 5-10 residents in a Wednesday afternoon "turnout." Standing in a park on the edge of one of the busiest roads in town, they wave "Protect Williston's Clinic" signs above their heads. Natalie tells me they haven't missed a Wednesday in two years, even during the frigid Minnesota winter.

On the sunny summer days when I joined the turnouts, the regulars included some people accustomed to activism – as Natalie says, this is "the least controversial" thing she does – and others for whom this is a first-time affair. Daniel, a retiree who uses a cane to support himself and prefers to bring his own home-made signs, had never participated in anything like this before. But, he explained, he relies on the low-cost preventive services that MinnReg used to provide to keep on top of his health. And as we stand waving at the passing traffic, it's clear that even the community members who aren't at the turnout support PWC: drivers honk and wave as they pass us, and as Daniel says, for every thumbs down, there are a hundred signs of support.

The original intention of PWC was to stop MinnReg from closing Williston's clinic. To that end, while Natalie's community engagement wing stood on the street corners, the action arm of the organization lobbied the city and county to fund an external consultant to evaluate the clinic's financial viability. The consultant found that it was feasible, with proper management, to keep a primary care and mental health clinic open in Williston without losing money.

But, as it became clear that it would not be possible to prevent the clinic's decision, the group changed tactics. They began searching for alternative providers to come to the community, and to represent this shift in strategy, they changed their name to "Protect Williston's Wellness."

Now, the turnout-ers carry the same red, white, and blue signs as before with a new word – “Wellness” – pasted over the old.

Just as I was preparing to leave Williston in the fall of 2019, PWC announced their first victory: a new clinic, MedStar, was coming to town. PWC itself was buying an old retail building and renting it to MedStar – an assurance that Williston would never again lose their clinic as the building would be “community-owned,” not owned by the city or the clinic itself. By the time I returned a few months later, fundraising for the new building was well under way and residents had added green placards reading “I bought a square of the new PWC clinic!” to their windows alongside the older PWC signs. PWC also recruited local businesses, the Chamber of Commerce, and other well-known residents to their cause, hoping to gain community support from all corners to ensure the new provider is a success.

But through the process, the community sidelined local government. While partnerships flourished among civic leaders, political activists, and ordinary citizens who showed up each week to protest—explicitly setting aside partisan politics in doing so—local government involvement was limited after some initial funding. Melissa, who was not involved with PWC but is very proud of their achievements, even gets annoyed when people inaccurately attribute PWC’s success to the “city of Williston.” As she explains, correcting the record: “It didn’t have anything to do with our governing people in Williston. PWC just came together and says we need to fix this. And that’s been awesome.”

And, unlike in Meriville where the community’s current problem-solving efforts began through existing organizations with dense ties among community members, Williston’s endeavor began as a grassroots movement, a meeting of angry residents in a school cafeteria. From there, it took shape with some of the usual suspects like business owners and people engaged in local

party politics taking the lead, but was bolstered by enthusiastic support and sign-waving from residents under Natalie's guidance.

Politics in Transition

PWC's success, and the community's response to it, hint at one pathway toward Republicanism in Williston: if residents learn from their experience that the community can address its own challenges, they may eventually come to take for granted the kind of anti-statism that we saw in Meriville. As we will see below, there are a few people who indeed draw such a lesson from the PWC success; but unless PWC or other organizations coalesce into a stable arrangement that routinely and visibly works toward resolving Williston's problems, it is unlikely that residents will reach Merivillians' level of agreement that the state is unnecessary. Instead, the more powerful undercurrent of Republicanism in Meriville is bolstered by the *lack* of stable organizational context: as residents continue to disagree about how to solve their problems through political means, a small but meaningful contingent of my interlocutors is increasingly drawn toward a logic that the only solution is to stave off future threats. And the central threats to communities like Williston, as Republican politicians regularly claim, are immigration and socialism. Although these are two seemingly unrelated forces, for some Willistonians—like for many other residents of White, postindustrial communities—they have become deeply intertwined.

From a Dying Town to a Community that Takes Care of Itself?

Given Williston's devastation at MinnReg's departure, it is unsurprising that joy over the new clinic spread like wildfire through town. In this instance, the town was able to forestall

further decline. Tina, for example, is a retired Williston resident who has lived in the county for all of her adult life. She could barely contain her enthusiasm when she reflected on PWC's accomplishments during a conversation in February 2020. She explained that other communities were inspired by Williston's grassroots movement to respond when corporations, clinics, and other organizations leave their towns: "So I think Williston has already been setting, you know, giving people hope and so on. But they've got to have a community like Williston to do it. I think you've got the idea – I'm proud of my community, the people in it." Echoing Tina's sentiment, another Williston resident named Amanda simply said: "I think we certainly have shown that there's power that we have, that we can affect change."

As both comments indicate, PWC's success has shown Willistonians that they are not just subject to the whims of global and national forces, but that they can fight back. By scraping together the resources within their community—often scant—they were able to claim a victory. But in contrast to Merivillians who have many experiences of local problem-solving within their nongovernmental network, this is a relatively new experience for Willistonians. Even so, residents are beginning to draw lessons as to how they might resolve future challenges.

For example, when I ask Melissa who she thinks could best help the community respond to a new challenge, she tells me: "I think the community themselves. I go back to PWC that, OK, we've got a problem here. We're losing our clinic. What do we need to do? So it was the community. It was this grassroots thing that came together and said, OK, what are we going to do?" Melissa's notion of community response is shared by a number of other Williston residents.

Amanda, similarly, reflects first on PWC when she thinks of the best people to respond to local challenges: "Well, the health care one really was community-driven," she tells me. In general, she concludes, the best resources for local problem-solving are: "the people of Williston,

but also our elected officials.” These responses stand in contrast to how residents feel about the Rivervalley lot, which indexes only the community’s lack of leadership and action.

Residents’ divergent understandings of how the community navigated the two crises have to do with how they experienced them. Although Williston’s leaders have long relied on informal partnerships and collaboration among nonprofits, local government, and small businesses, few people know how these things were accomplished or were involved in them directly. But in the case of PWC, residents experienced the problem-solving in action and took part in its success. Already, this is shaping how they think about solving future challenges.

But despite residents’ optimism about PWC—which is not universal—Willistonians do not share Merivillians’ sense that their local arrangements are up to the task of solving their social problems in general. Residents’ view of the church-led backpack program described in Chapter 2 illustrates these ambiguities: despite its objective impact in terms of expansion and reach, Willistonians disagree about whether such a program can be considered successful. There are several who, like Merivillians, view this kind of effort as a model for future problem-solving, on both the local and national levels. For example, when I ask Ashley, a local teacher, how she thinks our society can best make sure everyone’s basic needs are met, she replies: “I think having more programs like the backpack program. Or, you know, homeless shelters even...” But others, like Shawn who is also a teacher, think of the backpack program as Iversonians might. It’s just a “Band-Aid,” he tells me. He goes on to explain:

Shawn: You’re just trying to keep up with demand, but it’s not doing anything to change the problem, you know?

Me: So what would changing the problem be?

Shawn: I don’t know. You know, parents having access to better paying jobs, you know, that kind of stuff. Because everybody wants to feed their kids well at home.

While those like Ashley follow Merivillians' tendency to see social problems as resolvable through private, collective efforts within their community, Willistonians like Shawn follow Iversonians' tendency to define problem as structural and search for compatible solutions.

Even so, among the residents I spoke with, a fairly sizable portion are in agreement that Williston can solve the myriad problems of a "left behind" community by turning inward, piecing together solutions from a patchwork of local resources. A full evolution of such a turn might take them past their current feelings of anger and sorrow over "the demise of the small town" and towards a Merivillian notion that they are a community that takes care of itself, one that is better off without federal government intervention.

There is already some evidence of this. Willistonians' experiences with PWC are so impactful that Scott, a lifelong Democrat who voted for Trump in 2016 and 2020, thinks PWC's success indicates that his Republican friend might just be right about the role of the government in helping communities like Williston. When I ask him if he thinks there's anything "a politician" could do to help with the rural healthcare challenges Williston is facing, he thinks for a few moments, and ultimately arrives at the conclusion:

Maybe the government shouldn't be in on helping these small communities. Maybe it is us people, like Elijah says, we should govern ourselves. I mean, and maybe that's how the system should work. You know, us people have got the money that should maybe (he pauses) that should maybe step up and help.

But while some Willistonians might be turning inward, and learning along the way to embrace a kind of Merivillian anti-statism, and others are as interested in state intervention to level the playing field as Iversonians, many simply want to take care of people any way they can. Their community is dying—why not try any solutions to stop that? Rob, for example, tells me:

Seems like, you know, the conservatives always keep wanting to cut taxes like Trump just did and stuff. And there are some of those social programs that really need to be in place and they should be providing more instead of less. So yeah, I'd

like to see those programs keep up. And I don't know how the church has gotten involved in that, you know, the food for backpacks type of program. But they're good programs. And those are the things that you could and should support. But I think governments can do a fair job of that.

Rob is a retired law enforcement officer on a fixed income who regularly tells me he would pay more taxes to fund universal healthcare and that he should donate more to local charities.

Anything he can do to help, he will, regardless of whether his money goes to a public or private entity.

And Rob's stance makes sense in light of the herculean effort that Willistonians often have to put forth in order to fight their small town's demise. Often the trade-offs between public or private solutions don't make sense. For Willistonians, the answer is typically along the lines of: let's try everything we can to resolve our issues, because the community's survival is at stake.

Republicans are the Party for the Left Behind

Given Willistonians' overwhelming sense that they are far from able to address their problems on their own, it is unlikely that a Merivillian anti-statism is the driving force of their increasingly Republican tendencies. But the community *is* becoming increasingly Republican, as is clear from local, state, and federal elections over the past decade. Instead, what is moving Willistonians' voting behavior is their preoccupation with staving off future threats and their growing confidence that the Republican Party is the party to help them do this. This change has happened in part because Republican Party elites have themselves moved toward embracing a rhetoric that appeals to the left behind; however, it has also happened because that rhetorical shift resonates particularly with Willistonians living in the context of a dying town.¹³⁰

¹³⁰ On resonance, see: McDonnell, Bail, and Tavory 2017. On how resonance explains the increasing appeal of populist candidates, see: Bonikowski 2017. For research on populist appeals

The popular appeal of such a discourse—rooted in White racial resentment and a defense of the “small-town, American way of life”—is evident in public statements from Williston’s local politicians. During the 2020 election, Democrats and Republicans representing Williston and the surrounding counties flooded Facebook with populist posts that appealed to these sentiments. Six of the top 15 most popular topics among Williston’s politicians were about urban v rural divisions, gubernatorial overreach affecting rural communities, agriculture, “defending our values,” or simply launching populist appeals framed as “us” vs. the establishment of politicians in Washington D.C. A typical post embodying these concerns from the Republican candidate for the U.S. House of Representatives might read:

If you’re wondering why our opponent loves Pelosi and Kamala so much, I can spell it out for you: They support Medicare for All, including free healthcare for illegal aliens. They also support open borders. They support the Green New Deal, which includes a carbon tax that will destroy agriculture. And they support liberal judges who will fund late-term abortions and confiscate guns. And our opponent is a Democrat like them, who also supports making America into a socialist state. But here in Minnesota, we don’t want America to be a socialist state. So vote for Republicans up and down the ballot if you want to protect our values, our America, and our way of life.

Although many of these inflammatory statements would only appeal to Republicans, one key portion of the post would resonate with almost every Willistonian I spoke to, regardless of their partisanship: the idea that “our way of life” is under threat. Democratic politicians also post regularly about how their opposition’s policies will threaten rural and small-town ways of life, suggesting that Williston’s elected representatives from all parties recognize that this kind of appeal will resonate with their voters. Much as in Cramer’s (2016) study of Wisconsin, rural identity—and in this case, the specific identity of living in a dying

by Trump and other Republican candidates, see: Lamont, Park, and Ayala-Hurtado 2017; Oliver and Rahn 2016.

town—plays a powerful role in shaping Willistonians’ politics, one that local politicians recognize and attempt to cultivate for their own electoral ends.

But as we have already seen in Iverson, such an identity does not necessarily indicate anti-statist populism or Republican partisanship; in fact, in Iverson, concerns about local decline turn residents toward the state and the Democratic Party. The Republican candidate’s Facebook post offers insight into the differences between the two communities: the notion that state expansion is likely to help *some minoritized other* rather than them is gaining a powerful toehold among a group of Williston residents. This means that, when Republican politicians link together two seemingly unrelated issues—socialism and immigration—as threats to their community, this makes a compelling case to certain Willistonians.

Scott is emblematic of this. We’ve already heard from Scott several times: he is a lifelong Democrat who worries about the long-term decline of his community and now considers himself a Republican. Part of his conversion was rooted in conversations with friends. He mentions Elijah, a local Republican activist, above, who tells him that the country needs to get back to small communities taking care of themselves. But throughout our conversations Scott also refers to another friend from town who has convinced him that the Democrats and Republicans are no longer divided around class issues, but around issues of immigration and nationalism. Scott had a particularly formative political experience when he was young and belonged to a union, working for a boss who he felt mistreated him. That solidified for him that Democrats were for the worker, and Republicans for people like his former boss. But now, the more and more he talks to people in town, he sees that’s no longer the case. As we sit in his living room the first time we meet, Scott

indulges in a lengthy reflection on his experiences growing up in the community, what has changed for the worse in the country, and what he learned from his time in the union. In the midst of this, he tells me:

I try to be a reasonable person. And I think a lot about this stuff. And like I said, I used to be a pretty strong Democrat. That's just cause my family always was. And now ...and I'm getting older. I think we all get more conservative when we're older. But the Democratic Party has definitely changed. Used to be Democrat-Farmer-Labor. And, you know, the Republicans was more business. You know what I'm getting it. Just like me with my old boss. He was a strong Republican. And I was a Democrat. You know what I mean? And he didn't give a shit about his employees. You know, and that used to be, you know, labor and farmers and management, you know? And now it's gotten more where the Democratic Party has gotten for more of a giveaway thing. You know, by letting all these illegals in and all this kind of stuff. And I have got absolutely no problem with immigrants, people coming in. I have absolutely no problem whatsoever. But, all you got to do in my book is come in legally. Speak our language. Pay taxes like the rest of us do. Don't come in and think that you're gonna get a big handout. And that's what I think the Democratic Party is focused more towards. And that's why I think, I don't know which is left or right. But I think the Democratic Party is getting too far this way. And then I think the people, all of us in the middle are maybe gonna start voting back more conservative.

Later, we speak more about what the two parties mean to Scott, and I try to understand what he means when he uses the word "conservative." But regardless of what questions I ask or how directly I probe his thinking, he reiterates these points about party change again and again. For example, when I ask him to describe the politics of people who live in Williston, he responds by saying:

...the Democratic Party has changed so much that I think Williston is leaning more to the conservative side. People in this area are not for - um, we want to help people. There's no doubt in my mind. But we can't expect everybody to flock in and not do nothing and not speak the language and pay their way. I mean, around here, I think, I know we would have, the area would have no problem with some immigrants, you know, these people from these other countries coming in. If they come in and spoke our language and wanted to work here and be part of the community. But when they come in and want us to change, they maybe should've stayed in their own country. Regardless how bad it was over there. I mean, if you want to go someplace better, you're welcome here. But don't expect all of us

to change because you've got a different religion. You can have your whatever religion you want, but don't go telling us in school we can't say the Pledge of Allegiance, or sing Star-Spangled Banner, or you can't pray in school. Don't come around and do that. You know, if you don't like it, go someplace else. But we've been in this for generations.

For Scott, the Democrats used to be the party of the worker. But what has replaced Scott's understanding is a new one that resonates with him because of his specific fears about the future of his community: that Democrats are now the party of hand-outs, not just for anyone, but for immigrants who threaten the American way of life, the way Scott and his community have been doing things "for generations." When Republicans, like Williston's Congressional Representative, present their party as the party to protect small towns from these threats, that resonates with voters like Scott.

Scott's turn to the Republican Party is thus driven by two interrelated factors: a belief that immigration and socialism are an intertwined threat to his near-extinct community, which produces an anti-statism that is tinged with racialized fears; and an understanding that these issues—rather than social class—are now at the center of partisan conflict.

This version of racialized anti-statism provides a useful contrast to Merivillians. For them, as we saw in Chapters 3 and 4, the federal government is almost superfluous, because they are a community that takes care of itself. And in Meriville, native-born Whites are hardly concerned about immigration as a threat to their way of life: economically, residents recognize that immigrants are essential to their success; and symbolically, the experience of living in a German Lutheran community remains intact. For Scott, in contrast, the federal government is not just superfluous, but *threatening*: their interventions not only fail to benefit Willistonians in their many crises, but they also support an immigrant community that is a symbolic threat to Willistonians' way of life. This, in fact, is how several residents construe the dual threats of

socialism and immigration—that the federal government’s reach is dangerous precisely because it will support immigrants rather than native-born Whites. Melissa, echoing some of Scott’s concerns, tells me again and again that the Democrats “want to help everybody. And I says, there's gotta be a line. We can't help everybody.” As she goes on to explain, she sees immigrants as a particular stress on the system:

My sister works as a teacher [in a neighboring town]... She's told me they have 50 plus different languages in the school. And when English as a second language, and all these test scores and everything are based on everything, it's just...We can't take care of these people. And allowing children to become American citizens just because they were born in this country has got to stop. It's just that, it's got to. We can't keep having people flooding our borders and, and it's not even taking away jobs. It's, you're overloading our system, our school system, our health care system, our welfare system, everything. It's just, you're overloading.

Willistonians are not alone in seeing a link between state expansion and support for immigrants at their expense. As Jonathan Metzl (2018) has shown, Whites are often so concerned about this possibility that they are willing to vote against social policies like Medicare expansion, even when their own health is at stake. The idea that racial resentment drives Whites’ anti-statism is, of course, not new, but the effectiveness of this specific association between immigration and socialism in communities like Williston is evocative of recent developments in American political and social life: even in communities without large immigrant populations, like Williston, the threat of a multiracial society posed by growing immigration is palpable.¹³¹ Williston has, in fact, seen a fraction of the rise in immigration that has reshaped Meriville, and actually has a long history of Mexican migration to and from the community for agricultural labor. Even now, much of the concern about immigration in Williston is centered on Muslims, not on the actual immigrant community in the county, which are largely Christian. We get a

¹³¹ E.g., Wetts and Willer 2018

sense of that fear in Scott's comments: he mentions immigrants wanting to prevent people from praying in school, which has long been illegal.

The second facet of Scott's turn toward the Republican Party—that “Democrats *used to be* for the worker”—is also indicative of broader trends in the community. The historical processes that have led unions recede from public life in Williston likely play a role in this, as it is particularly among former union members like Scott that this kind of refrain is common. Keith, for example, is a retired union member and former Democrat who tells me: “When I was Democrat, the Democrat Party was for the workers. They're not anymore, you know, that's gone. And (the unions are) still giving that money to the Democrats.” When I ask Keith to explain how his view of the Democrats changed, he tells me it was right after he retired: as soon as he expanded his worldview beyond the unionized plant where he'd spent his career, he saw that the Democrats were no longer what he'd previously thought. And now, the ongoing connection between Democrats and unions has even turned Keith against organized labor.

Among the handful of people I spoke to who have switched party affiliations, this kind of “awakening” is a common experience. Recall Marie's story from Chapter 4: for Marie, the awakening occurred because she entered politics for the first time since childhood—she is now retired—and she did so in a community where the local version of the parties is centered around religious issues. Keith, in contrast, exited—also upon his retirement—a lifelong union affiliation and worldview, which threw him into a period of questioning that eventually resulted in strong Republican partisanship. But both processes are specific to the places where Marie and Keith live: if Marie had lived in Iverson or Williston, she may have remained a Democrat. And if Keith had lived in Meriville, he would likely never have been a union member or a Democrat.

But among Willistonians like Keith and Scott, leaving a union job leads to the realization that the “Democrats are no longer the party of the worker.” These very revelations suggest that the decline of churches and unions in Williston may have created not just a lack of coherence about what the parties mean at the local level, but also a kind of instability within people over time. I did in fact speak to many more party-switchers in Williston than anywhere else: this included seven residents, one of whom was a Republican Party activist-turned-Democrat, and another two were Democrats-turned-Republican Party enthusiasts. Each of these people described stability in their own views, but changes in partisan identification as they understood the political parties themselves to change—much like the process Keith describes.

Today, Willistonians are observing new shifts in the meaning of the parties. And as they come to understand the Republican Party as the party of dying towns and the Democrats as the party of socialism and immigration, it makes sense that the Republican Party is the party for them. This is not an uncontested point of view, however. Unlike in Iverson and Meriville, where residents typically agree about what’s at stake in party politics, Willistonians—as in many things—often articulate different points of view on this. Some continue to believe Democrats are the party for the worker, or more typically, that Democrats are the party of “rights” and equality broadly conceived—along lines of class, race, gender, and sexuality. Others believe Republicans are the party of Christian morality, individual liberties (usually gun rights), and small government. None of these conceptions are incorrect, of course, and many people offered up multiple interpretations in the same breath. This kind of incoherence and contestation point to exactly the reason that Williston has been a swing town for so long; but it is the undercurrent of racialized populism that explains their current trend toward the Republican Party.

Throughout Part I, I have argued that place matters for Heartland politics because it provides the context in which people make sense of postindustrial decline, partisan politics, and their place in it. The result is not a unidirectional shift to the right, as Iverson, Meriville, and Williston illustrate, but one that is geographically uneven, rooted in the interaction of local processes with national political and economic transformations.

But Williston *is* shifting to the right on a groundswell of racialized postindustrial populism – much as we might expect if we were attendant to only national factors. And yet, this doesn't mean that local contexts don't matter for political outcomes in Williston. The growing Republican toehold here is rooted in residents' increasing identification as a “dying town,” their growing frustration over a lack of viable solutions to their existential crisis, and their attraction to a Republican Party that increasingly frames itself as the protectors of White, Heartland communities in the face of threats from immigration and socialism.

Were the organizational context different, we could imagine a different outcome. Iverson provides a useful counterfactual here: in a town where unions remain actively engaged in local political and civic life, residents not only continue to think of the Democrats as the party of the worker; they also understand themselves as beneficiaries of potential state intervention. In other words, living in Iverson helps residents buck the national trend of Whites' racial threat driving their anti-statism. It provides a layer of insulation against this kind of right-wing populism. In the absence of union town politics, Iversonians might be much more like Willistonians.

But in some ways it is Iverson and Meriville that are the most alike: while they may have different politics, both communities are characterized by stability, as durable forms of social and

community organization reproduce a particular way of political sense-making among their residents. This is not the case in Williston. As such, it provides an important window into how the relationship between place and politics might change: destabilization of local organizational arrangements; changing community identity, which is often linked to local organizational arrangements; and changing interpretations of national party politics. The final factor is the most rooted in national processes of political party maneuvering, but its effect on place-based politics will still depend on local characteristics. For example, Republicans saw an opportunity to cultivate a new political subjectivity around the left behind White Americans in the postindustrial Heartland,¹³² but that subjectivity only took hold in Williston because the destabilization of local social organization had already left residents feeling that they were part of a dying community. In contrast, in Iverson and Meriville, residents were far less likely to interpret their social position in this way because they make sense of themselves and their social problems using different political tools. Taken together, we can see from Iverson, Meriville, and Williston how partisanship is constituted by both national party politicking and localized forms of political sense-making.

And although we have seen only evidence of stability in Iverson and Meriville, neither community is immune to change. Further attacks on unions, for example, could lead Iverson's place-based politics to break down over time, although the long tails of union politics in extended family members, which we saw in Chapter 4, suggest this breakdown would not immediately follow from union decline. And factors endogenous to Meriville might lead to deterioration there: as new generations continue to attend church but donate or volunteer less,

¹³² e.g., De Leon, Desai, and Tuğal 2009.

which some pastors indicated was occurring, churches will have fewer resources to publicly step in when social problems arise.

In fact, in many ways, both Iverson and Meriville relics of the past: amidst declines in church and union membership and organizational resources, it's unlikely that Iverson and Meriville represent the future of ex-urban, rural, and postindustrial communities. But in comparison with Williston, Iverson and Meriville offer insight into how persistent local patterns of social organization lead to political heterogeneity within broad swaths of the country often assumed to be politically monolithic. Iversonians, Merivillians, Willistonians, and other Americans living in similar communities do not experience the shifts in national political or economic contexts in the same way. As such, the comparison between the three indicates the kinds of social and political processes that might enable Whites to see themselves as part of a cross-racial, working-class mobilization rather than members of a group whose status is threatened by state intervention: grassroots mobilization among unions and community organizations that work to center local political debate around the need for *good jobs* in a macro-economic context that privileges the few economic elites over the many who are "struggling," as Danielle says.

But we can also see which pathways are the most likely for similar communities in the postindustrial heartland: as unions, churches, and other resources recede, instability and loss are likely to be more characteristic of residents' experiences than a turn toward the state like we saw in Iverson or even a turning inward, like we saw in Meriville. It is only through understanding the local sources of political heterogeneity across these communities that we can see why the reddening of the American heartland is unlikely to stop any time soon.

Part I thus reveals one possibility for change in place-based politics through the case of Williston. Part II will examine another likely possibility for change: the nationalization of politics and the erasure of the local. Through a detailed examination of place-based and individual-level polarization on issues related to the COVID-19 pandemic, Chapters 6 and 7 will show that even national crises and elite polarization on novel issues fail to destabilize the processes that produce and reproduce place-based politics.

**CHAPTER 6. LOCAL CONTEXTS AMIDST NATIONAL CRISIS: IVERSON,
MERIVILLE, AND WILLISTON CONFRONT THE ECONOMIC CRISIS OF THE COVID-19
PANDEMIC**

In March 2020, as COVID-19 raced through cities and ambled across rural areas and small towns, I picked up the phone to call Hugh, a law enforcement officer in Meriville. As we discussed the state and federal government responses to the pandemic, he repeated the exact story he'd told me eight months prior: "I mean, we have a tornado come through here, (the local people are) the ones that go out first thing. We're the ones that protect the people and lock it down." As Hugh concluded on both occasions, the federal government is just too big. When there's a problem, "the local people respond." And seven months after that, just before Hugh—a lifelong Democrat—cast his first ever vote for a Republican presidential candidate, he expressed the same belief about the appropriate division of responsibilities between local vs. national and public vs. private entities. Throughout the months leading up to the November election, even as unemployment spiked to historical levels not seen since the Great Depression, Merivillians echoed Hugh's sentiments, articulating similar beliefs about the limited role of the federal government in taking care of Americans, even during a time of crisis.

This is, in some ways, unsurprising—Hugh and other Merivillians offered up similar commentary in Chapters 3 and 4. And yet, at precisely that same time that Hugh and his neighbors were remaining stalwart in their beliefs, social scientists were making predictions that the opposite would occur: a rupture in Americans' anti-statism, leading to a rare moment of

national unity as people called on the federal government to intervene.¹³³ As Civil War historian David Blight wrote in *The Atlantic* in March 2020: "...it is in our most profound crises that we discover, against the suspicions and beliefs of millions, that government can be our friend, even our savior."¹³⁴ And yet, this was far from the case in Meriville. What can explain the durability of Merivillians' particular brand of anti-statism?

In many ways, the account that David Blight and others offer relies on an argument about the diminishing importance of the local, the individual, and even the group during times of national crisis: Americans gather together as Americans to solve an American problem.¹³⁵ This suggests a profound nationalizing force that runs contrary to the one I have documented throughout Part I: that places provide the social context in which people make sense of their identities and how they fit into the political system.

But even before the pandemic, this observation already felt out of date—not just because local associations have long been in decline, but because social media and other forms of digital communication appear to be erasing the distinctiveness of the local, weaving an invisible web of transnational connections that blurs the boundaries of physical geography.¹³⁶ As local media

¹³³ In the welfare state literature, scholars argue that citizens' normative beliefs about what the government should do come from living within a national context in which they observe the government already doing those things (e.g., Staerklé et al. 2012). Those contexts provide the cultural template that people use to solve emergent problems, creating a stickiness to both institutions and political orientations (DiMaggio and Powell 1983; Pierson 1992; Thelen 1999). But "critical junctures" provide opportunities for change in these otherwise stable systems. On critical junctures, see Capoccia 2015; Mahoney 2000. On the Great Depression, see: Cohen 1990; Gordon 1994.

¹³⁴ Blight 2020

¹³⁵ Political scientists, for example, document "rally-around-the-flag" effects, wherein presidential approval spikes in times of war or national crisis (e.g., Norrander and Wilcox 1993).

¹³⁶ On the "network society," see Castells 2010. For a popular account, see Friedman 2007. See Lichter and Brown 2011 for a discussion of how this is in part erasing distinctions between rural and urban America by creating a new kind of "urbanism" in rural communities.

outlets disappear or cut their budgets and Americans get more and more news online, the public has less and less knowledge about local politics and tends to fall back on partisanship to guide them in subnational voting decisions.¹³⁷ Moreover, these processes are accelerating: in 2018, for the first time, social media outpaced print media as a primary news source for Americans. And in 2020, with the COVID-19 pandemic racing through the country, political campaigns shied away from in-person canvassing operations, relying increasingly on digital strategies to get out the vote.¹³⁸

These processes seem to leave little place for the local. According to Daniel Hopkins (2018), the result is indeed an increasing nationalization of American politics, in which the two political parties have “national brands” that mean the same thing to people regardless of where they live or the level of government at which they are seeking office. Taking this argument to the extreme, it means that a Democrat would never vote for a Republican, and vice versa, even for dog catcher.¹³⁹

But as Iverson, Meriville, and Williston have already shown, this nationalization argument only captures part of the story: residents’ votes are indeed tied closely to their partisanship, a relationship that largely holds at the local level. This was clear when I canvassed in Meriville for the Democratic mayoral candidate in 2019 and found that Republicans were just as likely to say something along the lines of – “Democrats are baby-killers” – when I told them about the candidate, as they were to recall her well-known family name and view her as distinctive from the

¹³⁷ See Hindman 2011; Hopkins 2018; Moskowitz 2021

¹³⁸ On the 2018 election cycle, see Shearer 2018. On the 2020 election cycle, see Thompson 2020.

¹³⁹ See Warshaw 2019 for a review. Despite a tendency toward increasing partisanship and ideological behavior in local elections, other factors do still matter a great deal. For evidence on the incumbency advantage at the sub-national level, see de Benedictis-Kessner 2018; Ferreira and Gyourko 2009; Trounstine 2011. For systematic research on personal knowledge of local politicians, see Oliver and Ha 2007.

national Democratic Party. And yet, as preceding chapters have also shown, residents of Iverson, Meriville, and Williston do disagree on what it means to be a Democrat or Republican.

In other words, while Iversonians, Merivillians, and Willistonians are subject to the same nationalizing impulses as are other Americans, pulling them online and away from their communities, there is reason to doubt that these changes have completely wiped away the role of place in shaping their politics, as Part I showed. But Part I encountered residents in “settled times,”¹⁴⁰ raising the question: how do these local factors that structure Midwestern politics hold up amidst the onslaught of nationalizing forces, like a global pandemic that resulted in the most virtual presidential campaign cycle in history? As Chapter 3 highlights, the place-based factors that help shape partisan identity tend to be sticky: in both Iverson and Meriville, residents’ and community leaders’ ways of solving problems help reproduce local contexts and the political identities that go along with them. This argument also implies that a key opportunity for change in residents’ partisanship lies in the breakdown of those local organizational arrangements.¹⁴¹ And COVID-19 did destabilize most of the daily rhythms of daily life in Iverson, Meriville, and Williston, as well as in the rest of the country: by the end of March 2020, Merivillians were no longer going to church and Iversonians were not attending union meetings. Social life, including the organizational settings of small-town interaction, ground to a halt. How did national crisis affect the political differences among the three communities, and what role, if any, did the local play in this process?

¹⁴⁰ See, e.g., Swidler 1986.

¹⁴¹ This stands in contrast both to social structural accounts, which locate change in large shifts in social divisions (e.g., Lipset and Rokkan 1967), and to the political articulation school, which theorizes change as emerging from some combination of political opportunity and parties’ strategic maneuvering (De Leon et al. 2009).

Part II answers this question by returning to Iverson, Meriville, and Williston—this time over the phone and via Skype—as residents grappled with the dual public health and economic crises wrought by the pandemic. This chapter examines residents’ responses to the economic crisis wrought by COVID. I show that the pandemic did not destabilize local organizational arrangements in Iverson and Meriville nor create new organizational arrangements in Williston – in other words, the distinctiveness of each community persisted. And when residents were forced to answer questions that they had previously understood through the lens of local experiences—such as, for example, what role the state should play in mitigating the economic impact of the pandemic—they answered in tried-and-true ways, shaped by their communities. The result was that the pandemic reproduced the same bases for political difference we saw in Part I, as residents continued to understand their relationship to the state in different ways.

But this reproduction of difference only occurs because residents are grappling with the same kinds of questions that they have historically answered with reference to their communities. What happens when they have to form opinions on new issues? Is this an opportunity for rupture in the relationship between place and partisanship? Chapter 7 addresses these questions by considering the public health aspects of the pandemic and George Floyd’s murder. As residents formed opinions on these issues and considered how much they even cared about them, their partisanship, political knowledge, and media consumption guided their thinking. As a result, partisans’ opinions rapidly diverged—regardless of place. But because of the difference in the partisan composition of each community, the result of both the individual- and community-level processes was that, by the eve of the 2020 election, place-based political differences had expanded to incorporate new issues related to the pandemic, but retained the hallmarks of place politics that we saw in Part I.

Experiencing the Economic Crisis

The COVID-19 pandemic was not just a public health crisis: it also produced an economic crisis, leading to a spike in unemployment not seen in the U.S. since the Great Depression. And just as schools and businesses were closing in late March, and before the CARES Act was passed, Iversonians, Merivillians, and Willistonians all expressed profound concerns about the economic effects of the pandemic.¹⁴²

Kate, for example, is a Democrat from Iverson who works as a retail manager in a popular shop. When I asked her in mid-March how concerned she was about the pandemic, she, like many people, broke her worries into two buckets—health and economic. After explaining her precise level of concern about catching COVID-19 and how it might affect her and her husband, she continued:

... I'm extremely concerned about the economic impact it's going to take on the community because like for right now, the store is closed for browsers. [...] So I'm here staffing it and I'm I'm here doing some of the catch up type stuff on, but - I am

¹⁴² When I discuss change over time in these chapters, particularly in the first few weeks of the pandemic, I often pay closer attention to Iverson and Meriville than to Williston. This is because of how the pandemic affected my fieldwork: I had just completed my second round of interviews and left Williston in March 2020, and I had yet to begin the second round of interviews in Iverson and Meriville, when COVID-19 became real to most Americans. As soon as stay-at-home orders were imposed, I took to the phones with Iversonians and Merivillians for the second round of interviews and incorporated new questions about the pandemic as I did so. I completed these interviews in mid-April, and shortly thereafter began a full third round of interviews across all three communities as states were lifting their stay-at-home orders in May 2020. I completed a final fourth round of interviews in September and October, right before voting in the 2020 election. This means that while I have three full interviews with Iversonians and Merivillians between the stay-at-home orders and the presidential election—and one interview during those crucial early days of the pandemic—I only have two interviews during that period with most Willistonians. To make up for this, I did speak to a handful of Willistonians in March and early April 2020; however, as I have much richer data in Iverson and Meriville I often rely on that data to look closely at change over time in the early weeks of the pandemic.

concerned, but it has more to do with the economic stuff because I work every day with a lot of people that if something happens and they can't collect unemployment, they'll be in really dire straits. And I'm very fortunate that the store is responding very well. And their number one concern is making sure that employees are taken care of and that employees know that you're going to have a job to come back to and all of that stuff, but there's going to be some long, long reaching implications because they're saying that the economic impact of this could last into the fall.

A few weeks later, Hugh from Meriville offered a similar reflect. As he told me, he worried that the economic consequences were pushing his neighbors over the edge. Of the local factory workers who were laid off while their plants closed temporarily, he explained: “You know, a lot of these people do not have the money. I’m starting to see some Facebook posts on people that I thought were mostly normal, that are starting to get scared because they’re worried about rents coming - not rent, but mortgages are coming due. They’ve got to provide food.”

Kate and Hugh, like many others I spoke to who directly experienced a loss of hours at work or watched their coworkers, friends, and family get furloughed, felt the tight crunch of the pandemic’s economic costs immediately. There was little question that it was more than just a public health crisis; it was also an economic crisis.

But despite recognizing similar levels of need, Iversonians, Merivillians, and Willistonians over the following weeks continued to describe living in communities that responded to that need differently: Merivillians praised their community for taking care of itself; Iversonians saw little evidence of a coordinated, local response—nor did they expect one; and Willistonians continued to fall somewhere in between, some recognizing that churches and nonprofits could do more to help, and others feeling much like Iversonians—that the local response to economic need was nonexistent.

Merivillians’ persistent awareness of their community’s efforts to help those in need stood out more than ever in this time of crisis as people sat closed off from one another and their usual forms

of volunteerism. The day before Governor Holcomb issued Indiana’s first “stay-at-home” order on March 23rd, I ask Todd from Meriville if he’d heard of any local people or groups “stepping up” to help out those affected by the early days of school and work closures. He replied quickly:

They’ve never stepped down. They’ve never changed anything. [Even as the need has grown] The organizations here in town are still doing exactly what they’ve always done. It’s been business as usual. There’s been hardly any hiccup.

Todd’s assessment is consistent with organizational activity reported by residents, volunteers, and local media. Across Meriville, the networks of churches, ministries, and nonprofits continued and extended the work they were already doing to meet the community’s growing need. SAM went from serving 35-50 people each Wednesday night to over 100 people. The organization’s volunteers discussed leveraging this opportunity to deepen their ties with local churches, investing further in existing problem-solving strategies rather than searching for new ones.

Even beyond those directly connected to service groups, Merivillians continued to express appreciation for and awareness of local churches and nonprofits serving the community continued during the pandemic. Often, they learned of these efforts via the same communication networks through which they heard about case counts: local news and social media. In an analysis of local politicians’ public Facebook posts from January to November 2020, I found that Meriville is unique among the three communities in that politicians post about communitarianism—local, collective efforts to solve social problems—with incredible frequency.¹⁴³ Even amidst the many other sensational events and episodes of 2020, Meriville’s politicians talked about churches and nonprofits helping their communities, and residents liked and commented on those posts.

The result was that, despite being tucked away in their houses for the most part, Merivillians continued to feel that Meriville was taking care of itself. As Sophy summarized: “I

¹⁴³ See Appendix for more information on data collection, analysis, and findings.

feel like in our community that our churches have really stepped up.” Many others agreed with this assessment: in Meriville, the private response to economic hardship was swift, loosely coordinated across different groups, and highly visible to community members. As Emma explains of her hometown, it’s different from a lot of other places in this way:

Because, you know I think a lot of people would wait for FEMA or they’d wait even for the national governments to say, here’s what we’re giving everybody. Everybody was all about their thousand-dollar checks that have yet to hit the mailboxes. And so, I think a lot of people would wait for that.

Note how similar Emma’s view of her community is to the one that Hugh expressed at the beginning of the chapter: in Meriville, the local people do not wait for the federal government but take care of their community as they are accustomed to doing.

In sum, two legacies of community life from before COVID-19 shaped Merivillians’ response to the pandemic and its economic fallout: the existing network of non-governmental social provision, and residents’ view that this network was successfully meeting community needs that removed things like food insecurity—and, to an extent, housing—from the list of social problems that require government intervention.

Contrast this to Iverson, where residents – despite racking their brain – could think of little that churches or other community groups were doing to meet the local need in the spring of 2020. As Isabelle, who has lived in Iverson her whole life, explained: “I know there’s people that have food insecurity and what have you. And I haven’t heard of any food drives here at all. I haven’t heard of anything.” Although Isabelle is referring to food drives here, which are ostensibly run by nonprofit organizations, Isabelle concludes this statement by noting—as she has in the past—that Iverson is often “forgotten about” by the rest of the state—a reference to public resources. As Isabelle’s response indicates, when Iversonians think about their lack of resources—even when considering a lack of nonprofit resources—they locate the problem as a public one.

But while most Iversonians echoed Isabelle's sentiment, a handful attributed some vague activities to local churches and nonprofits. In Lorraine's view, for example, "people are being really supportive of them more than they ever have." But Lorraine is in the minority, in part because she works for a nonprofit herself. When pressed, Iversonians explained that service organizations "must be" doing something, and assumed they were unaware because they no longer belonged to a church. But Kate, who is a member of a local Catholic Church, also had little sense of her church's efforts to provide for the community. As she told me: "I feel like kind of the culture of Minnesota and Wisconsin is kind of helping people out on a more of a smaller scale. [...] I think there's a lot of smaller, you know, helping out kind of things that doesn't necessarily get reported or shared."

This does, in fact, seem to be the case. Two Facebook groups emerged shortly after the stay-at-home orders, one dedicated to supporting local businesses and the other that filled with posts of residents' needs and others' offers of help. Danielle recalls seeing people post offers for car repair, childcare, etc. and concludes: "I know a lot of the community itself is opening their doors to fellow community members." But while many Iversonians lauded the efforts of the small business Facebook group, by the fall of 2020, even these efforts had tapered off: as a handful of people told me, the community seemed to be tiring of the many calls for help.

Williston was much the same. Several residents, primarily churchgoers, noted in the spring of 2020 that churches were continuing their usual work of providing food and toiletries to needy families in the days following Minnesota's stay-at-home orders. Others touted the Salvation Army as an excellent local resource, one that many had also cited before the pandemic. But for the large majority of people I spoke with, nonprofits and churches were not a visible presence—even among churchgoers. Ben, echoing many Iversonians who have only a vague notion of what's going on

with local churches and nonprofits, explains: “I think churches are still trying to go out to the community and kind of minister to the community. Although not being super connected with the workings of the churches anymore, it’s harder to see what’s been going on.” Ben used to be a much more active participant in two local evangelical churches, but during the spring of 2020 he was working three part-time jobs amidst the pandemic and was less attuned to their activities.

But while Willistonians’ relatively low levels of insight into church and nonprofit activity during the COVID-induced economic crisis had an echo of Iversonians’, Willistonians were much more like Merivillians in that they generally continued to accept that churches and nonprofits can and should play that role. Ben, for example, takes for granted that churches would and should be stepping in to help out their neighbors during an economic downturn. But overall, these efforts in Williston fell flat. Even more so than in Iverson, residents felt a lack of local leadership – from both the private and public sectors. As Zack summarized in April: “... in terms of actual leadership (locally), in terms of addressing the health concerns and the economic fallout and the well-being of the community. No.”

Thus, while Iversonians, Merivillians, and Willistonians were all experiencing the same *national* economic and public health crises, they also continued to experience them from within their communities—places that shaped both the extent to which they felt the pandemic was closing in on them and the extent to which it had decimated people’s livelihoods. And in some ways, as they tuned in to local news, tracked the people wearing masks to the supermarket, and read about efforts to serve an increasingly hungry community, the pandemic even heightened residents’ attention to community life.

A Moment of Agreement

Despite these ongoing differences in local experiences and community-level responses to economic crisis, Iversonians, Merivillians, and Willistonians expressed some degree of agreement in the early weeks of the pandemic that the federal government needed to intervene to address the growing need. As Merivillians described it, there was a growing group of people who probably needed more than what the community itself could provide. Veronica, a Republican from Meriville, felt that the government's response was necessary: "You know, I think it's a good thing, especially for those individuals that aren't able to continue working. And it should hopefully help them." Iversonians agreed. As Kate, the Democrat we heard from above, explained a week before the CARES Act passed:

...I heard that Lindsey Graham said something to the effect of, I'm not concerned about whether or not people get a check in the mail from the government, I'm more concerned about whether or not we let the airlines go out of business [...]. Well... that's well and good for him to say, but it's a lot more concerning as to whether or not people are going to get back to being able to afford stuff.

Kate was not alone in anticipating the need for government intervention, as many other Iversonians had a similar reaction. And while few Merivillians directly called for federal relief, they generally held positive views of it once the CARES Act was passed.

Kate and Veronica's comments also pick up on the near-universal claim—among the Iversonians, Merivillians, and the Willistonians I spoke to – that the government should not direct too many resources towards big business, CEOs, and the wealthy. In the most general sense, they agreed that there was a clear division between the people who "needed" federal relief and the people who did not. And for the most part during the early months of the pandemic, they tended to draw the lines in similar places: the rich, the big corporations, and – for many people – their own families, did not need relief.

Paul, a Republican from Williston, was livid about the stimulus package when we spoke in early April. As he told me:

Paul: This is supposed to be stimulating stuff. Why in the world does the Kennedy Center get it? Oh, isn't Pelosi's daughter on the board of trustees or something? At the same time they got the twenty five million dollars the same day they sent home the orchestra or something like that. I didn't read a lot about it. I'm like, oh my gosh. *This stimulus should be stimulating the people.* Why are these museums and stuff getting all this money? Why'd Amtrak get a billion dollars? Why? *Well, because they have special interests in it.*

Me: So in terms of the checks, the thousand dollar checks to the regular people, that to you seems....good, or?

Paul: Better than nothing! We didn't have that in the past. So, I mean, it helps. There's a lot of people, you know, single moms who...are trying to make it, now they're staying home. Now they don't have money coming in.

Me: So you feel like the part that's going to the people is good.

Paul: Yes.

Me: But the part that's going to make the museums is bad. What about the businesses like the airlines and things like that?

Paul: Ridiculous. *Absolutely ridiculous. They don't need the stimulation.*

Me: So you would just say give all the money to the people?

Paul: Yes.

Me: OK. And do you feel like it should be more than a thousand dollars?

Paul: I don't know. If we didn't give away, what, 2.3 trillion dollars? It probably could have been.

Paul's comments summarize the concerns of many people whose immediate reaction to the CARES Act was that big corporations should, under no circumstances, receive "stimulation" from the federal government. As Paul explains, there are trade-offs between supporting the people and supporting corporations, and in those circumstances, the government should prioritize those who "need the stimulation." For Paul, as with most others, the view that government should prioritize the needy immediately ruled out anything like a corporate bailout. As he says: "This stimulus should be stimulating the people."

It was rare, in those early days of the shutdowns, that I heard anyone who did not share this view. This kind of pessimism about the government's penchant for corporate bailouts pervaded among those who had lived through the 2008 financial crisis and felt a creeping suspicion that this

crisis would bring more of the same. But others drew different boundaries between who was and was not truly “need”: between rich and poor; between working and unemployed; and between families and single people.

In the most general sense, Iversonians, Merivillians, and Willistonians agreed that there was a clear division, as Shane from Meriville told me, between the people who “needed” federal relief and the people who did not. As a result of these needs-based distinctions, many people—like Mallory, a teacher from Meriville who was still fully employed, as was her husband—grouped themselves in the category of those who did not “need” the funds and felt uncomfortable receiving them. As she explained of her family’s reaction to it: “I mean, we were not affected financially at this point. So it made me feel a little bit guilty that we were even getting anything.” Mallory’s guilt over receiving the stimulus payments was overwhelmingly common among those who remained employed full-time during the early months of the pandemic.

But even among those who were unemployed, several people expressed qualms about making more money staying at home than they did working. In late May I spoke to Scott and Lisa who live in Williston. At the time, Lisa’s receptionist job at a local chiropractor’s office had temporarily disappeared with COVID shutdowns; later, the loss would become permanent. Scott and Lisa were lifelong Democrats until 2016, when both voted for Trump. They are starting to consider themselves Republicans these days, but they hesitate to take up the mantle entirely. At the end of our conversation, I asked, “Is there anything else that you would want to see the federal government doing right now that they are not doing?”

Scott: I don’t think so. The only thing I wondered about is they’ve got that \$600.00 thing in for everybody on unemployment. People are making more money when they’re home than when they’re working (*sic*), and that’s not right.

Lisa: Yes. We do kind of wonder how that got passed.

Scott: It would be the liberals who did that, got it in somehow or another.

Lisa: Yes.

Scott: It was something that got slipped through that there weren't a lot of thoughts on how it works. I don't know.

Lisa: The nurses and doctors, they should be getting hazard pay as well.

Scott: Right, instead of the people getting paid \$600.00 extra a week sitting at home.

Lisa: Yes, a week? I mean, I couldn't even see it if it was a month, but it's every week.

Me: So you're making more money now than if you were at work?

Lisa: Yes. [Laughter] Yes, I am.

Scott: Absolutely, way more.

Scott and Lisa, along with several others who lost their jobs or whose spouse lost their job, felt that they did not *need* the extra money. But smuggled in again among these needs-based concerns, as Scott and Lisa's comments indicate, were notions of deservingness: why spend resources on the people "sitting at home" – even if it's your own wife – instead of the frontline workers?

But for the most part, Iversonians, Merivillians, and Willistonians agreed on who did and did not need stimulus in the spring of 2020. And importantly, while they were most annoyed about the wealthy and big corporations being "bailed out" by the government again, many people also felt that they did not *need* or, often, *deserve* federal funds. And yet, in contrast to much of what we know about White Americans' racialized conceptions of deservingness when it comes to welfare, residents weren't concerned about some imagined "other" who was receiving welfare unjustly; they were worried about themselves and their families receiving an undue benefit from the government.¹⁴⁴

The Limits of Crisis as Transformational Opportunity

But these similarities proved to be superficial and short-lived. As the economy began to recover, Willistonians and Merivillians alike wondered if the unemployed were needy or simply

¹⁴⁴ See, e.g., Gilens (2000) and Quadagno (1996).

undeserving—lazy people taking advantage of free-flowing government money. And at the same time, Merivillians retained an additional notion about the “need” for relief, characteristic of their pre-pandemic logic: there are people who are and are not needy, but there are also types of need that are and are not suitable for government intervention. And those needs that *can* be addressed within the community *should* be. The result was that Merivillians felt there was no longer a need for further public assistance, *except in the case of small businesses*. Small business loans were not something the community could take care of itself. Thus, even as both Merivillians and Willistonians became increasingly focused on articulating deservingness rather than needs-based criteria for public assistance, it was only in Meriville that this distinctive, local anti-statism continued to shape residents’ claims on the state during the pandemic.

Iversonians (particularly Democrats), meanwhile, were anxious for the government to step in and provide a second stimulus bill that included all elements of the first and more. In fact, as they experienced the government making an unprecedented foray into sustaining Americans’ livelihoods, they saw this as evidence that they were right all along—the government *could* be helping the working- and middle-classes more than it had been. The result was that, particularly between Iverson and Meriville, participants’ views of the state’s responsibility for its citizens diverged further than ever.

From need to deservingness: Meriville & Williston

By the fall of 2020, residents across Iverson, Meriville, and Williston were returning to work as the shutdowns eased. While this was true everywhere—only two of my interlocutors suffered permanent job loss by the time of the election—it was only in Meriville that residents had come to view the local economy as entirely recovered. In contrast, Iversonians offered up a lengthy

list of people they knew personally who were still suffering and Willistonians continued to think of their economy as in a state of permanent depression. As a result, Merivillians—and, to an extent, Willistonians— became increasingly wary that the people claiming a need were really the lazy ones, i.e., the undeserving.

Consider, for example, Ashley, a Democratic-leaning Independent from Williston. When I ask if she would like to see more unemployment relief in October, she replies: “Yes. If they are unemployed because of COVID, yes. If they’re unemployed because they’re lazy, then no.” And as she contemplated continuing the extra \$600 a week, she added:

It’s kind of tricky for me. I had a co-worker who chose to take a leave of absence – not a leave of absence. She chose to be laid off or whatever, furloughed for it just because she didn’t want to get – she didn’t want to work but she wanted to make that extra money. I mean, as long as they’re not making more than they normally would at work, I’d be definitely okay with that, but there’s people who are just lazy and want the money.

Many people like Ashley agreed that government relief should be limited to those who were unemployed *directly because of COVID-19*. This was distinct from the most common needs-based claims evoked by participants in the spring, which focused primarily on income and wealth as a dividing line between the needy and the not needy. Moreover, within Ashley’s needs-based language are hidden claims about deservingness, as her comments indicate: “there’s people who are just lazy and want the money.”

In Meriville, this view was even more prevalent given my interlocutors’ overwhelming conclusion that the economy had returned to its pre-COVID robustness. It also crossed party lines. Kevin, a Democrat, echoed Merivillians’ typical assessment of the local pre-COVID economy when he told in October, “I really feel like anyone who wants a job around here can get one.” As a result, he did not support another relief bill, explaining that he knew it would go to people choosing not to work. As with Ashley, who observed a

coworker *choose* not to work because of the generosity of unemployment, the myriad “Help Wanted” signs around Meriville told residents that there must be “people who are just lazy” and therefore do not deserve the relief. As such, many of my interlocutors across Meriville and Williston agreed: as the economy recovered, the truly needy—the truly *deserving*—were a dwindling bunch.

But for Merivillians, the circle of needy was even narrower: it included only those directly impacted by the pandemic *who were not being served by the community*. As residents saw the economy return to pre-shutdown levels of employment and local charities step in to feed people as always, this was an increasingly narrow space for government intervention: if the local economy had rebounded, the usual patterns of local provision should suffice to meet any remaining need. This was, in fact, the logic that Merivillians used as they parsed out the areas suitable for government intervention and those better left to local aid networks throughout the pandemic. Larry laid it out clearly as we discussed the CARES Act in a conversation in late April. He explained that he was more worried about using federal government resources to keep small businesspeople afloat than to feed people. The latter is taken care of by local, nongovernmental efforts:

Because I think the feeding of people, believe it or not, socially—and I told you before, and I think you know this—Meriville County would be an example of where it gets done, in my opinion. I don’t mean to say there’s nobody hungry, I won’t go there. But I think in general, if there is somebody (hungry), there is somebody (else) covering that in some form. You know, food services and all that. [...] Because I think people are being fed locally.

In this example, Larry – like other Merivillians in the months prior to COVID-19 – recognizes a clear trade-off between public and private provision of certain social welfare goods. Within his community, he observes nonprofits very successfully providing certain social goods, particularly food. Most importantly, like many of his neighbors, Larry concludes from his observations of local

provision that the government's role should be limited to providing the things that the community can't, like loans for small businesses.

Moreover, note Larry's aside to me – "I told you before, and I think you know this." Given the time I had already spent speaking with Larry and other community members, he assumes that I would have picked up on this very obvious fact about Merivillian life by now: the community takes care of a wide range of social needs and only calls on the federal government to step in where it can't.

Similarly, when I asked Harry, perhaps the most active and staunch Republican among my sample, about further federal stimulus in October, she was adamant that it should not happen because of the local economic recovery. I pressed her further, but what about those who "really do need help"? She replied:

If they really needed the help. I just think that communities take care of one another. We've got a shelter. We've got food pantries. We've got people that are helping people. In my opinion, communities work together. They provide for one another and if they're really in need, we help. I just don't think another stimulus check or anything from the government is necessary.

Harry's response perfectly encapsulates the narrow window for federal intervention among Merivillians. It lies between what the market—through jobs—and the community—through nonprofits—can provide.

This logic, pervasive among Merivillians across lines of party affiliation, age, class, and gender, led many people to the same conclusion as Larry and Harriett by the fall of 2020: the government should prioritize helping those who really need it, and those who really need it are the small business owners. Marie, a Democrat who pays little attention to politics, exemplifies this stance. When I asked her if she would like to see another round of relief passed in Congress, she considered it and then replied: "I'm not sure if that's a good idea because what's happened is this

caused people not to go back to work because they're enjoying payments. Around here, almost every business you pass is hiring. They can't get people to work." I then turned to the specific elements of a possible bill and asked about more loans for small businesses. This time her response was different: "I think I would. A lot of small businesses just didn't make it because people can't go there."

In sum, because Merivillians tended to define "need" so narrowly as those directly affected by COVID who could not receive help within their community, they increasingly saw little role for government provision by the fall of 2020. Employment had picked up, local charities continued to provide food, and only small businesses still needed help. This perspective was almost entirely limited to Merivillians. Only Tina, a Democrat from Williston, expressed a similar notion in September when I asked if the government should pass another round of stimulus checks:

We have many groups around here in this part of the country that step in and try to help, and we have a lot of people with gardens that are donating, and that all helps, but let's just say, in my area, per se, Minneapolis-Saint Paul, that is not the case. So, where are the food shelves getting more of their food from to help those down and out? I don't know.

Tina, much like Larry and Harriett, sees her community as rising to meet the need. While she imagines, unlike them, that there may be other places where there is a population that is not provided for by local charity, she can't be sure of this. But Tina is not just the only person outside of Meriville to express this worldview during the pandemic, she is one of the most civically engaged people in Williston. Between church, grassroots meetings, and her other volunteer work, Tina is deeply attuned to the local provision networks. But even for others who are similarly aware of those networks—like Jennifer who twice tells me about local church food drives and is deeply involved in the community—no one articulates the same idea as Tina.

But there is an even greater contrast between Merivillians and Iversonians who, even where they were aware of nongovernmental sources of help, continued to see this as evidence of private failure – just as they had done before the pandemic. Christopher, for example, was one of a handful of people who referred to the efforts of a local Catholic charity to provide financial and food assistance in Iverson. But by September, he told me: “It’s still not as much as we need. I’ve known two different people now who because of this have not been able to get their jobs back and have been evicted from their homes.” He went on to describe a cascade of issues he saw tumbling from the lack of help for people like his friends, and I finally asked, “So, what would you like to see done?” He replied:

Realistically, more stimulus money going out to people, the unemployment benefits brought back. People need financial assistance right now from the government, and that’s not been happening. People were okay, not great, but they were okay before they lost the unemployment benefits, and they’ve been really hurting since then.

Even in instances like Christopher’s, where Iversonians are aware of private, local efforts to provide for their community, these efforts do not appear as a viable stand-in for government intervention. In many ways, this is the opposite of the prevailing ethos in Meriville, but it echoes almost exactly the kinds of concerns that Iversonians had expressed about their community’s problems in the months prior to the pandemic.

From need to universalism: Iverson

Instead of turning inward for solutions, Iversonians turned outward—as they had done in the past. Moreover, despite ongoing preferences for targeted, needs-based public relief, Iversonians were also beginning to make appeals for further state intervention on the basis of universalist principles. Isabelle, for example, is a Democrat who argued in September that another round of stimulus checks were needed *by everyone*. As we discussed what she would like the

government to include in a second relief bill, I asked: “Okay, and in that bill, would you like to see another round of those \$1,200.00 stimulus check go out to everyone?”

Isabelle: Absolutely. Prices are so ridiculous in the grocery store. I’ve never spent so much money on services and on food than I have these last several months.

Me: Oh, interesting. So, you feel like that money could help people make up the difference?

Isabelle: Oh, yes. I’m getting a regular source of income, I’m getting my retirement income in, but it’s not covering anywhere near what it did because hamburger has doubled in price now. Everything has gone up.

Isabelle’s claims for a universalistic approach are couched in needs-based language: she believes everyone has at least some increased financial cost from the pandemic. But later she adds, of people who might be uncomfortable going into work but *could*: “Until this gets straightened out, I think the government’s going to have to foot the bill.”

But others in Iverson couched their preferences in languages of fairness and citizenship. As Quinn told me in September, she supported another round of stimulus checks and greater resources for a whole host of people in need: “Because I feel like we all pay the government our whole life so I think they should give us a break right now and give us some stimulus checks, and obviously what they can. Because I just think that the ones that really need it the most, it would help a lot.” Quinn, like others, recognizes that there are some who “need it the most” and others who don’t; however, she also argues that if people pay into the system they have a right to government relief.

Among Iversonians who shared this orientation, they also saw the stimulus as evidence that the government could be doing more for the people in general. And these claims evolved as they saw what the government was willing and able to do if they so chose. Jamie, who continued to

work during the crisis but feared for her coworkers at a local restaurant who were furloughed, explained in May:

This pandemic is really exposing how many of our institutions are just...it's all bullsh*t. There have been states where they just passed laws saying guess what? You can't evict somebody for being late on your rent this month because of the pandemic. [...] The federal government could easily, say, look, nobody is going to work, but you're going to pay. And that's just the way it is.

Similarly, when Danny reflected on the lessons he'd taken away from the pandemic in late May, he told me:

But I think this showed that maybe life isn't as good as the majority of people think it is. Maybe we do deserve better and we should have better. And maybe we should start asking for it with a more firm voice. So, it opened my eyes to confirm what I already had somewhat of a belief in. And that's that maybe the government could do a little bit better for the people.

For Jamie, Danny, and other Iversonians, the crisis revealed a kind of untruth that they had long suspected, the notion that the government was *unable* to provide more for the people. As Danielle wondered aloud while we discussed the stimulus: "If America could have done this to begin with, why weren't they doing it all along?" Like Jamie said, "it's all bullsh*t." By the fall, these Iversonians were focused on the possibility of not just widespread, but universalist, interventions.

But while Jamie, Danny, and Quinn appear to echo Lizabeth Cohen's (1990) account of Depression-era bread-liners who realized that state intervention was necessary because local nonprofits had failed to provide in a time of massive unemployment, there is an important caveat. Note, for example, Danny's comment: "it opened my eyes to confirm what I already had somewhat of a belief in." Danny already believed the public sphere should be expanded significantly. For folks like him, the notion that the "government can be a force for good," as Carl put it to me, was commonsense long before COVID-19. The pandemic proved their point rather than taught them this lesson.

But importantly, their willingness to call on the state to provide for the things they already wanted —particularly universal healthcare, universal basic income, and student debt relief— evolved as the federal government actually took up similar policies. Free school lunch for everyone and universal basic income suddenly seemed politically and pragmatically feasible. As Luke explained in May: “I’m a big fan of the idea of a universal basic income. So that was the first moderate steps to implementing that. So it was nice to see that it could actually work and have a plausible effect.”

Outside of Iverson, I rarely heard similar claims. Only a handful of Willistonians called for universalistic policies, and when they did so it was usually on terms that focused on the government’s responsibility *in times of crisis* rather than on claims of citizenship or fairness. As several Willistonians told me, the purpose of government aid should be to stimulate the economy. Nate, a Republican, told me in October that he felt the first stimulus was one of the Trump Administration’s key successes in pandemic policy: “Them giving the stimulus plan, I think was probably a good thing because it helped keep the economy going. People were still buying stuff, those that were laid off or furloughed that weren’t still making income were able to do that, pay the rent, pay the mortgage for a while.” In other words, government stimulus kept the wheels of the economy churning, as long as it did not land in the hands of the wealthy.

And among Merivillians, even at the height of unemployment in the spring of 2020, government was still anathema. According to Fred, a Republican, in times of crisis we’ve got to take care of people. But for him, this was not an indication that we should welcome the government into our lives. As he explained when I asked him whether the pandemic has made him reconsider how our healthcare system works:

The government can screw up a glass of water. I mean, you’d turn on your faucet and you’d get burps and belches and farts and you’d get brown water out of it. I’m

tellin' you. The government has proven itself not to be really good at running programs. There are always cost overruns. They're not very effective. You look at how we how we spend our money. If we gave them carte blanche in the health care system, Stephanie, can you imagine how screwed up it would be? Geez. So, I think the private sector...Makes them have to produce. It makes them to have a product that people have faith in and trust and is efficient. The government answers to nobody.

Fred was not alone in this response. Several Merivillians – unprompted—explained during our discussion of the pandemic that they think government is inefficient, wasteful, and even corrupt. Echoing a somewhat typical finding of the welfare state literature, Merivillians held ambivalent views toward the state in those early months: even as they expressed positive opinions about the federal government's extensive investment in its people's welfare during the early months of the pandemic, they retained staunch anti-statist views in the abstract.¹⁴⁵ But these ideas were not just abstract: they also prevented people like Fred from taking the CARES Act as evidence that the government could or should do more to intervene in people's lives, a view that drastically distinguishes him from Iversonians like Danielle.

Only Todd, the erstwhile progressive Independent from Meriville, firmly believed in another round of stimulus checks in the fall of 2020. As he told me: "I think that they worry too much about people getting a benefit that's undeserving. They would rather watch 30 deserving people die than to let one non-deserving person get \$1,200.00, which to me is mind-blowing." As is often the case, Todd's own political understandings—while generally at odds with his community's—are a reflection of the politics that surround him. Republicans, he believes, believe in redistribution based on the principle of deservingness. And by the fall of 2020, this was increasingly true of the Merivillians I spoke to.

¹⁴⁵ Cantril and Free (1968)

The economic crisis produced by COVID-19, in sum, reproduced differences in beliefs about the role of the state across each community—differences that had always been particularly stark between Iversonians and Merivillians. Iversonians were learning that the government could take care of a whole range of social problems that had long plagued the country, exposing the lie—or the “bullsh*t”—of the system, in Jamie’s words. Meanwhile, Merivillians had only learned that existing combination of local, private solutions and a national spigot that can be turned on in times of crisis was working.

In other words, residents’ experiences of a national economic crisis from within their communities, and the way they interpreted and made sense of the federal government reaching in to protect those communities, proved their previous beliefs right. When COVID-19 threw the economy into standstill, Merivillians continued to deploy existing strategies for taking care of the needy and, according to residents’ view of the situation, were able to meet the rising local need through extended networks of voluntarism and giving. If the government had not stepped in with the CARES Act, those local systems may have been overwhelmed as they had been in earlier eras of economic downturn. But in this instance, the *balance* of public and private provision sustained the Merivillian community enough so that residents were not forced to question its validity. And in many ways, that is not much different from what always supported Merivillians’ experiences of social provision: a balance of largely invisible public support for the middle-class and highly visible private support for the needy within their community. Although public support became more visible than ever during the pandemic, this did not change the fact that Merivillians

continued to find that their beliefs *worked*: Merivillians really could take care of themselves, as Larry says.¹⁴⁶

It was only for a moment that Merivillians wavered on their commitment to local communities taking care of themselves. And in that time, at the height of the unemployment crisis as states mandated business closures, Iversonians, Merivillians, and Willistonians did agree not just on the need for state intervention but on the principles by which it should be distributed—only to those who need it.

But Iversonians' trajectory after that followed the same logic as Merivillians': seeing the government do what they had so long wanted it to – make large, meaningful interventions to help working- and middle-class Americans—proved to them that their way of thinking was right. The way the two communities made claims on their government in the weeks and months leading up to the presidential election was much like what they'd done over the year and a half prior. The national crisis did not produce convergence, nor did it entirely erode the importance of the local in shaping Iversonians' and Merivillians' beliefs: many elements of local contexts remained intact, and so too did the way that those contexts shaped politics in Iverson and Meriville.

But the national crisis did bring up a host of new issues, ones that were not rooted in residents' experiences within their communities. And as the next chapter will show, individuals' partisanship, rather than place, guided their thinking more on these issues.

¹⁴⁶ On the invisible welfare state, see Mettler 2011. On beliefs “working” in institutional contexts, see: Strand and Lizardo 2015.

CHAPTER 7. THE END OF PLACE?: WHY ELITE POLARIZATION DOES NOT NATIONALIZE ALL POLITICS

In mid-September 2020, the U.S. was facing the beginning of its third—and at that point deadliest—wave of COVID-19, a wave that did not ease up until vaccines became widely available in spring 2021. After a fleeting media hiatus from the public health crisis amidst increasing national attention to racial inequality in the wake of George Floyd’s murder, the public’s attention was forced back to the pandemic’s progress in the run-up to the 2020 presidential election. And on October 2nd, the politics of COVID-19 took another dramatic turn: President Trump and First Lady Melania Trump tested positive for the virus.

On that day I happened to have a mid-afternoon phone call scheduled with Mary, a Democrat from Williston. We discussed how COVID was affecting life in Williston and how she felt Governor Walz had handled things in Minnesota, and finally I asked about President Trump, a topic I knew was a sore spot for her:

Me: ...how are you feeling these days about how the Trump Administration has handled COVID?

Mary: I don’t think the Trump administration has handled COVID. I think he has pushed it off. He admitted on tape (to Bob Woodward) that he was lying to the public. He knew how serious it was and he chose not to tell people how serious it was because he didn’t want to cause a panic. I’m sorry (*she pauses, frustrated*). I’m not using the language that is going through my head right now.

Me: You feel like the Trump administration really hasn’t done much of anything?

Mary: Well, I don’t think they have done enough and I don’t think they have done the right things. I think he has politicized this. He helps the governors in favorable states politically to him and criticizes the governors in the states that are led by Democrats and the cities where the mayors are democratic. He’s done nothing but criticize the way they’ve handled things. He pits the governors against each other to get PPEs. They were in bidding wars with providers because he set it up that way. He said, “Go get it yourself.”

Mary's response is overwhelmingly typical of other Democrats at that time, regardless of whether they lived in Iverson, Meriville, or Williston – in their view, the Trump Administration had utterly abdicated responsibility for taking care of the country. Many, like Mary, expressed concerns about Trump's delayed response to the pandemic, which he famously admitted on tape to journalist Bob Woodward who then published his comments just a few days before I spoke to Mary. Others were similarly angry because he appeared to politicize the response, failed to listen to experts, or, as Mary tells me, pushed off all responsibility to the states. To the Democrats I spoke to on the eve of the 2020 election, President Trump's handling of the pandemic was a complete and utter failure. Even as many Democrats were also angered or saddened by his response to the murder of George Floyd and subsequent Black Lives Matter protests, it was in these remarks about the pandemic that their sense of being abandoned by presidential leadership came through more clearly than at any other time during the previous 18 months.

About a week and a half after I spoke to Mary, I talked to Veronica, a Republican from Meriville. I asked her the same question I'd posed to Mary, and she responded:

Again, it's similar ... with the governor. It's very difficult, I think, trying to strike that balance of protecting us as individuals, but not totally destroying our economy because in essence, our economy is part of taking care of us too with our livelihood. Overall, I think he did the best he could—as anybody could have done. I don't know that anyone else would've done anything better or different. I know everyone thinks that and they say that, but I don't know whether it would've been a different Republican president, or a Democrat president. I think they would've all have the same challenges. No matter what that person would do, someone is going to be upset and think that they're wrong. I think he tried to lean on the medical professionals to help guide him through that. Even some of them, I know there's a lot of controversy on who's the most, I guess, knowledgeable on what should be doing. I think it changes every day because they're learning more about it. I think they did the best they could, honestly. If a Democrat would've been in there, I would've not been one to be overly critical because I just don't know how a president can really control the virus.

Veronica’s response, like Mary’s, is typical of her co-partisans. It contains many of the constituent elements of a Republican evaluation of the Trump Administration at that time: this was a challenging situation that any leader would have struggled to address, given trade-offs between public health and economic health; Trump “tried to lean on the medical professionals” and listen to the experts, but there is some dispute over who the experts are; and in the end, it’s hard to judge him critically because “I just don’t know how a president can really control the virus.” In other words, the President did not abdicate responsibility – stopping a virus wasn’t his responsibility to begin with.

In the preceding chapter we saw how residents polarized over the course of just a few months on issues related to the size and scope of state intervention into the social welfare of the American public. These beliefs, already rooted in part in their experiences living in a community that takes care of itself, like Meriville, or a community that needs help from the state to level off economic inequality, like Iverson, were “proved right” yet again by their experiences during the pandemic.

But this chapter will take a closer look at how Iversonians, Merivillians, and Willistonians formed opinions on novel issues that rose to national prominence during the 2020 presidential campaign—particularly those related to the public health crisis. Could these issues have provoked change in the relationship between place and partisanship?

Because partisanship increasingly guides Americans’ vote choice and opinion formation, political scientists have argued that the old adage “all politics is local” should be replaced by a

new one: “all politics is partisan.”¹⁴⁷ This implies that Republicans in one place are much like Republicans in another, and vice versa for Democrats, and that co-partisans should respond similarly to novel issues that they learn about on the news or in the paper. The first part of the chapter suggests that this is indeed the case in Iverson, Meriville, and Williston. I chart in detail the partisan polarization among individual Democrats and Republicans—regardless of place—on issues related to public health.¹⁴⁸ In this instance, partisans behaved much like research on American political behavior predicts: they had pre-existing political biases, and when presented with a new issue such as a global pandemic, they self-selected into a media environment that confirmed those biases, and issue polarization ensued.¹⁴⁹ Along the way, they often justified their partisan stances using two tactics: reinterpreting COVID-19 data and models to conform to their

¹⁴⁷ For evidence that partisanship is driving voting behavior in state-wide, Senate, and U.S. House of Representative races, thus “nationalizing” American politics, see Abramowitz and Webster 2015 and Hopkins 2018.

¹⁴⁸ A portion of the debate on polarization has to do with how to measure it: are partisans increasingly *distant* in their positions on issues (i.e., moving from a unimodal to a bimodal distribution of public opinion) or have partisans simply sorted better into two camps without pulling further apart (i.e., still in a unimodal distribution) (see Park 2018 for a summary). Without measuring my interviewees’ issue positions on a survey scale, I can’t say for certain whether what I observed was partisan sorting or polarization; however, I use the term polarization to denote the fact that the *qualitative* differences between Democrats and Republicans led to two clear, distinct subgroups that appeared to be living in different versions of reality.

¹⁴⁹ Issue polarization occurs when there are biases in the information environment that clue people in to which party supports which side of an issue. In such a context, politically motivated reasoning ensues: people self-select into information environments that confirm their partisan biases and even when presented balanced information, they credit accounts that confirm those biases and discredit ones that do not (Kunda 1990; Lodge and Taber 2013; Taber and Lodge 2006). Although there is a lot of debate about the extent to which polarized media—whether online or on cable—contribute to this process of issue polarization (see Prior 2013 for a review), scholars tend to agree that the U.S. media environment enables this kind of biased opinion formation because it offers people the choice to consume only partisan news sources (Jamieson and Cappella 2010; Prior 2007), and those who do—often the most ideologically extreme already—do become further polarized (see Levendusky 2013 for an account of how media polarization affects the polarized; and see Bail et al. 2020 for a related account of how Russian bots affected extremists during the 2020 election).

opinions and appealing to the multiplicity of scientific “experts” to legitimate their claims.¹⁵⁰ The key to how partisans polarized so rapidly and meaningfully on COVID-19 mitigation policies is that they knew which party went with which issue position—this must take place before they can even begin to engage in the kinds of justifications described above.¹⁵¹ And they did this by listening to media that they knew, for the most part, would tell them what they wanted to hear.

This account thus appears to conform to the predictions of nationalization arguments: even as Iversonians, Merivillians, and Willistonians experienced the public health crisis from within their communities, as they did with the economic crisis, partisans’ ultimate position-taking on these issues came from national news media and rapid polarization by elites.¹⁵² But I conclude the chapter by offering a different view of where the national forces of the presidential campaign, the pandemic, and Black Lives Matter protests shaped Iversonians’, Merivillians’, and Willistonians’ eroded place-based politics, asking: what portion of residents’ political beliefs changed, and what didn’t change, from our first conversations to our last? I show that the issues that voters cared most about shifted almost every time we spoke, in accordance with what had most attention on the news at any given time; but their place-based politics—the way they understood how to solve their solve problems and where they fit into the party system—remained remarkably stable. In other words, Iversonians are still workers who want the Democratic party to level the playing field; Merivillians are still Christians in a community that takes care of itself and favors the Republican Party; and

¹⁵⁰ On how partisans reinterpret the same facts to mean different things, see: Gaines et al. 2007. As Rogers Brubaker (2020) has argued, the “participatory challenge” to expertise—a kind of scientific populism—has led to the proliferation of competing epistemic authorities. And this has made it possible for two people to say the same words – e.g., “I want the President to listen to the experts,” and mean very different things.

¹⁵¹ On the role of political knowledge in shaping issue polarization, see: Layman and Carsey 2002; Slothuus and de Vreese 2010.

¹⁵² On the latter, see: Druckman, Peterson, and Slothuus 2013.

Willistonians are still living in a dying town, moving toward a Republican Party that seems to reflect their concerns.

In sum, despite clear evidence of individual-level polarization on novel issues, this did not destabilize the roots of place-based politics: such polarization appeared fleeting, while residents' beliefs on issues formed through local experiences were reinforced over time.

Experiencing the Public Health Crisis

I began many of my conversations in the spring of 2020 by asking residents how their communities were handling the COVID-19 pandemic. It wasn't atypical for people to tell me they weren't sure – they'd been cooked up inside for days or weeks, trying to protect themselves and their families. But many people offered detailed responses. Just as I described in Chapter 1, Iversonians, Merivillians, and Willistonians continued to learn about their communities through local news, social media, and—even during the pandemic—in-person observations.

In those early days of fear and uncertainty, people often used the time they gained from forgone work commutes or shortened work hours toward staying up to date on the virus' spread within their states and communities. Local news outlets reported case counts, hospitalizations, and deaths, and residents stayed attuned. Merivillians, for example, proudly reported that they had yet to have a death by late April; in Williston, residents noted that the quick jump from 0 to 30 cases in early- to mid-April had been largely confined to a residential treatment facility, and that they had remained stable for over a week by early May; and in Iverson, people assured me that their first few cases had all been out in the county, carried in by people who had been travelling out of state.

Amanda, for example, is a Democrat from Williston who could cite chapter and verse the state of the virus in Minnesota when we spoke in late April:

Minnesota has seen an increase, although I don't think today was a new high. The past two days were new highs, though I don't think with a new high in deaths, which is good. That's a good thing. But the two previous days, I think we had beaten the record beforehand for a number of deaths in a day.

Like Amanda, many people learned about the virus' progress through their communities via their governors' daily press conferences. But as was the case prior to the pandemic, they also learned about local developments from social media, particularly Facebook. Meriville's mayor even began posting regular daily COVID case count updates on his official Facebook page to keep the public informed.

As residents watched governors' briefings and read local news updates, they also learned about epidemiology and how to critically interpret the case and death counts to assess their practical implications for public policy and individual behavior. Phrases like "flatten the curve" were taken up quickly, and people often offered detailed assessments of what emerging data meant for their counties and states. For example, as testing ramped up throughout the country in March and April, residents often repeated to me what they'd heard from their governors: their states were going to see a spike in cases, but a lot of that had to do with the testing. They learned to interpret the data accordingly. Sophy, a Republican from Meriville, explained in late March: "It sounds like we're gonna see a spike in maybe cases because there's gonna be more testing that's gonna be available. So people are probably going to panic because they're gonna see our numbers rise here a little bit." Sophy, like many others, had adopted a whole new way of thinking about her community – reading it's present and future through the numbers, and even further, learning to interpret those numbers based on other factors like the availability of testing.

Nearly universally, interviewees described dedicating more time than usual to consuming news so that they could collect accurate information about the pandemic’s course. This tapered off after a few months: by the fall, few people were following the pandemic’s progress as closely as they had been in the spring, nor were they as attuned to local case counts. But for a brief period of physical isolation, local news—whether directly from their governors or circulating on social media—became a much more regular feature of many people’s lives than it ever had been.

At the same time, in those very early days of the pandemic—late March through early April—there was little difference in the public health behaviors that Republicans and Democrats described. Many people articulated some degree of hesitancy about the country’s response to the pandemic, but most agreed that they would abide by the restrictions and stay home. The conclusion most people arrived at was “better safe than sorry.” Cal, for example, is the retired Republican from Meriville whom we heard from in Chapter 4. As he told me in late March:

I somewhat think that maybe it’s an over scare for ...I mean, I’ve read and seen on TV, we lose 30,000 people on average every year, to just flu in the winter time. And... I understand that this is, I guess, probably more contagious, but I sometimes think that kind of we’ve had an over scare of it. But then here again, you know, it’s an over scare until you get it. And then when you get it, it’s not (an over scare) obviously. So, I really don’t know. I’m trusting the leadership of the doctors and the political hierarchy and everything to make the best decisions and I’m trying to follow them.

At this time, just a few weeks after the state of Indiana and other states imposed stay-at-home orders, many political commentators worried about the exact kind of false equivalence that Cal is drawing here: COVID was *not* like the flu, and believing it was—at least so the reasoning ran—could endanger lives. But at least among the Republicans I spoke to at the time, Cal’s willingness to believe the pandemic was a bit of an “over scare” was as widespread as their willingness to just follow “the leadership of the doctors” and stay at home. This consensus shattered rapidly, as we will see, but at least for a few weeks I heard almost the same refrain from everyone with I

spoke to in Iverson, Meriville, and Williston: luckily, the virus hadn't hit their community too hard yet—this was one benefit of no one ever leaving town, as Brenda in Iverson told me, and of living “out in the boonies,” as Brad from Williston said—but they were wary, watchful, and attuned to local news.

But residents' experience of the pandemic was not just shaped by the severity of COVID's spread and their own public health adaptations to it; it was also shaped by local and state policies and their neighbors' responses to them. And despite many people describing themselves as more physically isolated than ever, they were also hyper-vigilant about their neighbors' reactions to the pandemic. Early on, residents described the frenzied dash for toilet paper and other basics that emptied shelves in supermarkets across the country. Kevin, for example, supervises a line in a manufacturing plant in Meriville. On March 20th, as he sat in his car parked outside the Home Depot, he described the crowded parking lot. I could almost hear him shaking his head as he told me of the difficulty he'd had getting flour and ground beef a few days before. He went on:

There's a guy that works for me and he was like, 'Hey, I need a vacation day tomorrow.' And I always like to ask 'em what they're doing. I was like, 'So, what are you gonna do man? Anything fun?' He's like, 'No, I want to get' - he has five kids. He's like, 'I want to get to Wal-Mart early and make sure I get what I need.' And I thought, oh my God, you have to take a vacation day to go to Wal-Mart now. And he sent me a picture. I'll send it to you later. But it's Wal-Mart at 7 o'clock in the morning and there's like 40 people in line. It's like Black Friday. But they're trying to buy like milk and eggs and shit. Like you can't find eggs.

At that point, Kevin's company had yet to shut down their operations, and his voice was dripping in anxiety over the entire situation: that people had to ask for days off to get eggs; that he had to field questions about public health issues from his workers that he could not possibly answer; that he had to have his temperature scanned on the way into the facility each morning; that he even had to go into work at all when all the other plants in town were shutting down. His response was not

uncommon at the time across all three places: a mix of anxiety and fear, focused on the most visible sign of the pandemic's reach into the community, a long line at the Wal-Mart.

Within a few weeks, the focus of that anxiety had shifted from bare shelves to neighbors' mask-wearing, but the principle remained the same: through some combination of in-person observations during limited trips to the supermarket, extra attentiveness to local news, and scans of neighbors' posts on Facebook, Iversonians, Merivillians, and Willistonians got a sense of how their communities were responding to the pandemic. For example, when I ask Rose from Iverson how she feels the community is doing in May 2020, just after Governor Evers' stay-at-home order in Wisconsin was overturned, she offers a response that again exemplifies how these overlapping communication flows kept residents tied into the local amidst the pandemic. As she tells me:

Rose: The governor's stay at home order was overturned by the Wisconsin Supreme Court. And I realize, if you have been unemployed for the last, whatever, six weeks, two months, it has taken a financial toll on you. But I think because people are in such dire circumstances, they feel, we've got to restart the economy right now. But it was ironic because on the local newspaper, front page picture was a bar in Iverson already last night that had patrons in it.

Me: Oh, wow.

Rose: If you go on Facebook and - you know, I'm not reading all of it 'cause I don't want to waste time. It's just depressing. I mean, everyone, of course, is adding their two cents. And regardless of what side of the fence they're on, they're very passionate in how they feel. And no matter what one would say to the other, I think one's feelings are so ingrained, no way would they change their mind.

Me: Right. Right. So you're seeing people on Facebook fighting over whether or not people should be going to the bars right now?

Rose: Right. And let's just say it's maybe 50-50. People are saying, you're endangering the health of others. No way would I go out. Other people are saying, it's about time. It's long overdue. Our freedoms have been stripped. You're hearing both sides.

In this conversation, Rose explains how she saw an image in a local newspaper that she then read about in a debate among friends on Facebook – much the same way Brenda, in Chapter 1, learned about local political gossip through a texted screenshot of a deleted Tweet. In other words, even as COVID-19 altered so many rhythms of daily life that had connected residents in these places,

it did not erase them entirely. Instead, people learned to view their communities through an often-blurry lens of public health and public policy.

The Process of Issue Polarization

A Partisan Debate Emerges

It was during those moments of heightened local attention in the earliest days of the pandemic, that cautious consensus prevailed: residents of Iverson, Meriville, and Williston were scared and concerned. And it wasn't just that they agreed—sometimes reluctantly, as in Cal's case—to adjust their own behaviors or that they were pleased the government was providing a stimulus, but that they were often worried about *both* public and economic health in the same breath. In fact, it was overwhelmingly common that when I asked people how concerned they were about the pandemic in March and early April, they would—without prompting—run through a list of their concerns for public health, personal health, the economy in the abstract, and their own personal finances.

Rose, for example, is the Democrat from Iverson quoted above whose first concern when we spoke in mid-March was the economic consequences of lockdowns: “Our life will be changed for a long time, especially up here where a lot of the jobs are paycheck to paycheck. There are so many people now without jobs and it's only going to get worse.” But in the next breath, she mentioned all the measures she and her family, who care for her elderly mother, were taking to protect themselves. “The last thing I want to do is expose my mother to anything,” she explained. As Rose's example indicates and as Chapter 6 described, residents were well-aware that the pandemic would have economic consequences – for their own jobs and the macroeconomy – as

well as health consequences – for their personal well-being and the nation’s public health. And this was true regardless of where they lived or what party they preferred.

In other words, public health and economy prosperity were not understood to be in opposition to one another. But by late-April and May, this had shifted. A sizeable contingent of people I spoke with—the people who were most politically sophisticated and regularly tuned into national news—began to clearly express the view that there was a trade-off between these two metrics for handling the pandemic: the country could only mitigate one by exacerbating the other. As Christopher, a young Democrat from Iverson, explained in mid-May: “In my personal opinion, I think there’s only two sides to this. You either want to help stop the disease. Or you don’t. And you want it to continue spreading. Even if - whatever your reasoning may be - that’s what you’re doing.”

Not everyone saw things as black-and-white as Christopher, but among the group of residents who watched national news and listened to the political parties discuss the pandemic, it was common by mid-April and May to think not only in terms of trade-offs, but also along partisan lines: residents recognized that Republicans favored reopening sooner to protect the economy and Democrats favored extending stay-at-home orders longer to protect public health. Jacob, for example, is a Merivillian who was “raised” a Democrat but has recently strayed from the party.

He laid it out for me in an interview toward the beginning of May:

I mean, I guess I felt like, you know, you go back and look at the numbers and who is opening up? The Republican governors. Except for Holcomb, good on him. And who’s not? Who’s saying, “let’s use science”? The Democrats. And I knew that. And again, I don’t like either political party right now. I think they’re all stupid pretty much. But at the same time, I mean, it’s like the Republicans want the economy to get back going. But they can’t look into the future.

In other words, less than two months after the very possibility of stay-at-home orders came into the national consciousness, people like Jacob had already perceived the terms of partisan debate

on the issue—Republicans favor opening up because they “want the economy to get back going,” while Democrats are saying, “let’s use science” and focus on protecting public health.

Not only did these residents think in terms of trade-offs at this time, they were also thinking along partisan lines: consistent with survey evidence, Republicans in my sample favored reopening sooner to protect the economy and Democrats favored extending stay-at-home orders longer to protect public health.¹⁵³ In other words, they polarized rapidly. And they did so by many of the pathways we might expect: self-selecting into a news environment that confirmed their pre-existing biases and partisan-led opinions.¹⁵⁴

Many Republicans, for example, expressed their readiness for reopening in April and May by explaining: “we can’t stay locked down forever.” Fred, for example, described how he hoped Governor Holcomb of Indiana would approach the reopening question when we spoke in late April:

Well, I think the Governor has to talk to his experts and see what is going on in the state. And I think what he’s gonna do is do a partial opening of the state. And I don’t think that’s too soon. I think, the longer we wait, the more damage is gonna be done. You can only run so far on the gas tank when the needle’s on empty. And I think that’s where we’re runnin’ right now, as far as the economy is concerned.

Fred had told me the month before that he preferred the “scientific approach” to the pandemic. As is clear here, he still hopes his governor will listen to experts; but now, he feels he must balance those concerns with economic considerations.

¹⁵³ Allcott et al. 2020

¹⁵⁴ In other words, via selective exposure (e.g., Arceneaux, Johnson, and Murphy 2012). As noted above, there is extensive debate over the extent to which Americans engage in this behavior, but the consensus suggests that at least some portion of the electorate does this, usually those that are already quite ideologically extreme, such that the effect of media polarization on polarization in the mass public is probably limited.

Jeff, a Republican farmer from Williston, took this sentiment even one step further. As he told me during our conversation in late April:

I'm not concerned about the virus at all," he told me. "Maybe five, 10 percent of my thought is questioning how dangerous it is. You know, I know it's pretty contagious, but there's lots of things I figure are contagious. I'm more concerned about collapsing the economy and destroying a whole way of life here.

Facing financial devastation as a result of the collapsing grain market, Jeff could only focus on the economic costs of the pandemic.

On the flip side, many Democrats like Isabelle from Iverson hoped that the government's response would prioritize public health. For her and others, the trade-offs from opening the economy could not be balanced by any economic gain. As she told me in mid-May after the state was summarily reopened by the Supreme Court:

I'm just anxious for the election to happen [...] I thought we were gonna have some messed up policies we were gonna have to fix - the environment's pretty much on the edge and if we had another four years, it might be too late for the environment. But I thought we could still... We could still fix it. You can't fix dead people. And that's what's happened now.

Thus, despite the novelty and complexity of the issue, partisans like Jeff and Isabelle came to opposing views on how to handle the pandemic within just a few weeks. And not only that, but they had also both formed stark and deeply opposed visions of what was at stake in how the government responded to the pandemic. For Isabelle, the issue was not just health, but keeping people alive – “You can't fix dead people” – she tells me; while for Jeff, it was not just the economy but rural and small-town life – “I'm more concerned about collapsing the economy and destroying a whole way of life here,” he says.

And to reach such stark points of opposition so rapidly, partisans like Isabelle and Jeff quickly perceived and began to accept the terms of the debate over pandemic policies – as a

constant trade-off between health and the economy – simultaneously deduced which party supported each side, and followed their party’s position in forming opinions.

Partisan Interpretations

As this happened, partisans leveraged various interpretations of the pandemic’s trajectory to justify their opinions. Some pointed to potential data manipulation, but more often, Democrats and Republicans agreed on the data—or on the fact that there were unavoidable inaccuracies in the data due to human error—but disagreed on the interpretation.¹⁵⁵

In the spring, these different interpretations tended to focus on case counts. In line with warnings from their governors that cases would rise due to increased testing rather than spread alone, Iversonians, Merivillians, and Willistonians across party lines took to heart that cases were likely being under-reported in March and April. As such, they learned to reinterpret the case count accordingly, and repeatedly exhibited their ability for critical evaluation of data in interviews during the early weeks of the pandemic.

Karen, for example, is a Democrat from Williston who explained that she was happy to see people “taking it seriously” in her community because she was certain they were more at risk than the case count indicated in early April:

For the longest time, though, there weren’t many cases in Minnesota, even here we didn’t have any registered COVID cases until just a couple of days ago, which I think was misleading. I really do think there are people with COVID here, but the tests are so hard to get. So I think it’s a slanted statistic.

On the question of how accurate the case count was, most residents I spoke to agreed: the official statistics were “slanted” – to use Karen’s term – downward. This was something

¹⁵⁵ See Gaines et al. 2007

people had heard repeatedly in March and April from their governors and public health officials. And like Karen, many residents used what they had learned early in the pandemic about how to read and interpret case counts to interrogate how “official” estimates of COVID cases and deaths were being reported. But they did so in line with their partisan opinions about reopening. Karen, for example, took the under-counting as a lesson that the pandemic was worse in her community than official statistics let on. In later weeks, many others, particularly Democrats, followed her lead, raising concerns over the lack of testing and undercounting of cases as the reason they preferred to extend the stay-at-home orders.

Republicans for the most part agreed with the assessment that lack of testing meant COVID cases were likely being under-reported in their counties and states. But for many Republicans, the under-count became an indicator that they could be less concerned about the virus’ severity. As evidence emerged that COVID may have been spreading through the country in early 2020 without anyone’s knowledge, many Republicans viewed this as proof that, without taking any mitigation measures, the country may have already overcome some of the virus’ lifecycle and not even noticed the public health impacts. Cal, for example, is a Republican from Meriville who was less concerned the second time we spoke, in late April, for this very reason: “It seems to be a lot more widespread than what they first thought. And most healthy people recover. I don’t know ...I’m doing what they say. But I’m not as concerned about it probably as I should be.”

Hugh from Meriville, the law enforcement officer who was raised a Democrat but now finds himself leaning toward the Republicans, agreed with Cal when we spoke in late April:

One of the things that I picked up on was, in one of the prisons there was 2,500 prisoners. And 1,800 of ‘em have COVID, but only seven of ‘em showed symptoms. So I’m at the point now where I’m not really worried about it. I think

when they start testing people, they're gonna find out a lot of people got it and showed no symptoms at all.

Cal, Hugh, and many others – usually Republicans – came to a similar conclusion: if the vast majority of people were recovering without issues, reopening would not put the public health much at risk at all. The virus' severity (or lack thereof) among the “young and healthy” had, by April and May, soothed many people's worst fears. Even so, it was particularly among Republicans that this evidence was taken up to suggest that it was time to reopen.

As Democrats interpreted the data to mean the virus was probably more widespread and threatening than anyone could know, and Republicans interpreted the data as further evidence that the virus was less severe than many had initially feared, their attitudes about the severity of the pandemic shifted. In just the few weeks between the two interviews I conducted during the spring of 2020, many Republicans had breathed a clear sigh of relief and were ready to reopen.

Following the Science

And by the fall, partisans had spent months interpreting the data and deciding whether the evidence weighed on the side of reopening or extending stay-at-home orders; wearing masks or not; staying indoors or meeting up with friends. As many scientists predicted at the outset of the pandemic, success bred doubt in the government's containment methods. Across party lines, as early as mid-April, residents began to see that the models their governors used to predict the virus' trajectory had not come to fruition. Many sighed with relief, noting that hospitals in the Midwest had not been overwhelmed by COVID patients. This was universally seen as good news – the result, to many Democrats, of their governors' careful efforts to keep their states locked down. For some Republicans, however, it was simply further evidence that the dangers of the disease had been “overblown.”

For many Democrats it seemed clear that the stay-at-home orders were successful. Karen, quoted above, told me in early May that she was “probably about 50 percent less (concerned about the virus) than I was a month and a half ago,” given that the hospitals in her area had weathered the storm. Mark, another Democrat from Williston, agreed with Karen. Of Governor Walz’ performance he simply said: “He’s done a good job with the social isolation here. And with the number of cases Minnesota’s had, I think it shows that it’s good.” Even those Democrats living in Indiana with a Republican governor credited him with protecting their state through stay-at-home orders.

In contrast, Larry, a Republican who lives in Meriville, believed that the models’ mismatch with reality suggested Indiana might be ready to reopen by the end of April. Although he didn’t agree with the protesters at the Capitol, he expressed some sympathy on the grounds that the virus simply hadn’t been as bad as everyone had feared:

I do believe there is a legitimacy to some of it in the sense that...they do these models and you have to, even when Trump makes some decisions on these models and Fauci as well, some of these models haven’t held up well. Am I really questioning? I think the people who are out there doing that protesting, they don’t think any of that is good.

Larry did not go so far as to question the legitimacy of Drs. Fauci and Birx’s scientific expertise, but he did empathize with the protestors on the grounds that the models did not “hold up well.”

Often, these reinterpretations of the evidence offered insight into the sheer multiplicity of pseudo-scientific claims to authority during the pandemic.¹⁵⁶ While interviewees overwhelmingly expressed a keen desire to “trust the experts” and an enduring willingness to abide by how those experts told them to behave, they did not always agree on who they experts were or what the scientific consensus was. In fact, by the fall there was a great deal of debate

¹⁵⁶ See Brubaker 2020.

over the “correct” scientific approach to the pandemic, leading to a situation in which people regularly disputed current approaches by appealing to “scientific expertise.” Nate, for example, is a Republican from Williston who tells me in October 2020 that he’s not sure how he feels about pandemic policies, because the science “keeps evolving.” As he explains: “Early on, they were finding out new stuff about coronavirus every day, right? [...] The science on it will develop more and so we’ll know more over the coming years.” Until the scientists reach a consensus, he’s willing to defer judgment on the Trump Administration’s handling of the pandemic.

Nate was also among a substantial minority—usually Republicans—who offered up bunk science or called the early COVID models “wrong” (because the worst-case scenario had not happened) in order to refute containment measures. But even on these occasions, people made these claims to call politicians *unscientific* for not adapting containment measures to the current reality of the COVID data.

And by fall, this proliferation of claims to scientific expertise meant that it was easy to cite “the evidence,” “the data,” “the experts,” or the “science,” in service of supporting any number of political opinions. As Jeff, the Republican farmer from Williston quoted above, told me in September 2020: “I think *now that the evidence is clear that...* It’s not as dangerous as what everybody led you to believe, that we’ve got to put people back to work again. And quit makin’ em so scared. We did a good job of making a lot of people scared.” Democrats made different arguments about what the evidence supported—usually mask-wearing and social distancing—but they used the same logic: appealing to scientific authority to justify their stance. Partisans just disagreed on what or who that scientific authority was.

To be sure, only certain residents of each community followed these pathways of rapid issue polarization—usually those with sufficient trust in media and political knowledge to guide them through these emergent partisan debates. For others, these competing claims to epistemic authority were just another reason that it was difficult to trust in media and political information. For these people, like Ben, an Independent from Williston who was planning to cast his first vote for president in November 2020, forming an opinion about the pandemic proved immensely difficult. In May, he described to me the depths of his distrust in how the media was reporting on COVID-19. Every information source was suspect—he wished he could inspect the hospital records of COVID patients. Short of this, he struggled to figure out what the “truth” was as he watched the possible versions of reality multiply around him. As a result, he concluded: “I feel like I’m unable to comment on the coronavirus hardly.” While Ben’s conclusion might seem difficult to comprehend in light of how COVID-19 overwhelmed every aspect of daily life throughout 2020, it stems from a lack of trust in how the media—and in this case, the federal government—were conveying information about the virus and its spread. Among a substantial minority of people I spoke with, this feeling was deeply disconcerting. As Kyle, another first-time voter from Meriville told me in October 2020: “Media just plays such a big role in everything in the society that it’s hard to know what the truth is...”

But even as people like Ben and Kyle felt they could make little meaningful evaluation of the government’s performance by the time they had to vote, many of their neighbors and friends who followed one or two—usually partisan—national news sources polarized rapidly and profoundly: by the eve of the 2020 election, Republicans within this group felt the pandemic was

“overblown” and Democrats felt that Trump had offered one of the worst performances of any presidential administration in history.¹⁵⁷

Nationalization or the Same-Old Place-Based Politics?

Partisan residents within Iverson, Meriville, and Williston thus confronted novel issues and formed opinions in line with their party. In the aggregate, this process reproduces community-level political differences between the two communities, but this is the result of nothing more than individual-level process—in short, it has nothing to do with place. And if such a process occurred each time a new issue hit the national agenda, we might expect that the communities’ political differences could be characterized *only by* nationally salient debates over public health or immigration or the national debt, and slowly erode the distinctive political orientations that—as Part I shows—are characteristic of each community.

But this was not the case. Instead, over the course of four interviews, a pandemic, mass mobilizations for racial justice, and a contentious presidential election, I found that an overwhelming amount of stability in place-based politics underlaid individual-level polarization on contentious issues. Residents remained consistent in how they understood the political parties and which one best represented a community like theirs and their social problems.

To illustrate this, consider how Jamie from Iverson thinks about what the two political parties represent. Jamie is the young woman who we heard from in Chapter 6, describing her concerns for her coworkers that were furloughed at the hotel where she works because of COVID. She considers herself to be a progressive Democrat and was one of the few people I

¹⁵⁷ See Ternullo 2022 for a full account of how lack of trust in media led to lack of opinion formation among people like Kyle and Ben during the pandemic.

spoke to in summer 2019 who loved Elizabeth Warren then and kept up a passion for her by the time the primaries rolled around to Wisconsin in spring 2020. The first time we meet, in late June 2019, we're sitting in a coffee shop on Iverson's Main Street, and toward the end of our conversation, I ask: "So to you, what does the national Democratic Party stand for?" Jamie replies:

Well, I think they stand for, I don't want to say like the little guy, because it's not necessarily the case, but they stand for the people, I guess they stand for— They're working towards making it so everybody can go towards that, you know, the American dream or whatever. Where, you know, *it feels a lot like Republicans are like, I can go towards the American dream, whereas Democrats are (for) everybody.* That would be my best way of describing what they stand for because they want everybody to be able to – to enjoy the wealth of life, as it were. (*emphasis added*)

In this example, Jamie articulates the overwhelmingly common belief among Iversonians—as Chapter 4 lays out—that the Democrats are the party to fight for the workers, the disadvantaged, “the little man.” Republicans are just for themselves – “*I can go towards the American dream,*” she imagines them saying. And in contrast, “Democrats are (for) everybody.”

About eight months later, in March 2020, we're on the phone, this time discussing everything from local politics to the presidential primary to the pandemic. I pose a slightly different question: “So what do you think is the biggest difference between the two political parties?” And Jamie responds similarly:

Jamie: [...] I think it seems like a lot of the Republican motivations are very internally motivated, whereas the Democratic motivations are more generally all people motivated, I guess, like even like just not necessarily Republicans who are running for office or in office or anything like that, but like the ones that I talked to just generally in life. How is this going to affect me personally? Versus how is this going to affect the community as a whole? I get a lot of guys (at the hotel) who complain about their personal paying out in taxes. And it's like, well, yeah, but, you know, you pay for schools right now. Right? That's a thing that you are doing. So it's sort of almost like a cognitive dissonance between like if it doesn't directly impact them and they can't see what the use is.

Me: And whereas you feel like Democrats..?

Jamie: The Democrats are more like—don't get me wrong, I am fully aware that Democrats, politicians are going to be politicians no matter what side they're on. But it's sort of, you may or may not be able to think of some of the way that it affects you personally, but that doesn't mean that it's something that you shouldn't be doing.

Me: And when you say politicians are going to be politicians, what do you mean by that?

Jamie: I mean, we all know that the super PACs and corporations are donating to politicians and putting money in their pockets to guide their—how they're going to do what they're going to do.

In this instance, Jamie again articulates the notion that Republicans are selfish, focused on taxes as something being taken from them, while Democrats are more focused on “the community as a whole,” and part of that is about thinking how their taxes are a part of their duty as citizens—contributing to public schools and safe roads.

And finally, in October 2020, I ask the same question I asked more than fifteen months prior – “What do you think the Democrats stand for?” – to which Jamie responds:

Jamie: I think that what they want to project that what they're about is for the people. It's a little bit vague, but like they're about helping everybody and not just the wealthy, the White, that kind of thing. I think that's what they're trying to project - now whether or not I agree with them, (if) they actually match their words....

Me: Got you. So, then the Republicans, what do they stand for?

Jamie: [Laughter] At this point, they stand for clinging to their desperate dying power to do what they want. Again, they put forth that we're here to protect the hard-working Americans who earn their money, it's like, “Do you though?” Because I think at this point, it's very clear that they are ruled by the almighty dollar.

In similar terms to those she uses throughout our conversations – in response to both these questions and others about political divisiveness, the biggest challenges to the country, and her concerns about the pandemic, Jamie again articulates the notion that Republicans “are ruled by the almighty dollar” while Democrats are “about helping everybody and not just the wealthy, the White...”

In other words, Jamie’s understanding of what’s at stake in party politics is overwhelmingly stable—even if it’s “a little bit vague,” as she says in our last conversation—her sense is that the Democrats are the party for the little guy, who believe in paying taxes to support them and the nation as a whole, while Republicans are the party for themselves—the wealthy, White people. As is typical of Iversonians, Jamie does not see the process of paying taxes to expand government intervention as solely an unjust benefit for others—although, as we’ve seen, some Iversonians do worry about the latter—but as a universal duty and benefit. This suggests that the factors that distinguish between Iverson, Meriville, and Williston – how they see themselves and their communities fitting into the political system – are also durable.

But there are two elements of what Jamie has said that merit further consideration. First, in both our spring and fall 2020 conversations, Jamie repeated the notion that the Democrats do not always live up to their ideals. As she says in March 2020: “politicians are going to be politicians.” And a few months later, she caveats her description of the party with “I think that’s what they’re trying to project...” Caveats like Jamie’s were relatively common among both Democrats and Republicans, across Iverson, Meriville, and Williston. Republicans might call out their party for claiming to be the party of fiscal responsibility but driving up the national debt, or for being just as bad as the Democrats in using their public offices for personal financial gain. In fact, few people really believed that either party was a real vehicle for change in American politics or for resolving their biggest worries for the country, but most settled on a lesser-of-two-evils approach when it came to voting or affiliating with a party. In other words, residents of all three communities share a feeling of populist disenchantment but they contain it *within* the party system. And given the current combination of deep feelings of dissatisfaction with party elites,

alongside continued partisan voting behavior and unwillingness to vote for the opposing party, it seems like populist sentiment is not a likely source of change in their partisan politics.

But Jamie’s comments also contain a second element worth considering further: in our third conversation, she notes that Democrats are for “not just the wealthy, the White.” As I described briefly in Chapter 4, it was not uncommon for people across the political spectrum and regardless of where they lived to describe the racial divide between the two parties. But the fact that maintaining White racial privilege appears to Jamie as central to partisan divisions in October 2020 is indicative of the one aspect of residents’ politics that was overwhelmingly *unstable*: the issues that were most important to them. And by fall 2020, racial inequality, injustice, and police brutality had skyrocketed to the top of this list for most Democrats.

But for Iversonians—as Jamie’s comments indicate—incorporating concerns for racial inequality into their politics was simple. Democrats should fight for “the little guy” on all axes—race, class, gender, and sexuality. Race and class are not at odds as organizing principles of Iversonians’ politics because of their deep-rooted belief in the overwhelming inequalities in American society.

In other words, incorporating different issues into their top concerns over time did little to shift Iversonians’—or anyone’s—definition of what was fundamentally at stake in partisan politics. But what it did do is serve, often temporarily, to expand the bases of disagreement between the Democrats and Republicans I spoke to.

We can see by looking at the concerns of residents from each party on the eve of the election. Democrats were overwhelmingly worried about five buckets of issues: protecting or improving government programs, including maintaining Social Security and expanding affordable healthcare (89%); mitigating class inequalities through living wage laws and redistributive

programs (56%); mitigating racial inequalities, often through police reform (47%); climate change (39%); and the COVID-19 pandemic (39%). Republicans, in contrast, showed some degree of consensus (>30%) in their concern about three buckets of issues: religious/moral issues, including abortion and electing conservative justices to the Supreme Court (43%); economic recovery, including “getting people back to work” and not imperiling the economy by a return to strict pandemic containment measures (43%); reforming government programs and limiting the tax burden on the middle-class (39%).

These differences summarize the changes I observed quite well: after about seven months of the pandemic and a summer of mass political mobilization against racial inequality, Democrats—regardless of place—were living in a world where the country faced a dire public health crisis and a simmering racial reckoning, while Republicans—also regardless of place—were living in a world where the biggest threat to the country was anything that might destabilize economic recovery. And as racial inequality and COVID-19 issues moved to the center of the agenda, other issues faded from view. In particular, during my first conversations with residents in summer 2019, immigration was a top concern for people regardless of where they lived or how they voted: 50% of Democrats and 42% of Republicans listed it when I asked about the issues they wanted presidential candidates to address during the campaign. By fall 2020, the corresponding figures were 6% for Democrats and 17% for Republicans. Even COVID followed a similar trajectory—spiking as a public health concern for Republicans in spring 2020, then disappearing almost entirely and reemerging as a question of the country’s economy in the fall.

But beneath these shifts, the bases of partisan difference in Iverson, Meriville, and Williston remained: Republicans like Katherine from Meriville, who we heard from in Chapter 4, were worried about reforming government programs and protecting the unborn; Democrats

like Jamie from Iverson were worried about expanding government programs for the purpose of leveling the playing field.

Place-based politics is thus defined by both continuity and change: as we saw in Chapter 6, durable forms of community organization reproduce place politics even amidst national crises, but as this chapter illustrates, individual partisans also polarize on novel issues as they emerge. In the aggregate then, communities' political differences incorporate various issues at any given time, some of which are linked to place-based factors, and some of which are linked to individual-level partisan polarization. But only those beliefs that emerge and are reinforced through place persisted over the course of 18 months of fieldwork, four interviews, a life-altering pandemic, months of mobilization around racial violence, and a historically contentious presidential campaign. Residents' concerns about other issues subsided as those issues moved out from the national media spotlight.

In sum, the four elements of place that produce and reproduce partisan attachments are at the root of place-based politics, and polarization on national issues does not affect this as much as we might expect. In fact, issue polarization is somewhat epiphenomenal to place-based politics. And extending this claim somewhat, we can also see how issue polarization is also epiphenomenal to the real political differences across individuals in Iverson, Meriville, and Williston: while residents might be polarized on any number of issues at any given moment, this distracts from the real source of divergence among them.

For social scientists and political observers who are concerned about the consequences of mass polarization for social unity and a well-functioning democracy, this suggests that we need to shift the target away from the ever-growing quantity of issues on which Americans may be

polarized,¹⁵⁸ and refocus our attention on durable elements of their social lives that enforce and reinforce the ways they make sense of party politics and their place in it.

¹⁵⁸ See, e.g., DellaPosta 2020 and the oil spill model of polarization.

CONCLUSION. THE FUTURE OF PLACE IN HEARTLAND POLITICS

In August of 2022, with the 2020 presidential election in the rearview mirror, Joe Biden installed in the White House, and the COVID-19 pandemic briefly receding from center stage amidst widespread availability of vaccines, I spoke to Isaac from Iverson. As you may recall, Isaac is a Democrat who, during every single conversation we had from October of 2019 through the November 2020 presidential election, was preoccupied with protecting the working- and middle-classes. Even more specifically, he was preoccupied with the Trump Administration's 2017 tax cuts which, to him, symbolized everything that was wrong with American politics: the legislation wielded government power to exacerbate economic inequality rather than mitigate it. So it was somewhat unsurprising when, in summer 2022, he returned again to the 2017 tax cuts in response to a question about the infrastructure bill that was, at that time, up for debate in Congress. At first, he explained his support, saying: "I wish it was bigger, but I mean, I hope they can pass something. I, you know, it'll be good for American workers, and obviously it'll be good for people that are invested in the stock market. It'll be good for and it'll be good for the economy and for the stock market, I think in general. So yeah, I wish it was bigger." But then he went on to describe his frustration with those who oppose the bill and other social spending measures that had been floated by the Biden Administration. As he said:

Well I mean, people talk like we can't afford that. And I'm not saying that we can, but in 2017... You know, they call those middle-class tax cuts. I mean, those weren't middle class tax cuts. The corporate tax rate got dropped from 35 percent to 21 percent and the top tax bracket got dropped from... I want to say, 39 percent to 37.5 percent... And the nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office said that that's gonna add 1.7 Trillion dollars to the national debt. Somehow, we could afford that and you know, 83 percent of that, or 84, 85 percent, they said, is gonna go to the richest one percent of the country. We can afford that, but we can't afford an infrastructure bill... You know, it was the largest upward transfer of wealth. I mean, we can afford that, but we can't afford infrastructure.

Over the course of the two years during which we spoke about politics—despite the pandemic and a change in presidential administration—Isaac’s politics were unperturbed. Not only did the broad brushstrokes of Iverson’s working-class politics remain intact, but the specific experiences from which Isaac drew political meaning were the same. He learned a specific lesson from the 2017 tax cuts, one that resonated with his worldview so much that he returns to it again and again as a central political touchstone. The same was true of so many people in Iverson and Meriville, and even in Williston.

But some things had changed by summer 2022. Just before I spoke to Isaac, I returned to Meriville. A new café had opened up at the end of Main Street, but a handful of other businesses had shuttered during the pandemic. But the biggest difference was in what was top-of-mind for certain residents: Critical Race Theory. Larry was among these residents. He is a retired educator and Republican whom we heard from several times throughout the book. When I asked him if he had any new concerns about the community since we’d last spoken, he at first answered no, but then replied:

Two of our school board members are members of our church. We have a country church. Meriville is a pretty good-size school system. And I just made a comment to both of them that I would... Hopefully they are aware of CRT [...] I simply say that, as I see it, from what I hear, I would not prefer that any of our students - I was a teacher for 40 years. That was not my job [preaching politics]. Nobody knew - I did mock elections and everything all those years. No one knew my party right. Because I think it’s important. I resent professors, teachers who are out there to do that [preach politics]. [...] That’s [the job of] parents in their home.

Later in the conversation, when I asked if there was anything else we hadn’t discussed yet that was concerning him, Larry again returned to the issue of Critical Race Theory and his concerns about forcing this kind of education on members of the military and on public schoolchildren.

From there, he continued, linking concerns about CRT to his other worries about race, education, and socialism in America:

Another philosophy I have, is that 600,000 people died in the Civil War, and let's just say it's half-and-half, 300 and 300. There were three hundred [thousand] white northern people fighting to free the slaves, and they want to turn that history around as if ...That 16 19 project, whatever it is, of changing the whole philosophy of the Civil War. And let me keep going. I'm on it now. And it's the fact that all this stuff, taking down statues and all that. There's a socialistic background in that. That's happened in all the nations that [socialism] ever happened. What you do, you tear down the history of the past. So there isn't that. And then you develop your own, which is your way. And then you go after the nuclear family and you go after the kids and their education system. And here we go. We're on a fast track to places I don't want to go.

Although questions of socialism, education, and the nuclear family were not new to my conversations with Larry, CRT certainly was. But as these examples indicate, it was a clear preoccupation for him in July 2022: he mentioned it in response to extremely open-ended questions about his community and general concerns he might have. He also articulated fairly well-developed opinions on the subject and linked it back to many of his pre-existing political beliefs about American families and the appropriate scope of the state. Those beliefs did not change, but they expanded to incorporate this new set of concerns, much like what we saw with people's beliefs about COVID-19 mitigation measures in Chapter 7.

These conversations with Larry and Isaac evoke exactly the pattern of continuity and change that characterizes place-based politics in Iverson, Meriville, and Williston: places shape residents' understanding of their social identities and social problems, and their view of which party is best-suited to represent them and their community; these place-based beliefs produce and

reproduce residents' partisan attachments and political beliefs over time, as we can see in Isaac's case here; and even as residents take up the party line on new issues, as Larry does with Critical Race Theory, these concerns do not displace their place-based politics. This is not to say that these new opinions aren't important to residents—as Larry's comments suggest, they may feel extremely pressing, even urgent or all-consuming, when they emerge. But the key is that they do not undermine the processes by which community life shapes residents' political beliefs and partisan attachments; rather, these nationally polarizing issues are epiphenomenal to what makes Iversonians into Democrats and Merivillians and Willistonians into Republicans.

Through the experiences of Iversonians and Merivillians, during both settled times and in times of polarizing national crisis, we have seen how the relationship between place and politics is reproduced. This process of reproduction explains the enormous degree of inertia in America's place-based politics.¹⁵⁹ It also suggests that place-based politics is here to stay, as many factors that we might expect to produce political nationalization have failed to erode the distinctiveness of these communities' politics. Even social media becomes yet another means by which residents learn about their community and their neighbors.

But through these accounts of stability in Iverson and Meriville, and particularly through the eyes of Willistonians, we can also begin to identify the factors that might destabilize place-based politics. The first is the breakdown of local organizational arrangements. This explains many of the changes in Williston, as we saw in Chapter 5. As Willistonians watch their problems grow, residents feel there is no viable solution nor any local leadership trying to find one. This feeling finds fertile ground in a place where the features of organizational life that once defined the

¹⁵⁹ As Miller and Schofield 2003 noted, the states that voted together after the Civil War are essentially the same states that vote together in the 21st century.

community—including employers, churches, and unions—have declined. But Williston’s organizational decline began decades ago, and over the ensuing years it was the repeated blows to union power amidst Rivervalley’s bankruptcies and restructurings, and the steady decline in dedicated church membership, that slowly and irrevocably reshaped Williston into the community as residents now understand it: a dying town.

Although I could see the after-effects of these changes during my time in Williston, I couldn’t see the actual process unfold. This is where my observations in Iverson and Meriville are useful, because they indicate what it might take for organizational breakdown to produce real change in place-based politics. In particular, the stability in both places’ relationship to the state during the COVID-19 pandemic suggests that residents’ beliefs and partisanship would take some time to adjust to any change in local organizational arrangements. For example, even if some exogenous shock undermined Meriville’s churches and their financial capacity to serve the community—perhaps a Ponzi scheme targeting local religious organizations—we should expect that residents would continue to look to their churches to resolve emergent needs. Only after several experiences of these practices no longer working in the changed environment should they begin to update their beliefs.¹⁶⁰

For this reason, it seems that Williston’s decades’-long experience of decline culminating in the very recent rightward shift is precisely the sort of change that might be produced by local organizational breakdown: changes in the global political economy produce a slow change in the local organizational environment, and eventually the new environment becomes central to the

¹⁶⁰ As Strand and Lizardo (2015) and strand argue, changes in the environment for action produce “belief-situation mismatches” that can produce “a chronic lag and misfiring of dispositions and habits” or a “complete withdrawal of belief from the world and resulting chronic inability to act in relation to situations” (51).

community's politics. In Williston's case, we can also see how this happens in residents' contemporary accounts of loss: each organization that leaves the community is integrated into the narrative of decline, and eventually that narrative takes on a life of its own, defining the very core of what and who the community is.

The case of Williston also points us toward the second source of change in place-based politics. As described in Chapter 5, it is only because the Republican Party began shifting their discourse to incorporate the "left behind" in White, postindustrial communities that Williston is moving slowly from a swing town to a Republican town.¹⁶¹ Social scientists have long been attuned to these changes in the political parties and their efforts to create and recreate the lines of social division that matter for American politics. But Williston shows us that for these changes to reshape place-based politics, we have to understand how they interact with local ways of meaning-making. In other words, political parties do not face an infinitely malleable public; instead, their maneuvering will resonate differently in different places according to local organizational and cultural logics.¹⁶²

But between organizational breakdown and political change, there was an intermediate step in Williston, one that was immediately observable during my time there: a new sense of community identity as a dying town. It is precisely this identity that renders residents available to Republican

¹⁶¹ As many scholars have shown, populist discourse in American politics is neither a new phenomenon, nor one that is limited to right-wing politicians (see Bonikowski and Gidron 2016 and Fahey 2021). What has changed, instead, is the *context* of reception for those claims, which appeal particularly to globalization's losers (Bonikowski 2017). That said, the Republican Party under Donald Trump has mobilized populist discourse with particular effectiveness (see Boucher and Thies 2019 and Lamont, Park, and Ayala-Hurtado 2017).

¹⁶² This notion can be incorporated into the political articulation school's account of party politics. Already in Menali Desai's treatment of the Communist Party in Kerala, India, she recognizes the importance of the particular organization of civil society in creating fruitful ground for the party's strategic efforts (Desai 2002).

Party populism. And it also indicates the final possibility for change in place-based politics: how communities define themselves. This is, of course, tied to local organizations, particularly in a union town like Iverson. But Meriville is a particularly interesting case here. It is the only of the three communities that has seen substantial immigration from Mexico and Central America in recent years, and yet native-born White residents continue to tell anyone who will listen that this is not just a Christian community, but a German Lutheran community. In other words, they articulate their Whiteness through this durable, ethno-religious identification, despite objective changes in the community's demographic composition. But this dissonance cannot persist forever, and we might imagine that this will change as immigrants are no longer immigrants in the next generation and have more of a voice in defining the community. As the community's identity becomes more contested the salience of ethno-religious identity might subside for Meriville's White residents.¹⁶³

From Iverson, Meriville, and Williston to Heartland Politics

Through the voices of people like Isaac and Larry, Iverson, Meriville, and Williston thus give us insight into some of the most central questions in American politics: how social contexts shape the formation and perpetuation of partisan ties, and how place continues to matter in an era of increasingly national political and social life. The many parallels across the three communities, and among the people who live there, provide a unique opportunity to understand how similar

¹⁶³ In Molotch, Freudenburg, and Paulsen's (2000) account of the reproduction of place and Japonica Brown-Saracino's (2018) recent treatment of place-based identities, places are defined by both the hard elements (such as local organizations and demographic characteristics) *and* the soft elements (how people make sense of the hard factors). The two are distinct, as Meriville's case shows – the community identity persists despite objective change in demographics. But they are still related. In other words, we should expect that there is some tipping point in immigration after which it becomes difficult to continue thinking about the community as German Lutheran.

people can become different political subjects—not just through party elites’ maneuvering or mass communication, but through the social organization of their everyday lives. And in the case of Iversonians, Merivillians, and Willistonians a meaningful portion of that social organization is *emplaced*: their routines of work, leisure, social interaction, and associational life—even their social networks and engagement online—take place within a specific geographic area that is imbued with meaning for the people who live there. In other words, while an outsider might drive through each of these communities and write them off as just another small town in the American Heartland—with many of the same physical characteristics like struggling Main Streets, extensive corn fields, myriad churches, dilapidated housing, and sprawling industrial parks—residents take different lessons about who they are, who their community is, and what their problems are from living in each place.

This local variation that is so essential to understanding the differences across Iverson, Meriville, and Williston also helps us understand what we might expect from other postindustrial, White communities in the American Heartland. I arrived at Iverson, Meriville, and Williston by searching for all the counties in the U.S. that had once been part of that fragile White, working-class coalition that carried FDR to the White House four times, and that remain overwhelmingly White and blue-collar today, regardless of what has happened to their politics. And among those communities that once supported the New Deal, I found very few that still vote Democratic today. In other words, Iverson, Meriville, and Williston *are* representative of the kinds of places that were once at the heart of U.S. manufacturing power but have now lost out after decades of globalization and deindustrialization. But Meriville and Williston are much more representative of the political trajectories that those communities took over the preceding decades.

This means that the idea of White, postindustrial populism driving the reddening of the American Heartland is both correct and incomplete. It does, as described above, explain the recent growth in Republican voting in Williston. But it doesn't explain the hundreds of White, blue-collar communities in the American Heartland, like Meriville, that defected from the Democrats' New Deal coalition well before the onset of deindustrialization. The most likely explanation among these communities was change in the relationship between local organizational contexts and the political parties: just as Iverson and Meriville's contemporary politics can help us understand Williston's past, so too can Williston's current rightward shift help us understand what originally turned Meriville away from the Democrats. If we consider Meriville and Williston in the 1980s, for example, residents of each community may have been aware of the Republican Party rhetoric seeking to make White Christianity a more meaningful social and political identity. And both communities contained plenty of White residents for whom church attendance was a central part of their lives. But the Republican message likely resonated more in a place where ethno-religious identification is one of the most central parts of *community* life, as in Meriville, and where the public sphere also lacked any political engagement from unions. In contrast, Willistonians were, as several older residents told me, living in a town full of regular churchgoers *and* union members who were often engaged in contentious actions against their employers.

So if we return to the two standard accounts of the Heartland's reddening—one that focuses on the changing relationships between social groups and political parties since the New Deal; and one that identifies the importance of place, conceiving of the Heartland as a region defined by loss—we can see how all three factors are needed to understand the current political trajectory of White, postindustrial communities.

This has several practical implications for the contemporary political parties. To begin with, Iverson is among a dwindling set of places that remain in the Democratic fold. Several times throughout this book I've referred to Iverson as an outlier or an anachronism—and in many ways, it is a relic of a bygone era. But the question for American politics today is what would it take to revive Iverson's kind of political sense-making in other, similar communities?

The first answer is that social policy is probably not part of the equation. This is not to dissuade politicians from fighting for legislation that will improve the lives of America's working poor. But it is to say that this is probably *not* what will marshal people from Williston, and those like them, into a cross-racial working-class party. That's because Americans typically vote in line with their political party, and as we've seen throughout this book, they join a party based on their interpretation of their social group membership and the political content of that membership.¹⁶⁴ What social programs *can* do is increase voter turnout among their beneficiaries by increasing their resources, but this does not mean that those folks will go to the polls on behalf of the party that provided the benefit.¹⁶⁵ In fact, in other research projects, I've found that the FDR's expansion of Old-Age Assistance programs during the New Deal cost him votes in elderly counties that had previously leaned Republican—in other words, he turned out the opposition.¹⁶⁶ If even a social program rolled out during the era of Democratic consolidation

¹⁶⁴ See Galvin and Thurston 2017. Scholars who study the effects of social programs note that program design is essential to determining whether a program will generate support or backlash (Oberlander and Weaver 2015). But even when programs do cultivate support among their beneficiaries (e.g., McCabe 2016; Mettler and Stonecash 2008), it is unlikely that beneficiaries will translate those positive feelings into voting for the party who provided the benefit. This is because Americans tend to vote with their party, not on the basis of policy evaluations (e.g., Johnston 2006), and because most Americans give little consideration to their own economic conditions when choosing a candidate (e.g., Kinder and Kiewiet 1981).

¹⁶⁵ In general, people with more resources—usually time and money—are more likely to vote (see Brady, Verba, and Schlozman 1995).

¹⁶⁶ See Ternullo 2022.

under the auspices of a pro-worker pro-welfare state agenda did not mobilize welfare beneficiaries to their cause, it is unlikely that future social programs will have this effect.

So then, what can we learn from Iverson, Meriville, and Williston about what might remake working-class politics in the American Heartland? The answer is that not all of these communities will be susceptible to this kind of political mobilization. In fact, the very notion of reviving an Iverson-style working-class politics may be inapplicable in places like Meriville, where unions have always taken a backseat in community life—recall that, in contrast even to Williston, unions in Meriville have not only been disengaged from local politics, they have also been disconnected from the regional and national umbrella organizations like the AFL-CIO that create a sense of labor movement identity among their members and involve them in both an economic and political project. In other words, as unions in Iverson discuss revitalization in the wake of the Scott Walker Administration, they can only do so in reference to the historical legacy of labor organizing in the community; in a place like Meriville, there is simply no corollary set of institutions or understandings to revive.

But in places like Williston—former union towns with some residents who are still part of unions, others who remember and have passed down the stories of unions’ glory days, and a pool of potential leaders who believe in the power of unions as a mobilizing force for economic equality—such a revival is possible. One of the challenges, of course, will continue to be forming unions inside the workplace. As Amazon’s efforts to frighten and demobilize their workforce in Bessemer, Alabama made clear in 2021, this is no small feat.¹⁶⁷ But part of my argument is that community support for good jobs, good wages, and a better standard of living can actually be a source of support for unions inside the workplace. This suggests that

¹⁶⁷ See Weise and Corkery 2021.

communities whose leadership engages with the politics of good jobs, the way Iverson's community leaders do, can create *both* a working-class politics that is not undermined by racial threat, as we saw in Iverson, *and* the social bases of support for unions that will further support a working-class politics in the future.

You may notice that I haven't said much about the Democratic Party in this discussion. And that's because the possibility of a cross-racial working-class political mobilization need not be housed *within* the Democratic Party, despite current and past ties between Democrats and unions. In fact, several scholars have argued that such a mobilization *cannot* be housed within the Democratic Party but requires a new, third party to fully voice its message.¹⁶⁸ While I don't disagree with the premise of the argument, which is that the Democrats have historically co-opted rather than fully supported their coalition partners, I do disagree with the idea that this is a practical path forward for such a mobilization. The American political system favors two parties, meaning that any working-class alternative to the Democratic Party would have to supplant them, rather than compete with them.¹⁶⁹ And historically, most political realignments in the past two centuries have come from *within-party* change, rather than new parties emerging and gaining dominance. The last time a new party formed and replaced an old one was during the Civil War, when the Republican Party came to dominance.¹⁷⁰ Given the already overwhelming challenges to both unionization and a local politics focused on good jobs, it doesn't make sense to consider adding a third layer of difficulty and contingency to the equation.

¹⁶⁸ See, e.g., Eidlin 2014.

¹⁶⁹ Duverger 1954

¹⁷⁰ See Aldrich 1995; Sundquist 1983.

Place-Based Politics & the Formation of Partisan Identity

Iverson, Meriville, and Williston thus give us clear lessons for understanding Heartland politics and the possibilities and challenges for future working-class mobilizations in White, postindustrial communities in the region. But how are they relevant for other places that are composed of Latinx, Black, or Asian-American residents? How are they relevant for the growing and racially diverse suburbs whose residents tend to be college-educated professionals?

The account of place-based politics that I've offered here is designed to be transportable to different contexts, although with important limitations, because the four place elements I identify—local organizational arrangements, routine modes of problem-solving, shared community identities, and local reinterpretations of national party politics—are not specific to places like Iverson, Meriville, and Williston. First, local variation in the organizational arrangements that communities may rely on to meet their residents' needs is a defining feature of contemporary social provision in the United States—a product of decades of shifts in social and fiscal policy, as described in Chapter 2. This variation is not the special purvey of rural, ex-urban, or postindustrial communities, and should define local modes of problem-solving in many places. The only caveat here is that local resources might be particularly constraining in rural and ex-urban communities because they may be less able to borrow services from nearby communities. Second, the relationship between place and the construction of social identities is one that has been developed by urban sociologists in such varying contexts as a Jewish neighborhood in Los Angeles, LBQ communities in small cities across the country, and a Black community facing immigration from Mexico, Central, and South America.¹⁷¹

¹⁷¹ See Brown-Saracino 2015; Jones 2019; Tavory 2016.

In other words, the dimensions of place that shape and reinforce partisan attachments in Iverson, Meriville, and Williston, and the process by which they accomplish this, is in no way limited to White, postindustrial communities. That said, we should not expect the same *outcome* in different kinds of places. For example, we should not expect that people who identify as Asian, Black, or Latinx and live in a churchgoing community should automatically join the Republican Party because they may—as do many of my interlocutors—understand the Republican Party as the home of White people.

Thus, place likely shapes Americans' politics in many communities, although it does so to different effect. But the core of my argument about *how* place makes politics is via residents' routine experiences within their communities. This suggests that place is least relevant in communities with high degrees of in- and out-migration. For example, city centers that attract young college graduates for a few years are unlikely to have the kind of effect on their politics that we have seen in Iverson, Meriville, and Williston. But place should matter in the suburbs of those cities, where those same people buy homes, settle down for decades to raise children, participate in their schools, make friends at soccer games, and bake cookies for the church bake sale. It should also matter in poor communities—whether rural or urban—where residents' options for mobility is limited.¹⁷²

And at the most general level, the lessons from Iverson, Meriville, and Williston take us beyond the question of place-based politics and to the broader question of how Americans form partisan attachments. This is of central importance to American political and social life, given that partisan attachments—once made—shape not only political decision-making, but romantic

¹⁷² There is somewhat high residential mobility in poor neighborhoods, but it is often not the result of residents' choice, but rather due to eviction or violence (see Rosen 2017).

and economic action as well.¹⁷³ And while this book is a study of how place shapes the way people make sense of their social position and map that position onto the party system, my broader argument is that other forms of durable social organization are likely to play a similar role. This may include social policies that teach people they are hard-working, independent citizens; social movements that build a sense of collective identity among their members; or online social networks.

What Iverson, Meriville, and Williston show us is that for any of these factors to shape the formation of partisan identity, they must create *durable* social contexts that structure people's experiences in a way that helps them make sense of who they are, what their problems are, and how to resolve them through politics. And given the dearth of research on the process of translation from social group membership to partisan identity,¹⁷⁴ identifying other social contexts that shape Americans' partisanship and documenting how they accomplish this is an area ripe for future research.

Iverson, Meriville, and Williston are, in some ways, just three small towns. But my hope in writing this book is that they teach us lessons about American politics—both how we have gotten to this point in the ever-reddening American Heartland and how we might work toward a future that includes a revitalized working-class political movement, one that can incorporate White Americans by emphasizing their concerns about economic precarity amidst globalization rather than their concerns about racial precarity. There is also a more subtle political message

¹⁷³ On romantic relationships, see: Alford et al. 2011; Huber and Malhotra 2017. On marketplace interactions, see: McConnell et al. 2018.

¹⁷⁴ See Lee 2008.

that I hope this text will convey: despite the fear, hatred, and resentment that motivate the most vitriolic scenes of American politics, like the January 6 2021 insurrection at the Capitol, many of Americans' political differences are of a much more ordinary variety. They come from individuals' social positions, the life experiences those entail, and the stories people tell themselves to make sense of those experiences. This fact should be front of mind when we speak across lines of political division—not because it makes people more persuadable; in fact, it may make them less so, because their beliefs are often deeply rooted in the way they experience their social and political worlds. Instead, the political differences among such similar people as those who live in Iverson, Meriville, and Williston remind us that other people come to their political beliefs not for the purposes of disagreement or contention, but because those beliefs *make sense* to them. They are the product of an often-invisible web of social organization, social structure, and party politics that weave all Americans into their political beliefs and partisan identities.

METHODOLOGICAL APPENDIX

Interview and Ethnographic Data Collection & Analysis

Between May 2019 and September 2021 I conducted 415 interviews with 86 residents and 91 community leaders across Iverson, Meriville, and Williston. The first phase of data collection included six to eight weeks of fieldwork in each county, during which time I recruited interview participants and observed political party activities, City Council meetings, civic events, and church services. Much of this observation was intentional—I went to City Council meetings and sought out invitations to party events and union meetings, for example—but many of my most fruitful ethnographic experiences, as described below, took place in more informal settings.

I chose Iverson, Meriville, and Williston for theoretical rather than practical reasons. This meant that I knew no one when I first decided to study these communities. I began by selecting Iverson from within the counties in the Democratic cluster, as there were far fewer Democratic counties than either swing or Republican counties. That helped winnow down my options for choosing Meriville and Williston, as I sought communities that even more closely mirrored Iverson's size, density, and demographic composition. I finally arrived at Meriville and Williston by chance. I presented a map of potential field sites to a working group of my colleagues in political science, asking if there were any theoretical reasons to prefer one Republican county over another, when they were all so similar. One of the other graduate students excitedly pointed out that he had worked with the chair of the Republican Party in one of the counties; he offered to connect us; and then she offered to host me during my fieldwork. A similar happy coincidence helped in selecting Williston. I had a list of several swing counties among which I could choose, and I sent out emails and Facebook messages to the Democratic and Republican Party chairs from the first county on the list. Soon after, I received an overwhelmingly enthusiastic phone call

from the former chair of the Republican Party, who invited me to the picnic I described in this book's introduction—and who eventually invited me several times to stay on his farm during my fieldwork—and I decided to go there.

I made my other initial connections in each field site by similar means: emailing and Facebook messaging community leaders whose contact information was publicly available. I also asked residents to post on local Facebook community groups for me, and once in town, I hung flyers, recruited people by introducing myself in person at coffee shops, bars, libraries, and the YMCA. I often met people just by spending time in public spaces: I would never look like I fit in, as Elaine once told me, so I often received confused looks and, from some of the bolder residents, questions about who I was and what brought me to town. This rendered a handful of interviewees and some interesting ethnographic experiences. I really stood out during my morning swims at the YMCAs in Iverson and Williston, where I was usually the only person present below the age of 65. I befriended lifeguards and other patrons, and eventually began seeing my interlocutors in different places around town. Each time I made a connection with a resident or community leader, I asked to be introduced to friends, family, or acquaintances who would speak to me and who fulfilled certain characteristics I needed to balance out my samples. Table A1 describes the political and demographic characteristics of the samples in each field site.

Snowball sampling was essential to achieving a mix of political and demographic characteristics in each field site, but of course, it has its downsides. In one instance I was introduced to a particularly dense social network in Williston, and several friends expressed enthusiasm about participating in the study. Given the similarities among these participants and their regular social interactions, I had to pursue other routes to reach contacts outside of that network, meaning that my sample was somewhat larger here than in either Iverson or Williston.

Table A1. Sample Political & Demographic Characteristics

<i>Political Characteristics (%)</i>	Meriville	Iverson	Williston
Democrat	20	50	44
Republican	63	13	31
Independent	17	29	25
If I/DK, % leans Republican:	7	8	9
If I/DK, % leans Democrat:	10	25	16
Don't Know	0	8	0
Avg. Political Engagement ¹	2.6	2.5	2.9
<i>Demographic Characteristics (%)</i>			
Female	47	63	41
College Graduate	53	50	53
Church Member	87	25	75
Retired	23	21	41

In this instance and in others, I take care when analyzing data from participants who shared social ties so that I could ensure the conclusions I drew about the community did not rely too heavily on their observations. That said, these communities are small enough that even though it is not the case that “everyone knows everyone” (Wuthnow 2013), I often ended up interviewing someone who knew another interviewee despite the fact that I had recruited them through different means. For example, in Williston I recruited a stranger in-person, when I encountered them working as a retail sales clerk and they inquired about my out-of-state license. Only later did I come to realize that he was the nephew of a small business owner I had already interviewed (he was not working at her business when I met him). In other words, the existence of some form of network ties among interviewees is not only the result of snowball sampling, but also of the size of these communities and the relative duration that people have spent living there, often over many generations.

It was typically a mix of retirees and younger residents in each field site who took me under their wings and invited me along to social gatherings and kaffeeklatches. It was often through these informal mechanisms that I learned the most about community life—for example, it was during casual conversation among friends that I finally understood how devastating the loss of the supermarket was in Williston. And I only participated in that conversation because I happened into a favorite coffee shop on my first morning back in town after several months away and was welcomed into the group I'd met a few months prior. And it was at a Democratic Party debate watch party in summer 2019—at a “Republican bar,” no less—that the bar owner stumbled up to us drunkenly and apologetically to explain that he had been raised a good Democrat but now, as a business owner, felt he should be aligning more with the Republican Party. It was in these unexpected moments that I saw my theory of the case confirmed again and again.

It was also in these moments that I caught glimpses into how different elements of my identity were interpreted and reinterpreted by residents and community leaders in each place. During one Burger King kaffeeklatsch in Meriville, I was asking the retired men clustered around the sticky plastic tables to tell me what they were most worried about for the country. It was summer 2019, and their answers were the same as everyone else's: healthcare and immigration. We'd thoroughly gone over the healthcare issue, and were ready to take up immigration, when the oldest and most revered member of the group stopped everyone. “Where is your last name from?” he asked me. “I just want to make sure before we go on and insult her people.” He said it as something of a joke, something of a warning to the other group members. I explained that my name is of Italian—*not* Spanish—origin, and the group carried on. In other words, I assuaged their concerns and assure them that I was in the category of “White, non-

Hispanic”; but if I hadn’t, I’m not sure how the conversation would have gone differently. This point of clarification was one of several that marked different ways in which I was both insider and outsider in these field sites. As I alluded to above, Elaine remarked on my dark hair and tan skin tone to tell me that I stood out in Iverson. But in a conversation with Rob, from Meriville, my ethno-racial identity afforded me clear insider status: we were also talking about immigration, and he immediately launched into an invective against Muslims, explaining that the Quran exhorted them to kill people “like us”—in his words, White, English-speakers.

Such experiences helped shed light on the feelings of outsider-ness expressed by White residents of Meriville who were *not* German Lutherans, and also underlined the importance of that in-group identity in Meriville. And, while community ethno-racial identity was not nearly as salient or consensual in Iverson and Williston as it was in Meriville, my interaction with Elaine was a reminder that not just Whiteness—but a particular kind of Whiteness—was often the shared expectation during social interactions across all three communities.

Interpretations of my religious and class identities offered similar lessons. In Meriville, and occasionally in Williston, residents were relieved to learn that I attended a Catholic high school – even for non-Catholics, this fact gave them a point of reference for how to locate me within a Christian world. In Iverson, in contrast, my student status often became the focal point of my identity, which residents used to understand me: both young people with mounds of student debt and older residents worried about young people’s student debt expressed concern that I was still in school in my late 20s. This, despite the fact that I grew up in an upper-middle-class household and had attended several “elite” educational institutions. These markers were not only not as salient to my interviewees (i.e., it would be difficult to know about my parents’ occupation and income unless someone were to ask me directly); but importantly, they were less

legible. The distinction between the University of Chicago and other private institutions, for example, was less meaningful than the distinction between expensive private schools and less-expensive public schools. In other words, my class identity was interpreted and reinterpreted through a local lens in which economic precarity and dwindling economic opportunity was of paramount concern to everyone.

In sum, the way my positionality shaped my data collection was not only multivocal (shaped by the intersection of my racial, religious, and class identities), but also situated (Reyes 2020) – it shifted both across the three communities and in different social contexts within each community. Moreover, some people asked me about myself—and, given that I was asking them questions about themselves, I always answered truthfully. This means that some participants know more about me than others, but it's not clear how that would have shifted their understanding of me or my identities.

This raises one last point, about my ethical commitments during fieldwork. In addition to signing consent forms for recording or providing verbal consent during phone interviews and anonymizing participants' names and occupations, I have also attempted to contact all residents and seek approval for the quotes I plan to use before publishing them. Although I have lost contact with several people (those who dropped off between 1st and 4th round interviews), this means that I was able to explicitly discuss with most participants whether they had concerns over anonymity after they saw the way I was using our conversations as data.

Figure A1. Blue-Collar Counties, formerly in the New Deal Coalition

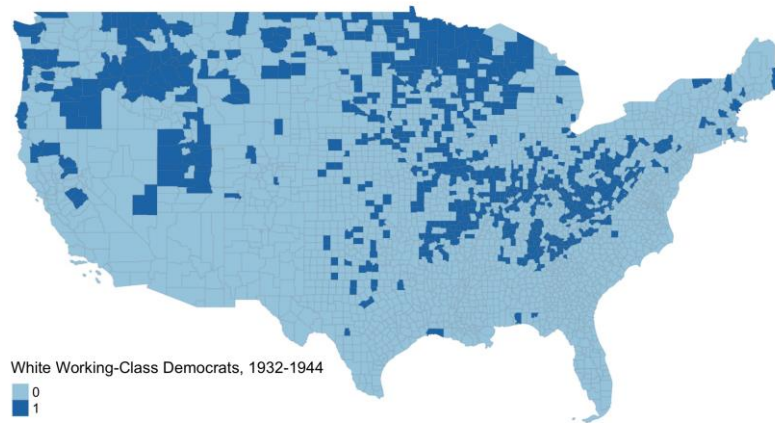


Figure A2 depicts state-by-state variation in the timing of union decline. As the map in the top left of the panel indicates, the northern Midwest through Pennsylvania and New York and the West Coast states were national leaders in unionization while the Southeast, Southwest, and Great Plains regions lagged behind. This remains the case to some extent today: New York, Washington, as well as Hawaii, now lead the country in unionization with rates of about 20% or over and places like Michigan, Minnesota, Illinois and Oregon remain among the most unionized states with rates over 13%. Wisconsin and Indiana, however, are now less unionized than the country as a whole, with fewer than 9% of workers in unions.

Figure A2. Unionization by State in 1956, 1986, and 2016

Fig A2.1 1956

Fig A2.2 1986

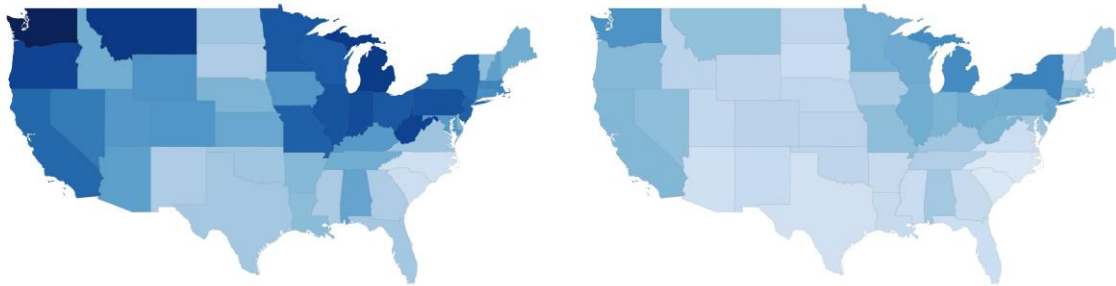
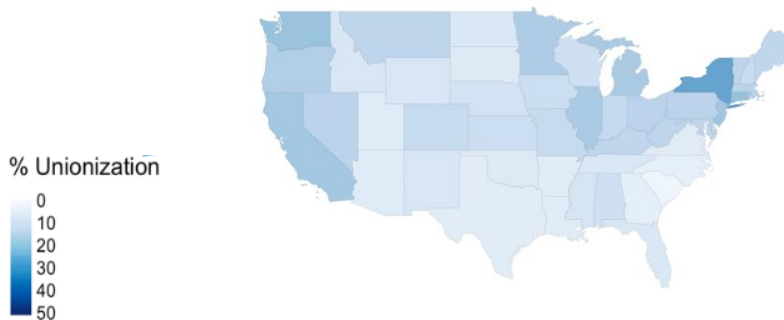


Fig A2.3 2016



Note: Union density data from 1965-2019 is from Hirsch, Macpherson, and Vroman’s “Union Density Estimates by State, 1964-201” at unionstats.com. See: Barry T. Hirsch, David A. Macpherson, and Rob G. Vroman, “Estimates of Union Density by State,” *Monthly Labor Review*, Vol. 124, No. 7, July 2001. Union density data from prior to 1964 comes from Leo Troy: “Extent of Union Organization, by State and Region, 1939 and 1953.”

Figure A3. Denominational Adherence by County, 2010

Fig A3.1 Catholics

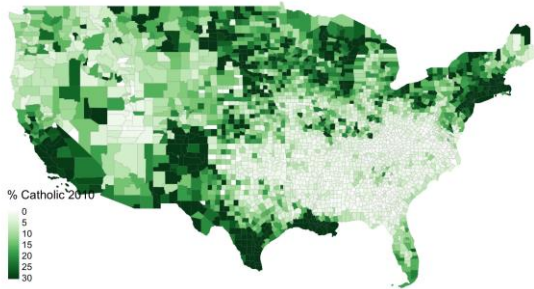


Fig A3.2 Mainline Protestants

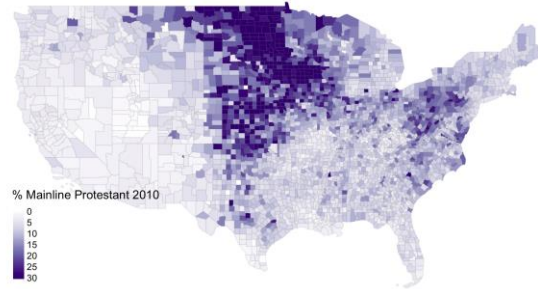


Fig A3.3 Evangelical Protestants

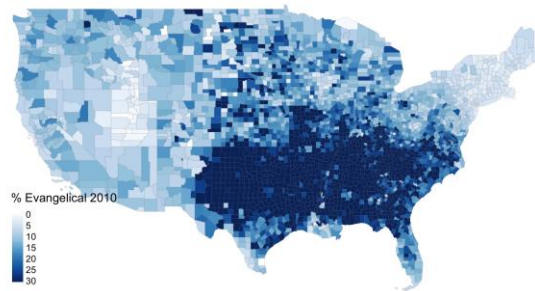
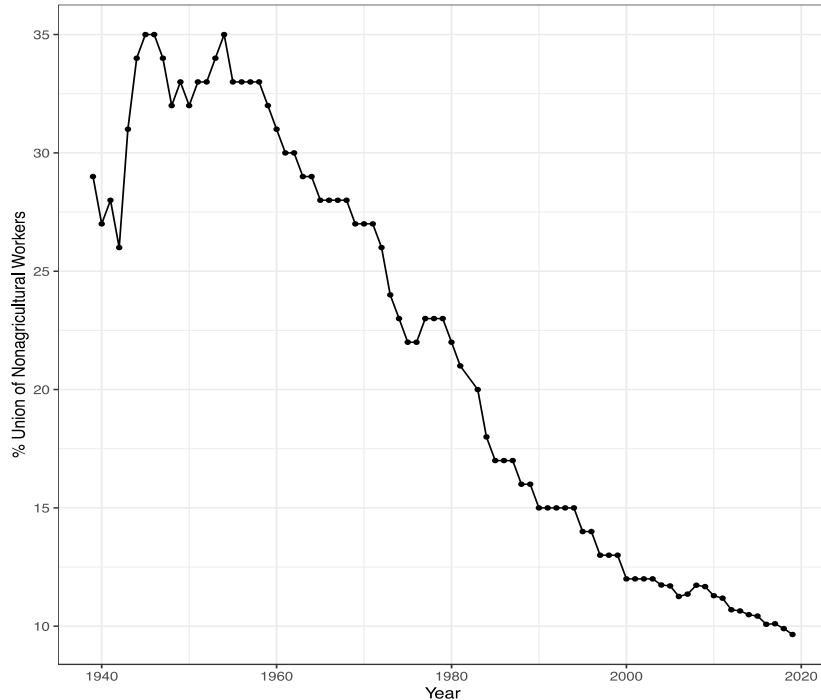


Figure A3 maps the county-by-county variation in the adherence rates of the three largest denominational affiliations in the U.S. in 2010: Catholics, Mainline Protestants, and Evangelical Protestants. Data are from the Association of Religious Data Archives (ARDA), and the denomination divisions are from the RELTRAD schema.

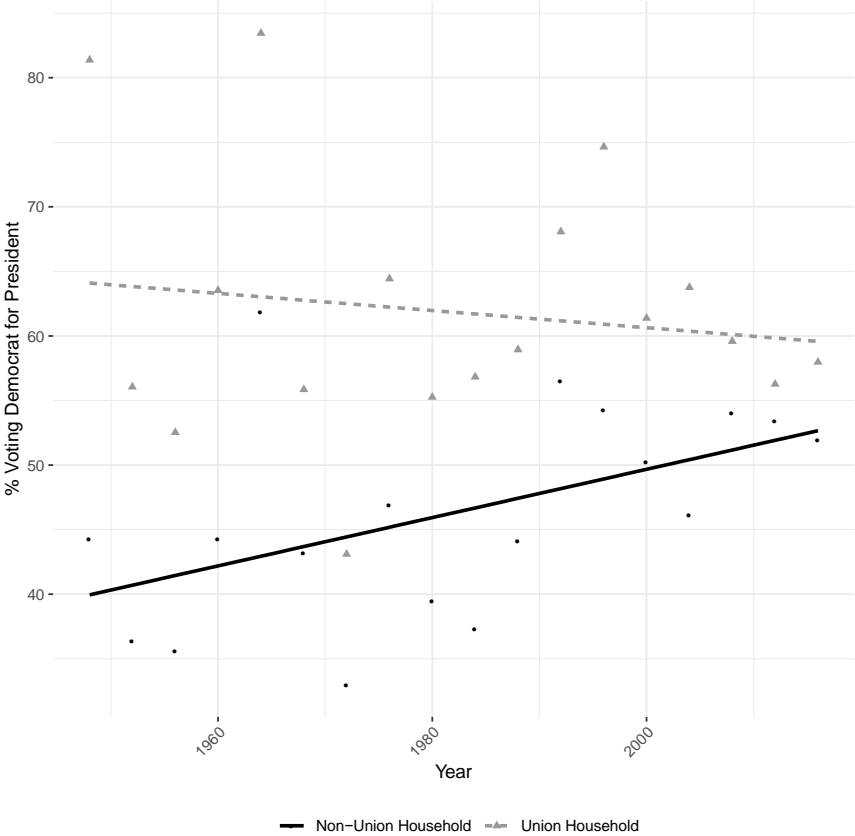
Figure A4 charts national unionization from 1939-2019 as the percentage of nonagricultural employed workers who are union members. It captures the peak of national unionization at 35% in 1954 and its fall to below 10% by 2018.

Figure A4. National Trends in Unionization, 1939-2019



Note: Union membership data from 2004-2019 is from Hirsch and Macpherson’s “Union Membership and Coverage Database” at unionstats.com. For information as to how they compiled the data, please see: Barry T. Hirsch and David A. Macpherson, “Union Membership and Coverage Database from the Current Population Survey: Note,” *Industrial and Labor Relations Review*, Vol. 56, No. 2, January 2003, pp. 349-54 (updated annually at unionstats.com). Nonagricultural employed workers data from 2004-2019 is from the Bureau of Labor Statistics’ Current Employment Statistics (CES) survey (<https://www.bls.gov/ces/data/>). Union density data from 1939-2003 is from Mayer, Gerald. 2004. *Union Membership Trends in the United States*. Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service. Mayer also draws on Hirsch and Macpherson data.

Figure A5. Democratic Party Voting in Union and non-Union Households, 1948-2016



Note: Data comes from the American National Election Studies (ANES) Cumulative Timeseries file. In calculating percentages for each year, I have applied the appropriate weights.

Data Collection & Coding of Politicians' Facebook Posts

Before the fourth round of interviews in September and October of 2020, with the help of three research assistants I collected all publicly available Facebook posts from “local” politicians in each field site that were posted between March 1-August 31, 2020. I later extended the data to include all posts from January 1-November 3 (the day of the U.S. presidential election). Within the scope of “local” I included all candidates and incumbents from city and county offices, up to the community’s U.S. House of Representatives seat. I focused on Facebook posts as interviewees had overwhelmingly indicated in previous interviews that this was their preferred social media platform.

I collected three pieces of information from each post: the text, the number of likes, and the number of comments. Based on the content, I then qualitatively coded each post for its geographic relevance. For example, a post about Main Street development was coded as “local;” a post about a governor’s stay-at-home order during COVID-19 was coded as “state;” and a post about President Trump or the impeachment as “national.” I also coded each post for issue content. I then weighted posts by likes and comments to identify the most prevalent issues and themes from political elites in each community in the months leading up to the election. I also used this analysis to assess the extent to which each community had a distinct local political discourse online, indicated not just by the prevalence of different issues but by a focus on local or state over national content. I then used this data to develop questions for interviewees in the fall. I asked if they were aware of or concerned about the most popular issues that characterized their communities’ local Facebook discourses. I also asked participants a number of questions about their social media usage and the geographic distribution of their social media networks.

I found that when my interlocutors logged onto Facebook, they learned about local politics in two ways: first, they learned about their community itself from friends who were also neighbors and politicians who posted about local issues. And second, they saw national politics discussed in ways that privileged local understandings of what is at stake in party politics.

First, my interviewees' social media networks are much like their face-to-face ones (see also Bond et al. 2012) —i.e., overwhelmingly local—and because local politicians post most frequently about local issues such as local events, charities, businesses, and Main Street development.

In interviews during September and October 2020, participants described how they knew their contacts on different social media platforms. Across all three field sites, they described overwhelmingly local networks, particularly in Iverson and Meriville: the vast majority of my interlocutors estimate that more than 50% of their contacts are local people. This makes sense given their relatively long length of residence in each community. Williston's geographic distribution is somewhat different: most people report that 50-75% of their contacts are local, and another substantial portion reports only 25-50% of their contacts are local. Even so, the three communities are more alike than they are different, as participants' virtual social lives generally share a great deal with their in-person social lives, and both are primarily local.

Within these networks, residents see friends and family posting about local events or activities and, occasionally, political controversies of local relevance—although these are somewhat rare. But in general, when residents describe “hearing” about local developments, they usually meant one of three things: they actually experienced something or heard about it from friends or family, as with Bill in Iverson's YMCA locker room; they read about something in the local paper or saw it on local TV news, as with Cal when it comes to homelessness in Meriville;

or they saw someone post about it on Facebook. Often, it is some combination of all three: residents might see local news articles posted on social media or hear from a friend about local events and later see them on Facebook as well. This kind of overlap is evident when I ask participants how they become aware of social problems, as it is often through multiple avenues. As Mallory from Meriville tells me about the local opioid crisis: “I do see often, like on Facebook, people will post pictures of finding needles in public places.” But she also hears about it from her husband who hosted a community forum about creating a needle exchange in town.

Local politicians also contribute to these information flows. Table A2 shows the proportion of local politicians’ Facebook posts aimed at each geographic level across Iverson, Meriville, and Williston, order within each case from least to most common. As the table makes clear, these politicians are indeed most frequently posting about local issues. It’s worth noting here that I coded every campaign post that did not explicitly link to a national politicians’ endorsements as “local.” Given that it was a re-election year for most politicians, this was a relatively substantial portion of the posts. Even excluding these posts—which were devoid of issue content but merely reminded viewers who their local politicians are—the prevalence remains nearly the same. The only difference is that “local” and “national” switch places in Williston. Weighting the posts by comments and likes also yields similar results.

Table A2. Geography of Issue Content

Iverson		Meriville		Williston	
Local-State-National	0.9	Local-State	0.9	Local-State-National	1.3
Local-State	3.5	State-National	1.4	Local-State	1.6
State-National	5.6	Local-National	3.0	State-National	2.6
Local-National	7.2	State	14.4	State	14.1
National	21.3	Local-State-National	15.8	Local-National	20.8
State	24.5	National	19.9	National	29.4
Local	37.0	Local	44.5	Local	30.2

During COVID, social media—and Facebook in particular—continued to play this role of communicating about the communities to their residents. As a result, especially among participants who were only active on Facebook, social media had a strongly localizing effect. Meriville’s Mayor Redner posted on Facebook daily about the county’s case count, and residents often went to his site for the latest information. Brenda, among others from both Iverson and Meriville, described the new groups that popped up on Facebook to support local businesses when we spoke in March: “There’s a Facebook page and it's all about restaurants who have been doing curbside throughout this. And trying to promote and help those businesses stay afloat.”

In sum, residents of Iverson, Meriville, and Williston have ample opportunity to learn about local politics and community life from Facebook—whether that’s about getting funding for the opioid crisis from the state, the activities of local nonprofits, building new roads, or simply who is running for office.

Second, local politicians in each community discuss national politics in ways that correspond to different local understandings of what is at stake in party politics. Throughout the qualitative interviews with voters, I have found that residents of Iverson, Meriville, and Williston have different understandings of what the parties stand for and where they fall in the party system. The content of politicians’ discourses on Facebook correspond to these differences in their constituents’ understandings: for example, Merivillians are much more likely to see a representative posting about the size of government while Iversonians are much more likely to see posts about inequality and workers’ needs. Although these differences are often driven by partisanship (i.e., there are more Republican representatives in Meriville than in Iverson), there are also important differences within party. In other words, Democratic politicians in Williston

are not posting about the same issues as Democratic politicians in Williston. This, too, corresponds with what I have found among my interlocutors. This correspondence suggests that social media may help reproduce the distinctive politics of each community.

To evaluate differences in local social media discourses across the three communities, I qualitatively coded the local politicians' posts for issue content, along with the help of three research assistants. The coding process was inductive, and many posts received multiple codes. Before discussing the results, I briefly describe the coding scheme for some of the most popular issues: "COVID containment" posts included any that advocated for social distancing, mask-wearing, or a test-and-trace strategy. Posts were only coded as "populism" when were framed in an us vs. them fashion, posing the "regular people" against political or corporate elites. This excludes any posts that evoke a kind of rural resentment (Cramer 2016), as I reserved more specific codes for these: for example, "urban v rural" indicates a post advocating for governors to treat urban and rural communities differently during COVID; and "rural way of life" indicates a post that promises to defend rural communities from outside forces such as the opposing candidate, Washington D.C., or the governor.

"Gubernatorial overreach" is distinct from "government overreach," and requires that the post refer explicitly to the state's governor—these were particularly common in both Meriville and Williston during COVID-19. "Communitarianism" indicates any post describing local volunteering efforts, applauding nonprofits or churches for community engagement, or otherwise providing an avenue by which residents might learn of collective, private solutions to social problems.

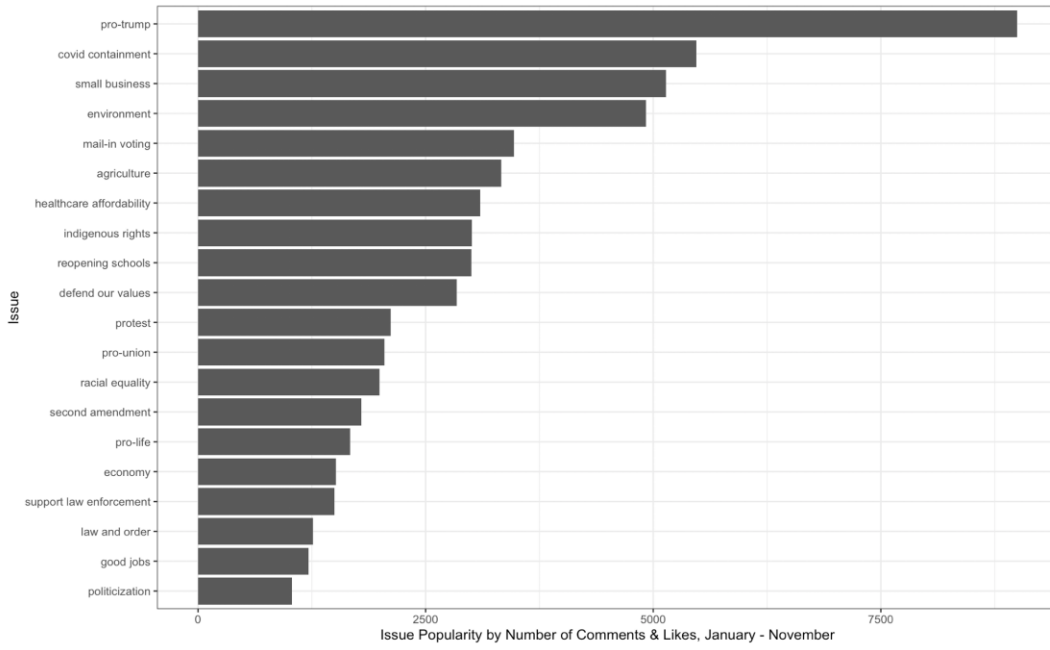
There are a number of posts that include discussions of reopening states' economies during the spring of 2020. Those coded as "reopening" simply advocate for governors to ease or

lift stay-at-home orders. Those coded as “reopening logic” question a seeming arbitrariness to the closures—a common concern, for example, is why Wal-Mart was able to remain open throughout the spring but mom-and-pop stores were not. Another set of posts were coded as “health-economy balance.” These conveyed a logic that the country is necessarily facing trade-offs between public and economic health, often advocating for the state to “safely reopen” so as to protect small businesses.

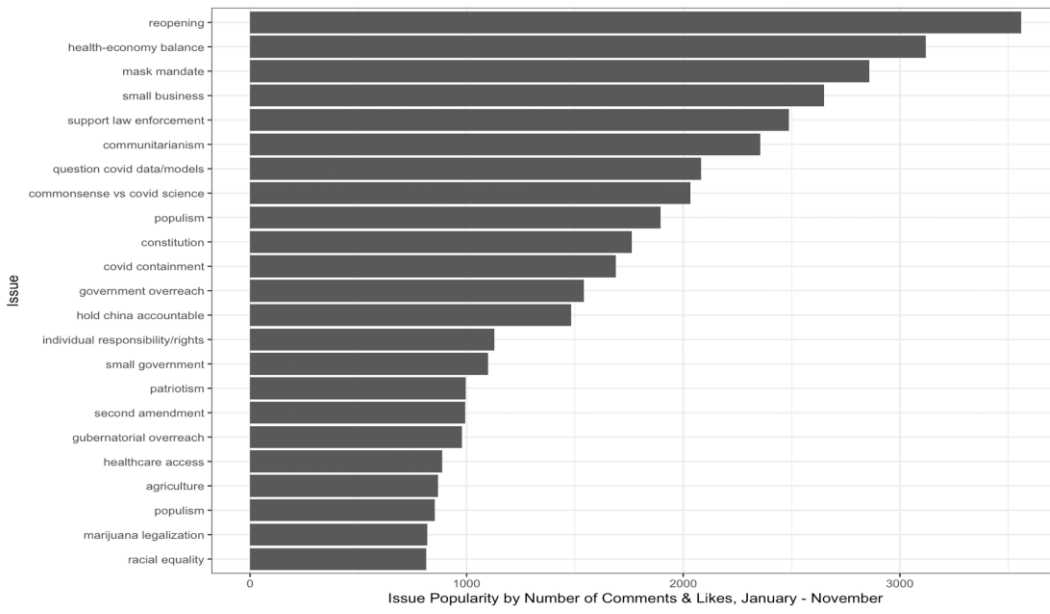
Finally, there are several codes that indicate a politician exhorting the public to question the COVID-19 response in some way. The most common form of this is for a post to note how inaccurate the early COVID projections were or to question the way that COVID deaths and cases have been reported. These posts were labelled “question covid data/models.” Another set of posts, often by one particular politician in Meriville, repeatedly called on viewers to apply commonsense to COVID mitigation policies. These might, for example, pose a rhetorical question such as: “Ask yourself, what good will a cloth mask do to stop millions of particles smaller than a pin needle from escaping your mouth?” These were coded “commonsense vs covid science.” After coding the posts, I weighted them by the number of comments and likes they received to produce the plots shown in Figure A6.

As Figure A6 shows, the one issue all three communities share is an emphasis on saving small businesses. Local politicians’ pages were flooded with images of them at local businesses, encouraging others to support small business, advocating for more funding through the PPP, or questioning how the stay-at-home orders would wreak havoc on small business owners. Iverson and Williston also share the most popular type of post: a “pro-trump” post, in which a politician proclaims support for President Trump and often ties their candidacy to him. Ironically, it is only in Meriville—the most Republican community—where pro-Trump posts are

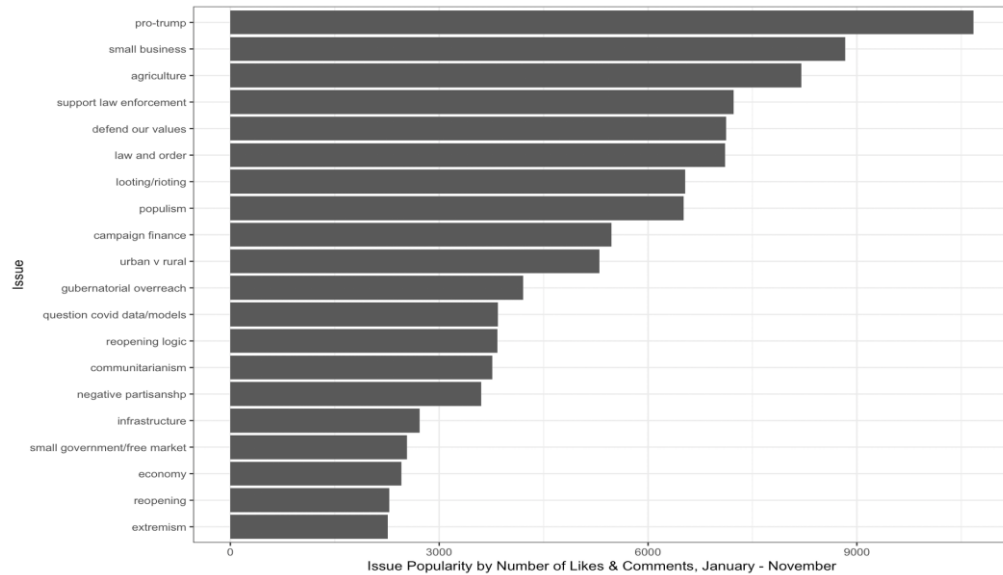
Figure A6. Most Popular Issues on Facebook, by Place



(a) Iverson



(b) Meriville



(c) Williston

not in the top 20. All three communities have a Republican Congressperson, and it is only Congresspeople who tended to post about Trump in both Iverson and Williston; in Meriville, the Congressperson’s Facebook feed is actually the least political or polarized of the three, perhaps because of the overwhelming surety of their electoral victory.

But apart from this issue, Iverson’s posts are unique among the three communities. Meriville and Williston share a focus on individual rights and responsibilities, gubernatorial and general government overreach, supporting law enforcement, and questioning the COVID-19 data and models. They both also focus on communitarianism, regularly highlighting local volunteer efforts and opportunities throughout the year. The particular popularity of these kinds of posts in Meriville is an indicator of how residents have easy access to information about private, collective problem-solving efforts.

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