
The Left Behind is Princeton sociologist Robert Wuthnow’s latest in a series of books he has published examining the intersections of rural culture and politics in the United States.1 While The Left Behind is based on research and oral interviews conducted between 2006 and 2014, Wuthnow has wisely framed it as a way to understand why, in the 2016 presidential election, “62 percent of the rural vote went to Donald Trump, compared with 50 percent of the suburban vote and only 35 percent of the urban vote” (1). Wuthnow’s academic study is unlikely to catch the attention of cable-news pundits who cover more popular and sensational diagnoses of so-called “Trump Country,” but that is a shame. The Left Behind is a far more thoughtful book than the likes of these offerings, such as J. D. Vance’s bestselling Hillbilly Elegy: A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis (2016). Even so, Wuthnow’s account leaves many unanswered questions and lacks historical perspectives that could have provided more compelling insights on rural outrage and its manifestations in right-wing politics.

The usefulness of Wuthnow’s book is largely the result of his research method. The Left Behind is essentially a distilled report on more than one thousand interviews collected by Wuthnow and his research assistants in about three hundred rural towns and communities (generally defined by populations of less than twenty-five thousand, excluding suburbs and metropolitan-adjoining locales) across forty-three states.2 Rather than leaning on old stereotypes and common assumptions for answers about rural politics, Wuth-


2. Wuthnow notes that greater details from these interviews appear in some of his other books, namely Remaking the Heartland; Small-Town America; and In the Blood.
now makes a strong case for the merits of pausing to listen. “To find out what people in these communities think—what their lives are like, what they value, and how they arrive at their opinions about political candidates and government—wouldn’t it make sense to spend time talking with them?” he asks (3). Throughout, Wuthnow is candid about his background: “I’m part of the liberal elite” (though his raising in small-town Kansas, he thinks, does lend him a unique “reference point”). “I’ve deliberately sought out people whose views differ from mine,” he continues, and “I’ve attempted to understand them as fairly and as objectively as I can” (159).

Wuthnow questions what he says are overly simplistic explanations of rural political rage as an expression of rural whites’ cultural fears and bigotry in the face of an increasingly diverse and cosmopolitan America. Though “85–90 percent of the rural population is white Anglo,” he contends that rural America is actually quite diverse in other ways and pushes back against “one-dimensional” portrayals (10, 3). To be sure, racism remains problematic in rural communities, and Wuthnow documents evidence of this in the book’s final chapter. Nevertheless, he concludes that “[m]ost people living in rural America are probably no more prone toward bigotry than many people living in suburbs and cities” (158). Instead, Wuthnow argues that we should situate rural folks’ political frustration within their “moral communities,” which—borrowing from the work of Emile Durkheim—he defines as the “local ways of being that govern . . . expectations about ordinary life and support . . . feelings of being at home and doing the right things” (4). In The Left Behind, rural Americans are not a reactionary bunch of hayseeds that have been duped by a demagogic billionaire savior who promises to “Make America Great Again;” rather, most are rational and nuanced people who sincerely love their communities and want what they genuinely believe is best for them. Most rural people feel—and often for legitimate reasons—that their way of life is slipping away, while Washington is simultaneously ignoring them and hastening their demise.

Wuthnow finds that rural people generally harbor immense pride in their home areas. “It was [a] sense of stability and familiarity that captured about as well as anything what a lot of people said they liked about their communities,” he writes (22–23). An attachment to place looms large among rural dwellers, because these are spaces “in which lives had been lived and memories had been born—the space behind the barn where the first cigarette had been smoked, the backyard where Grandma set out a picnic lunch, or . . . the field where [they] worked growing up” (23). Community festivals and a fascination
with local history and heritage are staples of small-town life and reflect this sense of shared pride and unity, though Wuthnow notes that he also saw evidence for the “darker side of togetherness,” which at times meant the exclusion of “others” deemed to be outside mainstream community mores (37–38).

Wuthnow details the real problems facing rural America in the twenty-first century. Most people he interviewed fully recognized that their communities were “falling behind,” which tended to feed into longings for the “good ol’ days” (45, 53). Statistics show that most rural communities are experiencing significant population loss, aging demographics, poor health and healthcare accessibility, educational struggles, and so-called “brain drain,” limited economic opportunities and severe shortages of living-wage jobs, higher rates of teen pregnancy, and growing levels of addiction and drug-related crime. Most rural people Wuthnow talked to are genuinely concerned about these problems. They are usually forthcoming with their thoughts and opinions, and their responses and ideas reflect perceptions that are framed by their moral communities.

Notably, as rural folks grapple with their problems and attempt to maintain their sense of pride, “[t]hey feel demeaned when outsiders look down on them, calling them ‘hicks’ and ‘country bumpkins,’“ writes Wuthnow. “It bothers them to read books and articles casting them as gullible, slow-minded, and eccentric” (59). Contrary to stereotypes of individualistic and fatalistic rural cultures, he finds that rural America is actually “awash” in voluntary associations and local organizations doing good work in striving to make their communities better places to live (80). Local governments, he contends, are also working hard to deal with rural problems and improve residents’ quality of life. But rural communities are more interconnected with and impacted by broader national and international forces than ever before, Wuthnow argues, so these local efforts are often inadequate. “Working with limited effectiveness to address local problems,” he writes, “is often as frustrating as knowing that the problems exist in the first place” (80).

Looking to the federal government for help, though, is mostly out of the question. The days when most rural Americans embraced FDR’s New Deal and the idea that government can—and should—act to mitigate problems are gone. Most tend to agree with Reagan’s claim that “government is not the answer; government is the problem” (95). Wuthnow states that “remarks about the federal government were among the most vehement of any topic we discussed” (96). It was commonplace for respondents to believe that Washington is rigged to serve urban and “special” interests, while it ignores rural
communities’ needs in flyover country. They feel that they are getting virtually nothing from a “wasteful” federal government, and believe Washington is taking from them more than its fair share—primarily through high taxes, the unnecessary and bothersome “red tape” of bureaucracies like the USDA, and the harmful impositions of agencies such as the EPA. But it is more than just pure economics, says Wuthnow: “Washington represents an affront to the moral obligations rural people believe are not only right and good but also sensible . . . [and] is a threat because it is big and powerful and because its way of thinking is fundamentally alien” (110). Hence, national conservative media outlets appeal widely to rural people’s deep frustrations and provide much of the vocabulary for expressing their outrage—but the resentments, according to Wuthnow, are truly their own and stem from the frames of mind constructed by their local moral communities.

Moral communities offer rural people both diagnoses and prescriptions. “[D]ishonest dealings in Washington,” “the sexual promiscuity portrayed by Hollywood,” “pornography on the Internet,” and “crude language on television,” many believe, are all strands of the same dangerous DNA of the “Alligators in the Swamp” that are devouring their communities and way of life (116–17). Above all, Wuthnow found that rural Americans are overwhelmingly convinced that the primary root of their problems is America’s rapid moral decline. Nostalgia for a mythical Mayberry-like past often combines with longstanding Christian cultural hegemony in much of rural America to call for a return to “prayer and Bible reading and teaching the Ten Commandments in public schools and opening community events with prayer” (121).

Abortion tops the list of moral issues for most rural Americans. Though Wuthnow found some nuance in opinions, no one he interviewed “felt abortion was not a moral issue” (129). “I preach about abortion as a theological issue,” one minister in Texas told him, “[so] I don’t have to turn around then and say vote Republican” (126). Religiosity is central to understanding this hot-button issue, and Wuthnow explains that rural people generally see abortion more broadly as women negating their personal responsibility, which stands as an ethical pillar of rural moral communities. Opposition to homosexuality and gay marriage is also more common in rural than urban communities, though, unlike with abortion, Wuthnow saw some evidence that older views are gradually moderating on this issue as rural folks—most of whom now personally know someone who is gay—consider new ideas. Again, religion is important here, and Wuthnow suggests that scholars and pundits ought to take more seriously how “[r]eligion is part of the moral warp and
woof of where [rural people] live, which means that supporting it is understandably in their self-interest” (139). Looking closer at religion and how local moral communities frame people’s political priorities, Wuthnow contends, ought to challenge Thomas Frank’s claim in *What’s the Matter with Kansas?* (2004) that rural Americans are voting against their own interests—which Frank defined more narrowly as economic.

Rural Americans’ presumed bigotry against immigrants has been held up as a decisive political force that put Donald Trump in the White House, but Wuthnow finds what he believes are important nuances, including some surprisingly positive views of Hispanics in several rural communities. Still, surveys of rural whites reveal significant alarm about undocumented immigrants, which Wuthnow indicates is probably a reflection of how playing by the rules is so highly valued in rural moral communities. While national surveys show significant anti-Muslim sentiments, the differences between rural and urban whites’ views are not all that substantial, even though the anti-Islamic rhetoric of many Christian fundamentalists often rings more loudly in rural communities due to a near “absence of proactive steps by pluralistic Christian groups to facilitate greater understanding and respect for Muslims” (150).

Likewise, anti-black racism remains alive and well in rural America, though Wuthnow’s interviews suggest that much of this is fueled by longstanding stereotypes linking African Americans to entitlement programs that many believe shirk the notions of personal responsibility they hold so dear. “I don’t mind helping people who are willing to help themselves,” one respondent told him, “[b]ut just because you’re over here or you’re that color, or this or that, I don’t think the government just owes you something because you know how to beat the system” (153). Again, these kinds of bigoted views and expressions, says Wuthnow, largely emanate from a strong sense of decline shaped by rural moral communities. “When communities feel threatened,” writes Wuthnow, “they are not above reassuring themselves by seeking scapegoats”—though this holds true whether these communities are rural, urban, or suburban (158).

There is much to commend in Wuthnow’s strategy of “listening” and attempting to see his rural interviewees’ political sentiments through the prism of their local moral communities. *The Left Behind* lets us hear from rural people who, for the most part, rationalize their thoughts and ideas, however blatantly wrongheaded they may be to those of us living in more liberal moral communities. Wuthnow documents plenty of outlandish hyperbole and disgusting racism, but he argues convincingly that the roots of rural political rage run much deeper than bigotry against nonwhites. Moreover, although
national conservative media plays a significant role in stoking and articulating expressions of their frustrations, the rural folks of Wuthnow’s study are not a mass of dimwitted rubes simply marching to the drums of Sean Hannity and Rush Limbaugh. Instead, we see real reasons for real frustrations. The moral communities in which rural people live out their daily lives inform them as they navigate and witness these problems, shape discussions and ideas as exchanged between neighbors, and offer solutions that make sense in their worlds. Washington, a sizeable rural majority believes, has both forgotten them—except for when it looks down its nose at them—and, through its sheer bigness, incomprehensibility, and favoritism toward “special interests,” is wrecking their hopes and dreams.

Despite its potential to raise more awareness and empathy for rural Americans, Wuthnow’s study is mostly devoid of historical understanding, which could have helped him drill much deeper and address a big piece missing from the puzzle. What forces construct and maintain the sensibilities of these moral communities in the first place that convince rural people that Washington is the bad guy and “moral decline” is the crux of all that is wrong? Other than noting that moral communities are built and developed by local institutions, events, relationships, and routines, Wuthnow does not tell us much at all about how the prevalent norms, expectations, and political viewpoints have come to be and thrive. Readers may even be left with the impression that anti-government ideas and the discourse of moral decline that emerge from these moral communities are somehow interminable components etched into an exceptional rural culture. But history suggests that the particular sensibilities of moral communities in a given period of time are ephemeral and are determined to one extent or another by historically complex experiences and forces. For instance, why did widespread rural frustration during America’s first Gilded Age of the late nineteenth century and then during the Great Depression of the 1930s often lend itself to the more proactive, pro-government politics of Populism and support for the New Deal? Why is that not mirrored in today’s opinions? Aside from noting the difference between politics in those eras and the strong anti-government sentiments of today, Wuthnow offers no historical insights into how and why things changed over time (95, 100–101, 113). He makes significant connections between rural religious culture and anti-government politics—and rightly so—but fundamentalist and evangelical Christianity also have rich histories in some progressive political traditions. So we need a deeper, historical understanding of the rural moral communities that play the determining role in Wuthnow’s study.
Historical context should help us to see and ponder what I think is central to the shaping of political discourse in rural moral communities: the dynamics of rural political economy and wielding of local power. We ought to consider whose voices carry the most weight—and why—in coffee shop conversations, at workplaces, at local farm bureau meetings, in church sermons and Bible study groups, in local political campaigns and elections, and on Facebook and Twitter. Wuthnow notes that “the top 1 percent in towns under 25,000 people earn five times the median amount on average, while approximately 25 percent of the households have incomes less than half the median amounts” (33). But he never connects this inequality—and the real-life interests, distribution of power, and dependencies that stem from it—to the formation and dissemination of political identities in rural moral communities.

The rural history of my home region, the Arkansas Ozarks, may be an instructive example. Prior to World War II, when small family farms still dominated the rural political economy, local and regional farmers’ unions and hundreds of small country churches gave life to moral communities that championed populist egalitarian politics, which often competed aggressively with the more conservative pro-business, anti-democratic, and “states’ rights” ideas promoted by many agricultural and business elites. The postwar collapse of small farm economies largely dismantled these local populist institutions amid massive rural-to-urban outmigration. Then, in-migration by comfortable and conservative retirees and others from the urban and suburban Midwest helped to forge powerful political coalitions with local elites in the second half of the twentieth century that advanced the region’s new economy based on agribusiness, light industry, and tourism—all of which hinged on low taxes and cheap labor. This conservative coalition of comparatively well-to-do rural folks leveraged their power in local political economies and institutions (i.e., churches, local newspapers and radio, farm bureau organizations, discussions in local restaurants and workplaces, etc.) to dominate new moral communities that blamed the reform agendas of “big government liberals” for rural troubles. Religious culture remained central to the local moral community, of course, but the dominant political sensibilities had changed with the redistribution of power to conservatives in local institutions that accompanied the new rural political economy.

Without similar attention to historical context, Wuthnow’s The Left Behind tells us a good deal about what and how rural Americans are feeling and thinking, but offers less insight into why and where the politics of rage came from.