

Introduction

Even by twenty-first-century standards, the 2016 election was unusually polarizing. Some Americans were elated. Others—ourselves included—were aghast. Paul Krugman, the long-time syndicated columnist for the *New York Times*, spoke for many of his readers when he confessed to feeling an overwhelming sense of despair as the final votes were being tallied. Before election night, Krugman presumed that whatever their partisan differences, the vast majority of Americans shared basic values. But the election exposed an “unknown country”—a foreign land where American citizens apparently disdained “democratic norms and the rule of law.”¹

At the time, Krugman probably was not aware that the unknown country he supposed was crowded with bad *democrats*, was, in fact, full of his fellow *Democrats*. Almost one-third of the counties that voted twice for Obama went for Trump. And many of them had not just supported Obama—they had also been loyal to the Democratic Party for decades (see the table in the appendix).² Some had not even supported a Republican president since prior to the New Deal. In fact, one county—Elliott County, Kentucky—had never voted for a Republican candidate since it was formed in the 1860s, the longest Democratic voting streak in

the nation. Yet Trump won 70 percent of the vote in Elliott County—a place where the ratio of registered Democrats to Republicans is similar to San Francisco's.

It is true, of course, that voters sometimes cross party lines. We are accustomed to referring to Nixon Democrats in 1972 and Reagan Democrats in 1984. However, those elections were landslides. Nixon won every state except for Massachusetts, while Reagan won every state but Minnesota.³ Thus it is not surprising that Republican candidates won many loyal Democratic towns and counties in those years. The 2016 election, however, was not at all like those of 1972 or 1984. Trump *lost the popular vote*. Nevertheless, he managed to win some of the most loyal Democratic communities in the nation.

It has been observed that the 2016 election widened the gulf that separates red from blue communities and exposed disturbing new social fissures in places where many had thought there was solid ground. Less noted is the fact that Trump's ascent opened a *new divide* between some of the most loyal blue communities, pitting the party's highly educated metropolitan centers and college towns against small communities populated by white working- and lower-middle class citizens. In the former places, Trump is a reviled character, seen as the worst president in American history, maybe even a fascist. In the latter places, Trump is often regarded as the best president anyone can remember since John F. Kennedy. The polarization of Democratic communities shows that Trump created a political fault line even deeper than partisanship.

Studying Trump's Democrats

This book sheds new light on the political chasm that ripped the Democratic Party apart in 2016 and considers what it means for the future of the party and of American democracy. We do so by presenting evidence from our ethnographic study of three long-standing Democratic communities that voted for Trump: Ottumwa, Iowa, which had been consistently Democratic since 1972; Elliott County, Kentucky, which, as we mentioned, had never voted for a Republican president in its history; and Johnston, Rhode Island, which last voted Republican in 1984. These places have been so faithful to the party that they mostly ignored con-

servative and populist movements that are often regarded as harbingers of Trump’s ascent, including the Tea Party movement and Ross Perot’s candidacy in 1992 (see chapter 1, “Three Democratic Communities”).

Why these three? Primarily because of their diversity (see table I-1). Not only are they in different regions of the country, they also represent varied social geographies: Elliott is rural, Johnston is suburban, and Ottumwa is urban.⁴ Their economies are different as well: Elliott’s has been traditionally dependent on coal and tobacco crops; Johnston’s is integrated into metropolitan Providence; and Ottumwa’s is centered around a large meatpacking plant. And while each place has suffered from economic stress, the magnitude and timing of these strains have varied. Elliott’s coal economy, for example, was hit hard by environmental regulations during Obama’s second term, while Ottumwa’s decline began decades earlier when its meatpacking plant’s corporate headquarters left town.

TABLE I-1. Demographic Profile of Case Studies

	Johnston	Ottumwa	Elliott
Economy	commercial	industrial	agricultural and extraction
Geography	suburb	small city	rural
Population	29,332	24,550	7,508
Region	New England	Midwest	South
Latino (%)	7	11	0
College Grad (%)	22	18	8
Per Capita Income	\$33,113	\$21,165	\$13,436

Ottumwa represents 71 percent of all county voters.

SOURCE: Demographic data from the U.S. Census Bureau.

These communities are also different ethnically. Elliott, for example, has experienced essentially no immigration, while Ottumwa is now home to a significant population of immigrants, mostly from Latin America. Johnston is somewhere in the middle, having enjoyed a moderate influx of immigrants in recent years. The dominant populations of each community also descend from different European nations. Johnston's are heavily Italian American, with a large minority of Irish background. Elliott's are of Scots-Irish descent, while Ottumwa's are mostly German, British, and Scandinavian. The variety of these cases gives us additional confidence that our general findings characterize other Democratic communities that admire Trump, and not just the places we studied.

Despite their considerable differences, however, Ottumwa, Elliott, and Johnston have other characteristics in common. Their citizens are overwhelmingly from white working-class backgrounds. Few adults have college educations, and their incomes are modest. And, of course, they are all one-party towns.

Our fieldwork was conducted over three summers, beginning in 2017 and concluding in 2019. We spent approximately six months in the field, or almost eight weeks in each community. The first case—Johnston, Rhode Island—was done together. Subsequent cases were done individually: Muravchik did fieldwork in Elliott County; Shields in Ottumwa. For the sake of readability, however, we use a royal “we” when presenting our findings throughout the book. Except for some of the local politicians and civic leaders, we disguised the identities of the people we spoke to.

We began each case by interviewing local elites, including politicians, journalists, clergy, business owners, union leaders, sheriffs, and other civic leaders. These elites know their communities well and helped us see them from different occupational perches. And because local elites are well connected, they introduced us to many “regular” citizens as well.

As we studied these communities, we paid attention not only to what local citizens said about Trump, but also to what they said about their lives, their hometowns, and the people around them. And we were interested in what *they did* as well as in what they said.⁵ This social immersion allowed us to observe differences between the social, moral, and political norms of the Democratic communities we studied and those familiar to us and many of our readers. Thus, in addition to conducting formal interviews with ninety-five people and engaging in countless ad-

ditional casual conversations, we also observed voters in their everyday life—in churches, bars, town council meetings, coffee shops, and homes. We were especially interested in identifying the local social centers in each community. In Johnston, for example, it was a local coffee shop. In Elliott County, it was the Frosty Freeze and the Penny Mart.

We did not approach our interviewees with the same slate of questions. In the case of local elites, for example, we were interested in understanding their particular domains of knowledge. Local sheriffs could speak to their towns' honor cultures and gender conflicts; business owners wanted to talk about consumer preferences for American-made goods; and Democratic politicians provided us with insight into local party politics. Thus, to a great extent, we tailored our questions to each person. Our questions also changed as new theoretical interests emerged from our observations and interviews.⁶ Because each community is put together differently, people in each place often wanted to talk about different topics. In Ottumwa, where there has been considerable immigration of late, the locals were eager to discuss it. But in Elliott County, where there is almost no immigration, we spent little time on the topic.

The distinct history and sociology of each community also meant that we had to approach people somewhat differently in each place. Elliott presented special challenges. We were not the first pushy outsiders to come snooping around the county. For decades, observers have descended upon the Appalachian Mountains only to describe and treat the people who live there with haughty disdain.⁷ Paula Dunn, a retired teacher with a quiet and dignified manner and a flair for art, turned to us early in our research there and asked pointedly, "Now, you're not going to go away and say that we're barefoot, toothless hillbillies, are you?" Thus, while residents of Ottumwa and Johnston often seemed to enjoy offering their two cents about the state of their town and country, people in Elliott County first had to get to know us and feel confident that we would not slander them. We are grateful to those who came to trust us, who vouched for us and allowed us to get to know them.

Our ethnographic approach differs from a large and growing body of survey-based research on Trump supporters.⁸ Although we have learned much from that research and speak to it throughout the book, we nonetheless found it could not adequately address our interests.

This is partly so because surveys tend to ask questions that have long been of interest to researchers. Thus they usually test old theories of political behavior rather than develop new insights. Those old theories also reflect the special interests of researchers.⁹ As some thoughtful critics of research on the 2016 election noted, “Even the best-designed questions tend to impose the designers’ categories and intellectual frameworks upon respondents.”¹⁰

At a time when academics are so culturally and geographically isolated from Trump supporters,¹¹ it is important to question our ability to design meaningful, discerning surveys and perceptive, well-grounded theories from our distant perches. We are struck, for example, by the fact that the dominant explanations of Trump’s appeal all have one thing in common: they all assume that something *must* be seriously wrong with Trump enthusiasts. Trump won, we are told, either because of racial prejudices or economic distress or various diseases of social despair, such as drug abuse, family breakdown, and suicide. Thus, in these accounts, Trump voters are driven by resentment or anger or desperation. How else could one cast a vote for Trump? Though it is never stated explicitly, such views rest on the assumption that any well-adjusted, healthy, flourishing citizen would reject Trump. Even though we joined in the rejection of Trump, we wonder if that assumption may be a symptom of the social and cultural distance between our community and the ones Trump’s Democrats call home.

Survey research also struggles to understand working-class communities because it rests on a “methodological individualism” that reduces citizens’ politics to a collection of attitudes and personality traits held by individual respondents. As Theda Skocpol and Vanessa Williamson argued in their study of the Tea Party movement, surveys “treat individuals as isolates floating around in asocial spaces—which is not the way real people live their lives.”¹² Ethnography, however, begins from a different premise: it assumes that people make sense of politics in particular social, cultural, and institutional contexts.

None of these arguments should be construed as a case against surveys. We have learned much from them. Instead, our case is simply that we need political ethnographies, too, especially in this new era of class isolation. Making sense of what Krugman called “our unknown coun-

try” will require more than surface-level surveys of communities that are culturally different from the places where scholars work and live. The age of big data needs ethnography more than ever.

To some social scientists, our approach may seem too unstructured and unscientific. Some may even regard it as indistinguishable from journalism. However, we believe that the comparative advantage of ethnography is maximized when it does not attempt to approximate the methods of survey research. Had we conducted structured interviews, for example, we could not have pursued—or perhaps even been inclined to tune into—new theoretical insights as they emerged in the course of our fieldwork. To some degree, the merits of our approach are difficult to persuasively argue in the abstract. We believe the better test is to read the book and then make a judgment. The proof of good ethnography—like a pudding—is in the eating.

What We Found

To understand Trump’s appeal, one must first appreciate all the ways he reflects values and norms that are common in small, working-class communities. We found, for example, that Trump does not really seem like a political outsider in these places. Instead, he behaves in ways that seem familiar. Thus, when Trump supporters praise him, as they frequently do, by saying, “He’s not a politician,” we came to understand that they mean he is not a *Washington* politician.

Many of the local Democratic leaders in the communities we studied are Trumpian. They are brazen, macho, and never let an insult slide (see chapter 2, “Dragon Energy”). One Trumpian mayor we observed, for example, called elderly constituents who attacked him “malcontents,” “misfits,” and “douchebags” at a town council meeting. Defending oneself by going on the offense as a method for handling conflict and status challenges is common in many working-class communities, particularly in the “Trump Belt” of the Upper Midwest and New England. The similarity to Trump’s behavior is no accident. Both Trump and his working-class admirers are governed by a common honor culture. Honor cultures exist practically everywhere—everywhere except highly educated cities and college towns. In an honor culture, individuals—and

men in particular—are expected to defend their reputation for toughness.¹³ If they do not, they are dismissed as weak and ineffectual.

Thus, whereas Trump's sensitivity to slights in college-educated Democratic communities is regarded as a sign of a thin skin and possibly a disordered mind, that same sensitivity is regarded as normal—even admirable—in the Democratic communities we studied. And although Trump was roundly criticized for violating the norms of politics, what he actually did was violate the norms of *national* politics. In places like Johnston and Ottumwa, political norms are far more Trumpian. This difference, of course, is largely a class-based one. In educated, professional communities, conflict is supposed to be mediated by norms of civility and deliberation. If push really comes to shove, lawyers are summoned. But in working-class communities, conflicts are still often resolved through shows of strength and intimidation. As one local mayor told us: "I'm kinda like a streetfighter when it comes to politics, because that's the only thing that people understand. You can't be nice when people are trying to take shots at you."

This finding should also caution against the interpretation, popular now in some conservative circles, that Trump appealed to the white working class because of his opposition to political correctness. The debate over political correctness is largely of interest to elites, whether conservative or progressive. The people we spoke with had little interest in, or even awareness of, debates over pronouns or microaggressions or safe spaces on college campuses. That world is too far removed from the one they care about. They would dislike the cultures of elite college campuses, if they ever encountered one. Political correctness, after all, functions as the cutting edge of a bourgeoisie culture that prizes civility and gentleness in manners. It's class, not ideology, that matters.¹⁴

In addition to his affinities with these local honor cultures, Trump invokes another important political norm from the communities we studied. Like the popular leaders in these places, Trump presents himself as an archetypal party machine boss (see chapter 3, "The Don"). Trump does so partly for the reasons we just elaborated: he is tough, direct, and brazen. But he also offers something greater: a paternalistic social contract that exchanges provision for loyalty and respect.

In all the communities we studied, politics have been organized

around bosses for the better part of a century. It is not too strong to say that these bosses and their networks *constituted* the party for voters. Thus, to be a Democrat did not mean that one took progressive positions on issues like abortion, crime, and welfare. Rather, to be a Democrat meant that one was integrated into political relationships that rested on a paternalistic social contract. The citizens we got to know remained firmly in the Democratic camp over the past decades—despite often describing themselves as “conservative”—in good measure because they retained their allegiance to Democratic city and county leaders.

Even though the boss-voter relationship has been weakened by reformers (badly so in the case of Ottumwa), it still endures in the memories and political imaginations of local citizens in all of the places we studied. And, to varying extents, it is a mode of politics still practiced by some of these communities’ most popular leaders. Because the power of Democratic patrons has weakened, however, their ability to mediate voters’ connections to the national party has atrophied, as has their ability to remedy local problems.

To see the Democratic Party in these communities, therefore, is to catch glimpses of its former self. That it was so unfamiliar to us, of course, is a reminder of how much the party has changed, especially in its more cosmopolitan centers. In the party’s more distant hamlets, machine politics faced fewer foes—thus much of the old-style politics endured. And the remoteness of these blue machine towns makes it harder to notice all the ways in which Trump is more like an old-style Democratic boss than a modern Republican.

Like a typical Democratic boss of old, Trump offers his supporters not a grand ideological vision, but rather a promise to *take care* of them by cutting deals—and corners, if required. Politicians in this mold traditionally also use their own *private* resources for the *public* good, and sometimes dip into *public* resources for their *private* ends. Trump has been faithful to this model by donating his salary, conducting state business at his resorts, and bullying Ukraine.

The traditional boss expects something in return, of course. He expects loyalty. While all politicians desire loyalty, Trump has placed greater stress on it than his predecessors. As Trump famously told FBI director James Comey, “I need loyalty. I expect loyalty.”¹⁵ To the presi-

dent's critics, this statement is inappropriate at best, and evidence of malfeasance at worst. But rewarding supporters and punishing opponents is standard operating procedure for political machines everywhere, including in the three places we studied. Whether or not they like it, citizens there expect it. When we asked one voter about the political history of his community, he nervously refused to talk at first, pointing out, "You know how this town is." Then he paused. "Or maybe you don't."

This emphasis on provision and loyalty grows up from the ideals that govern the traditional working-class family.¹⁶ Thus it shouldn't surprise us that boss-centered politics also tends toward nepotism. Many in the professional class were troubled when Trump turned for counsel to his daughter and son-in-law rather than to credentialed experts. But in the towns we visited, extended family ties are often the basis of common enterprises, including politics. For the past half century, in Elliott County, for example, each of the three men who served as the county judge/executive hired their sons as their second-in-command. Thus it seemed normal that Trump's relatives would play important roles in his administration.

While politics based on familialism help build social trust and solidarity, it has a dark side. It tends to reinforce racial and ethnic boundaries. Like many machine bosses in American history, Trump promised to protect and provide for *his* people, a category bounded by race. As other research has shown, many citizens supported Trump because they thought he was the patron of white working-class Americans.¹⁷

These provincial allegiances, however, may not emerge simply from bigotry, but also from strong loyalties to particular places.¹⁸ Because these citizens emphasize the importance of their community's interests, one might say their dominant political ethos is *Ottumwa* (or *Johnston*, or *Elliott County*) *first* (see chapter 4, "America First").

The primacy of these place-based loyalties are evident in everyday life. When Johnston's indoor basketball courts become crowded, for example, its town officials force outsiders from Cranston (a neighboring suburban town) to wait before they can use them. Meanwhile, in Ottumwa, many citizens prefer to spend their dollars within the city limits, because they think their hard-earned local dollars should enrich their community, not outsiders, even those from other parts of Iowa. Similarly, controversy erupted in Elliott County when an important job in the local

school district was offered to someone from a neighboring county. As in Johnston and Ottumwa, many believe Elliott County's limited resources should benefit its own residents. These examples demonstrate that in all the places we studied, municipal and county borders are not merely administrative districts or lines on a map—they *define* communities. Thus “white America” is too broad a category to capture the way people we spoke with think about their civic identities. Even identification with rural America—a much-touted explanation for Trump's success—did not seem especially salient to them. Americans from other counties, states, and regions are all outsiders, even if not to the same extent.

As these findings should suggest, the people we interviewed learn to think about politics primarily in the context of their towns, cities, and counties. These local lessons shape the way they think about their place in the state and national communities. And here, again, borders matter. For example, they think jobs in the *state* government should go to *state* residents. Thus one irritated citizen derided Governor Gina Raimondo for her tendency to “Bring people in from Missouri, bring people in from Connecticut, people in from New York. What's the matter with Rhode Islanders?!” They also prefer to buy American-owned and -manufactured products. In Ottumwa, in fact, it is still impossible to purchase a new Honda. As other scholars found years before the upset of 2016, putting “America first” has long seemed like the logical and ethical thing to do in locally oriented, working-class communities.¹⁹

An America-first ethos resonates with the Democrats we studied partly because they envision the national political community as an extension of the ones they know most intimately and to which they owe their primary allegiances. Thus its appeal grows up from their everyday life, not just downward from larger social constructs like whiteness. Such are the local origins of their American nationalism.

But if these place-based identities are distinct from white identity, it is also the case that strong social ties in these communities have long been enhanced by a high degree of racial and ethnic homogeneity. As immigration increases in many small towns and cities, including two of the places we studied, native residents worry about its effects on their community. These concerns are not unreasonable, even though they mix with more irrational prejudices that are inflamed by demagogues like Trump. After all, locals experience firsthand—and a large body of social

science confirms—that social trust and ties are undermined by ethnic diversity, especially in neighborhoods.²⁰

The reasonableness of these concerns is sometimes hard to appreciate from afar. Affluent Democratic communities are constituted differently, and so they have less to lose from immigration and, in fact, tend to rely much more heavily on immigration. Unlike Trump's Democratic towns and counties, the communities of highly educated Democrats are not found primarily in their neighborhoods. They are wider, more virtual, and often centered on professional associations.²¹ Mass immigration allows citizens in educated Democratic communities to tend to their more diffuse professional networks by freeing them from their neighborhoods. Immigrants, after all, clean their homes, care for their children, and manicure their yards at modest prices, allowing members of the professional class to *neglect* their neighborhoods.

The strong place-based identities we discovered also help us unravel a paradox of research about Trump voters (see chapter 5, "Make America Great Again"). On the one hand, studies that use community-level data find that various measures of economic and social stress predict Trump voting. Trump, for example, did well in counties with greater economic stagnation and higher levels of disability and suicide.²² On the other hand, studies of individual voters do not find any consistent association between personal measures of economic or social stress and Trump voting.²³ These divergent findings are less puzzling once we recognize that many new Republican voters in traditionally Democratic locales feel deeply attached to communities that face existential social and economic threats.

This devotion to community is obscured by some intellectuals who point to civic decline in Trump country. Jim Carney, for example, has described Trump country as a "wasteland of alienation" where residents are no longer rooted in a civic life—especially churches—that once provided them "a deeper sense of self."²⁴ While it is certainly the case that civic ties have weakened in the places we studied, the citizens we spoke to are not alienated. In fact, the opposite is more nearly true: the people we met are concerned about civic decline because they are devoted to their communities. This is partly why Trump's campaign slogan—"Make America Great Again"—resonated so deeply in these Democratic towns.

As members of the professional class, we at times felt quite distant from the communities we studied. Despite our concerns about the excesses of political correctness, our interviewees sometimes inadvertently reminded us of its benefits. When one woman described a local beach as “dark beach,” because it was frequented by immigrants and African Americans, we struggled to conceal our dismay. We bit our tongues when another man suggested Obama was secretly a Muslim. We also found ourselves aghast at the worst expressions of their local honor cultures. Several accounts of political disputes that almost led to blows were colorful stories to add to the book, but we were thankful not to have been around when things threatened to get physical.

Yet our time in these communities also made us feel like bad *local* citizens. Our interviewees are far more integrated into their communities’ political lives than we are. The people we spoke with know their local politicians, sometimes intimately. They stay abreast of the concerns of their neighbors, to whom they talk regularly, while we do not. And they are certainly more concerned about the welfare of their communities. We, on the other hand, often know more about recent elections in Britain or France than those in Claremont, where we live. We rarely read our local newspaper. By any reasonable criteria, we are bad localists.

But although we often felt like bad localists, we also felt like better *national* citizens than these admirable localists. We not only know more about national affairs, we also recognize the inevitability and importance of compromises in a large, polyglot republic. Unlike some of the citizens we talked to, we understand that there is no unified “people.” Thus we accept the necessity of a constitutional order that is designed to frustrate fleeting popular passions. And that project is best led not by those who are hot-tempered or brash, but by the temperate, not by newcomers, but by those with broad experience in governance.

These differences spring, in part, from the nature of our communities. Unlike the civic identities and commitments of those we spoke to in Rhode Island, Iowa, and Kentucky, ours bear little relationship to city or county lines. In this, and other ways, we are typical of our class. Our friends and families are scattered across the nation, and they come from varied racial, religious, and ideological backgrounds. In addition, we have lived in many different places. During one especially itinerant

period, we lived in four states over a four-year period.²⁵ As a result, we have extremely weak ties to the places we grew up in and to the various places we have resided. These social characteristics orient us toward our national political life and away from local citizenship. It is the national government, after all, that superintends the only political community that *always* matters to us. And we expect it to manage our nation's diversity in reasonable ways. By way of contrast, local politics in places like Johnston, Ottumwa, and Elliott County are an extension of their neighborhoods—they are realms marked by trust, social homogeneity, and a shared sense of the public good.

Political expectations nurtured in small, sociocentric communities do not scale up well into our national political life. In small, homogeneous towns, for example, it is less unreasonable to believe that citizens are a unified “people,” or that political amateurs with common sense can become capable representatives, or that strong executive authority benefits the public good. Even political norms shaped by honor cultures work better in local settings marked by social trust and familiarity. It is in larger, more diverse polities, where deliberative norms are essential, partly because conflicts run deeper, necessitating negotiation and compromise.

Trump supporters are sometimes unfairly maligned for holding a naive view of how politics should function. Drawing on public opinion research, Jonathan Rauch argued in the *Atlantic* that a large majority of Americans have “a severely distorted view of how government and politics are supposed to work.” They regard, Rauch continues, the “contentious give-and-take of politics as unnecessary and distasteful,” since “obvious, common-sense solutions to the country's problems are out there for the plucking.”²⁶ While we are broadly sympathetic to Rauch's lament, it also suggests that all politics are *national* in character. In the places we studied, the expectation that politics should be marked by little contentiousness is much less unreasonable. Many of the critiques of American populism, therefore, see all political life primarily through its national expressions. At the local level, politics have a somewhat different character.

When we turn our attention to the upcoming election, we doubt that the communities we studied—and many of his new working-class supporters—will reject Trump. Whether they will become partisan

Republicans in time is harder to guess (see chapter 6, “Democrats No More?”). On the one hand, they are watching Fox News more, largely because they find other news sources hostile to their president. And they are doing so at a time when they are questioning their past allegiance to the Democratic Party and at a moment when the party is drifting further to the left. On the other hand, they also adore Trump far more than they like the Republican Party and its platform. At least for now, the majority of citizens in these communities remain registered Democrats.

Democrats, of course, might decide that they simply do not need these communities anymore. They could just focus on driving up minority and youth turnout in metropolitan areas in key battleground states. In the concluding chapter, we argue that is a strategic mistake. But even if it is not, the Democratic Party still has to ask itself a more fundamental question: what kind of party does it want to become? Does it want to rehabilitate the party of the New Deal, a broad-based working-class party made up of citizens of all races? If it does, there may still be time to reverse its political course. But the hour is getting late.