

# When Democracy Falters: A Multidisciplinary, Multibook Review Essay on Polarization, Populism, and Authoritarianism<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

This multibook review argues that identity-driven polarization interacts with institutional design to erode democratic guardrails. Reading Heather Cox Richardson’s *Democracy Awakening*, Tom Schaller and Paul Waldman’s *White Rural Rage*, and Ezra Klein’s *Why We’re Polarized* through an economist’s lens, I emphasize two claims. First, when institutions fail to deliver broadly shared security and dignity, anti-pluralist projects gain legitimacy and room to maneuver. Second, questions of belonging, citizenship, and the obligations of government to the people are informed by culture and institutional trust. The culture of the United States is not one that lends itself readily to ethnonationalism, but these books make a case for an America that is, and perhaps has always, been divided by notions of who “we” are. I situate the books within the economics literature on populism, polarization, and institutions, and examine what we can learn about rebuilding both prosperity and democratic resilience in the United States.

## I. Overview

Why do people vote against their own economic interests?

Thomas Frank posed this question over two decades ago in *What’s the Matter with Kansas?* (Frank 2004), which explored how Kansas shifted from a hub of agrarian progressivism to a bastion of cultural conservatism—one where working- and middle-class voters prioritize cultural and social issues over pocketbook concerns. Although Frank’s straightforward thesis overlooked many arguably important complexities, his work served as an early warning that culture, identity, and institutional structures were overtaking economic factors at the polls. Today, we face an even starker quandary: why do some voters set aside economic self-interest, but why some appear willing to support leaders and policies that threaten democratic norms themselves?

Leading up to the 2024 election, a wide range of scholarly and popular books (*Democracy Awakening*, *White Rural Rage*, and *Why We Are Polarized*) argued that the United States is slipping toward authoritarianism and offered insights into how and why such a transformation is occurring. Their shared concern is that large segments of voters are willingly relinquishing rights

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and voting against their own economic interests. Their predictions appear prophetic at the end of 2025, as the United States shifts away from a fully democratic government with a market driven economy and an independent central bank toward an authoritarian government with a more top-down approach to the economy and monetary policy.

Each of these books offers a sliver of insight into why this might be happening in the United States, although none offer a comprehensive explanation. This essay explores what we can learn from these books: the path of cultural, identity, and institutional change that the United States has gone down that made this moment possible, if not inevitable. Throughout I attempt to situate them alongside the growing economics literature on populism, polarization, and identity (Guriev and Papaioannou 2022; Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017) and the broader literature on how social cultural, moral, and ethnic differences shape political, economic, and institutional outcomes (Alesina and Giuliano, 2015; Guiso, Sapienza, and Zingales, 2006; Graham, Haidt, and Nosek 2009; Enke, 2019).

It is worth stating at the outset that all three of these books share a common challenge: none of the authors regard the changes they analyze as beneficial. Each of the books is openly biased toward believing that something undesirable is happening. In parsing their contributions, I will attempt to highlight their positive analysis. At the same time, it is important to recognize that many of their critiques rest on normative assessments, most centrally, a belief in a democratic and pluralistic society.

Klein offers an objective lens to ask why we are polarized, but throughout there is an underlying assumption that many people are making mistakes. Similarly, Richardson argues forthrightly that the U.S. faces an authoritarian threat and makes a normative case for liberal democracy. And perhaps the most slanted of the three books is *Rural White Rage*—which might be better described as rage at rural whites, as the authors are not only deeply concerned by shifting American culture, values, and institutions, but place the blame for these changes squarely on the shoulders of rural Americans.

It is hard to be free from bias when you are attempting to analyze and document major historic shifts occurring in your own lifetime. How can even the most dedicated scholars know the extent to which their own hopes and fears and frustrations with the system that they have built a life in are shaping their understanding of the changes that are occurring? Our beliefs are shaped by our individual emotional, ethical, and intellectual experiences and that is one reason we are still grappling with ideas that our forebearers wrestled with centuries ago.

This is made more difficult because citizens of democratic countries rarely embrace a shift to authoritarianism outright. Indeed, many voters in the United States and elsewhere may believe that the threats identified by these authors are overblown. Or they may believe that these are small democratic costs compared to the perceived benefits. These books provide insights into what these perceived benefits might be for those voting in favor of authoritarianism even if the

authors conclude that these perceived benefits are not worth the cost of authoritarianism (and in some case are not really benefits at all).

The breadth of existing scholarship on institutions, ethics, populism, culture, and democracy might prompt one to ask: what more is left to learn? Yet the United States now faces a moment of profound change, one that could reshape its democratic trajectory, and our insights remain surprisingly thin. Why here, when populist and ethno-nationalist movements are stronger elsewhere? Why now, when racial tensions and material deprivation were even greater in earlier decades?

These authors attempt to answer these questions by tracing the social and cultural path that has led to brewing division and resentment among Americans. The America that Alexis de Tocqueville documented was one where the national self-understanding was civic and pluralistic—rooted in a commitment to equality, the absence of tradition, and a willingness to work together in pursuit of a better life. Against that backdrop, the ethno-nationalism and populism that spread across the globe in the early 20th century seemed almost anti-American. Much of what these books are documenting is how divisive, xenophobic, ethnonationalism has grown in a country that once prided itself on being a nation of immigrants. In contrast, the United States no longer appears immune to the modern day rise in nationalistic and authoritarian populism that is gaining in advanced economics around the world. While there is a broader literature looking at these global trends (Guriew and Papaioannou, 2022), these authors help us understand the individual experiences that have led the United States down this path and in doing so shed light on the broader trends.

Each of these books offer insights into why the United States is less sheltered from authoritarian currents than it once was. However, the inevitability of the march toward authoritarianism should not be overstated. The United States is a democracy that often operates near tipping points, where seemingly small events can shape important cultural, institutional, political, and economic outcomes with persistent effects (Lipset and Rokkan, 1967; Mahoney, 2000, 2001; Capoccia and Kelemen, 2007; Acemoglu and Robinson, 2012; Ciccone and Ismailov, 2021). In that sense, these authors should not be read as describing a single highway to autocracy, but instead a rail switchyard—in which small shifts of the lever at critical moments can, and sometimes have, set the country onto a very different track.

In *Democracy in Crisis: Democracy Awakening*, the American historian Heather Cox Richardson takes a broad historical perspective highlighting the tension between democratic ideals and authoritarian impulses. Richardson points to how culture and ideology are rhetorically used to shape public opinion, at times leading voters to support policies that do not align with their economic self-interest. Unlike economists who turn to theory and empirical evidence to find systematic relationships between culture and ideology, Richardson weaves a narrative of the journey of the United States as it has wrestled with who to include in its democratic ideas and

what the role of government should be. She argues that authoritarianism emerges when powerful elites deliberately exploit cultural tensions, misinformation, and historical grievances to undermine democratic institutions and norms. Her concern is primarily about the structural conditions, political tactics, and historical patterns that facilitate authoritarian tendencies, rather than labeling specific groups of voters as responsible.

Richardson's narrative is a reminder that policy lives inside politics—the viability of markets, the fairness of distribution, and the credibility of expertise all depend on democratic institutions strong enough to command trust. Economists have been at the forefront in developing our understanding of the role institutions play (Acemoglu and Robinson, 2012). And yet, by Richardson's telling, institutions are also the battleground on which the ideas about belonging and the role of government are fought. Richardson has become one of the most influential voices on American politics today because of her dispassionate, thoughtful, and engaging approach to highly polarized topics. Her narrative is compelling, yet her streamlined, moral-arc framing leaves out competing interpretations. Her approach as a dispassionate observer of the story can lull the reader into forgetting that there are multiple perspectives in history and other differing yet compelling narratives. What she includes builds a coherent account of democratic backsliding that is hard to ignore. More broadly, her work illustrates Robert Shiller's point that contagious narratives—complete or not—can drive real political and economic behavior (Shiller, 2019).

In *White Rural Rage*, the political scientist Thomas Schaller joined forces with the opinion writer Paul Waldman to assess the evidence that rural white voters are a threat to U.S. democracy. They set out to explore the factors contributing to the stronghold of conservative politics in rural America and examine why many rural Americans vote in ways that may not align with their economic self-interest. Their underlying thesis is that the entrenchment of conservative politics in rural America is largely due to the strategic emphasis on cultural issues. However, Schaller and Waldman's thesis includes a sinister undertone, arguing that conservative leaders and media outlets have successfully framed political discourse around cultural grievances to stoke anger toward anyone who seems different from those in rural communities. The book has both insights and significant shortcomings. Ultimately, it pairs well with Richardson's narrative for why authoritarianism is gaining ground, but it would be more insightful if it brought more empathy to the struggles of rural communities.

In *Why We Are Polarized*, the journalist Ezra Klein combines research from political science and psychology with electoral data to explore political polarization. As in Schaller and Waldman and Richardson's books, Klein points to identity and culture as central to political divisions. Klein's book, however, considers more deeply the role of institutions and media ecosystems in reinforcing identities. He painstakingly documents a shift in modern political identities to more closely align with personal identities using a wide range of research, including that of economists. For example, Klein is clearly deeply familiar with the work of Gentzkow and others

on bias and the media. He references this work to argue that American polarization is driven by a complex interplay of identity, media, and political institutions, rather than being solely attributable to digital media influences.

Of the three books, Klein's is arguably the most broadly researched, tying together findings from a wide range of scholars in a thoughtful and scientific manner. While Klein is a journalist, he approaches questions like a scholar. He sets out to tackle a narrow question that he hopes the data can answer: why are we more polarized than before? And he marshals enough evidence to make a convincing case that the answer is that our political identities are more intertwined with our personal identities than any time in the past. In a world in which work may slowly be taken over by technology, the intermingling of our personal, political, and economic identities may be increasingly important to explore. The evidence that Klein is laying out has broader implications for understanding our relationship with work, communities, and identity as technological change advances.

Together, the three books depict racism as a defining architecture of American society, shaping both its history and its current realities. This is not the racism of contemporary media debates, but a more profound inquiry into the boundaries of belonging—who is recognized as part of the polity, how civic life is organized, and how the allocation of rights and resources often contradicts the nation's self-image.

I place these three books in conversation with earlier political science and history scholarship and with each other. I assess their arguments and evidence on why people sometimes act against material self-interest, how authoritarian ideas have gained traction, and what these patterns imply for economists seeking to remain relevant in shaping policy. Much of what these authors leave unanswered are questions that economists are deep at work trying to answer.

## *II. Democracy in Crisis: Democracy Awakening*

In *Democracy Awakening*, Heather Cox Richardson explores why people vote against their economic self-interest with a lens on the rights afforded by democracy. She explores how elites convince Americans to give away the rights and power of democratic citizenship in favor of “autocrats who inevitably destroy their livelihoods and sometimes execute their neighbors” (p. xi). She takes a broad historical perspective, examining how American democracy has repeatedly been challenged—and sometimes reinvigorated—over time. Drawing on her expertise as a political historian, Richardson identifies pivotal moments when powerful interests, ideological divisions, and shifts in public sentiment threatened the nation's democratic institutions. As in *White Rural Rage* and *Why We Are Polarized*, she underscores how racial resentment has shaped attitudes, coalitions, and outcomes across U.S. history.

Richardson's analytical lens separates authoritarianism from populism. Authoritarianism refers to regimes that, compared with democracy, have fewer checks on executive power, curtailed civil liberties, and limited political competition. Populism, by contrast, describes the rhetoric and justification of power—leaders framing politics as a struggle between “the pure people” and “a

corrupt elite.” Populism can be left or right and can thrive within democracies or autocracies; it is distinct from, not antithetical to, authoritarianism. By her telling, populism is not itself the problem, populism is a tool being used to shift U.S. political institutions and consolidate power.

A core contribution of the book is its treatment of the interaction between culture and institutions. There is a large economics literature arguing that culture and institutions coevolve through feedback loops (Alesina and Giuliano 2015; Bisin and Verdier 2011). Where economists tend to emphasize theory and measurement, Richardson builds a historian’s narrative: American institutions have been the battleground where claims about belonging, power, and distribution are contested. Who counts as “the people”? Who holds authority? How are the gains of a growing nation shared?

These questions have been asked since the founding of America. The United States proclaimed political equality even as it entrenched slavery, with Thomas Jefferson embodying this contradiction as a warrior for egalitarianism and a slave owner. Alexis de Tocqueville warned that the racism required to rationalize slavery posed a fundamental threat to American democratic ideals. The challenge De Tocqueville saw was how America would integrate the end of slavery, the racist views that allowed it, and a democracy built on egalitarianism. Jefferson himself anticipated this problem. In *Notes on the State of Virginia: Query XIV* (1787), Jefferson argued that the emancipation of slaves should be paired with their removal from the United States. His argument was that an attempt at integration would ultimately end in violent conflict because of the combination of “deep rooted prejudices” held by white Americans and the “ten thousand recollections..[by former slaves] of the injuries they have sustained.”

*Democracy Awakening* documents the attempts at integration, both racial integration and the attempted integration or co-existence of competing visions of American democracy. Richardson brings a historian’s narrative to argue that the United States is experiencing an authoritarian challenge rooted in long-running struggles over who counts in the democracy. In her telling the struggle is fueled by both the end of slavery and with the emergence of greater taxing authority by the federal government. Together, voting in the United States comes to have more direct implications for one’s economic interests. While the wartime federal income tax of 1861 ended a few years after the war, it triggered an economic struggle that continues to this day both in terms of federal taxation and for whom those resources should be spent. Richardson emphasizes the latter struggle—focusing on the struggles over expanding the circle of belonging and dismantling racial hierarchy.

An alternative story can be told of a national struggle whose catalyst was simply rage at unfair taxation. A battle over tariffs began almost immediately with the founding of the nation and continued throughout the 1800s, with recurring tariff fights centered on belonging and sharing across regions—the export-oriented South was not interested in propping up industrializing Northern cities (Irwin, 2020). Such debates over whether federal government tariff rules should be used to hand-pick winners and losers subsided for much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century but have returned to American political debate with the intensity of the earlier eras.

Richardson’s focus however is on the federal income tax, the debate over which began in 1815 when the Treasury Secretary urged Congress to pass an income tax. Congress refused. In 1861, the Revenue Act created first federal income tax, which was quickly repealed. The Wilson-

Gorman Tariff Act of 1894 reintroduced a federal income tax, but it was struck down almost immediately by the Supreme Court. Congress, with the support of the states, finally settled the issue by ratifying the sixteenth amendment giving the federal government the right to enact an income tax. Even that was challenged in court several times and while it was upheld by the Supreme Court in 1916, there remain a small group of Americans who believe that a federal income tax goes against the founders' intentions. One could argue that President Trump, by raising tariffs and lowering income taxes is continuing the battle over federal taxation that began more than 200 years ago.

In Richardson's telling, race is intertwined with economics—the frustration is not only over the act of taxing, but to whom the spoils will be delivered. Society involves cooperation and sharing to some degree and disputes over with whom we should cooperate and share is a fundamental crack in American democracy. While economists might hear socialism and imagine an economic system, she argues that the word socialism in the United States means something different. It is not, she argues, the socialism of Marx and Engels. Richardson argues that Americans used, and continue to use, socialism to mean redistribution, particularly to people deemed unworthy of fully participating in the American democracy. During reconstruction white men opposed black men voting based on their low incomes and the potential economic redistribution that could occur. Giving black men the right to vote was seen as being tantamount to “redistribution of wealth from white men to Black people, who wanted something for nothing” (p. 27).

The idea that allowing formerly enslaved men to vote was a redistribution from white taxpayers to black citizens lies underneath modern-day notions of racial redistribution that are often at odds with empirical evidence. Branding equal political rights as “socialism” made an economic argument out of a desire to preserve a racial hierarchy. This move—equating inclusion with confiscation—reappears across the subsequent century in battles over voting, education, housing, and social insurance.

From this vantage point, the book contends that today's democratic crisis “began in the 1930s” (p. 3). The New Deal simultaneously expanded the federal government's role and—however unevenly—opened its benefits to groups historically excluded. That dual expansion, of state capacity and the circle of belonging, intensified long-standing tensions. Richardson recounts that moment was when conservatives began to carve out a position that a government “that answered to the needs of ordinary Americans was a dangerous, radical experiment” (p. 3). This self-conscious “conservative” identity arose in reaction to New Deal ambitions. These arguments cohere with those made by economists and political scientists who have shown that racial attitudes and racial and ethnic fragmentation are robust predictors of lower support for redistribution and public goods (Alesina, Alberto, Reza Baqir, and William Easterly. 1999; Alesina, Glaeser, Sacerdote, 2001; Luttmer, 2001; Habyarimana et al, 2007).

Richardson jumps forward to the present, back to the New Deal, and back to the late 1800s to build the case that authoritarianism and violence have arisen with each effort to widen the circle of belonging. In the 1930s, businessmen who were being pressed by the costs of New Deal labor and workplace regulations looked to European fascism for guidance in winning over the populace to their ideology. She argues that conservatives learned “Get people fighting first and they can be led toward right-wing politics next” (p. 112). Recent political violence in the United States can be traced directly from these lessons learned a century ago—reinforcing the political

economy idea of culture being passed along in conversation with institutions across generations. Throughout the book, she builds a case that Americans have been using violence and anger to spur a movement away from a democracy that includes minorities, immigrants, and women.

The New Deal had its roots in reform, but the government's role in the economy continued to grow in the 1930s and 1940s as Keynesian ideas took hold. This matured into what is known as the postwar liberal consensus: a cross-party acceptance of a mixed-economy welfare state at home and anti-communist, internationalist commitments abroad. The Employment Act of 1946 formalized Washington's responsibility for maximum employment, growth, and price stability and created the Council of Economic Advisers, reflecting bipartisan endorsement of Keynesian stabilization. Both parties preserved—and sometimes expanded—Social Security and related programs; Republican President Dwight D. Eisenhower backed increases in the minimum wage and supported low-income housing. The G.I. Bill fueled higher education and homeownership, even as discriminatory implementation limited its benefits for many black Americans. From Truman's landmark Presidential report *To Secure These Rights* (1947) forward, federal commitments to civil rights grew—haltingly and unevenly—placing new stresses on the consensus.

By the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Richardson argues, the idea that government can be a force for good was not considered radical. Federal intervention stabilized markets, supported working families, and fostered a robust middle class. She calls it a bipartisan consensus born out of the New Deal, World War II mobilization, and post-war prosperity. The mid-20th-century partnership between government and business allowed families to thrive, but it began to fall apart in the late 1960s and 1970s. The rise of the New Left in the 1960s and growing racial turmoil led to the rising political star of Reagan who became Governor of California and to President Nixon. Both of these conservative politicians used college students, “Black and Brown Americans and other “special interests” who Nixon's team insisted, wanted a redistribution of wealth so that they wouldn't have to work” (p. 44).

The rising divisions and partisanship was partially behind the Watergate scandal per Richardson's tell: “Nixon had so internalized his own division of the nation into good and bad Americans that he became convinced that he must win the election to save America” (p. 47). This description has a haunting familiarity to modern political rhetoric in the United States.

These challenges were then further fueled by the economic difficulties of the 1970s: inflation, a productivity slowdown, energy shocks, and growing concern about regulatory burdens. The interaction of the inflation of the 1970s and a progressive tax system with nominal tax brackets led to growing frustration with an economy that wasn't working for families and a government that seemed bloated at best and dangerous at worst. The conservative movement capitalized on these frustrations, reframing the federal role as overreach, even theft. In Richardson's account, this ideological shift fused with racial backlash to recast “big government” as both economically harmful and culturally threatening, especially to white Southerners and rural voters. The result, she argues, was a durable politics that linked identity and grievance to hostility toward the very institutions that had underwritten mid-century prosperity.

Richardson particularly points to the Federal intervention to dismantle segregation and expand voting rights as triggering a backlash from Americans (especially white Southerners) who

viewed these measures as government overreach. By the late 1970s and early 1980s, conservative leaders had successfully reframed government activism as harmful, undermining decades of bipartisan acceptance of a strong federal role. In their telling, the balance between regulation and innovation had tipped too far and was hindering progress. A narrative that has shaped American conservative politics ever since.

Two themes run through the book: belonging and power. Who is “in” the polity, with full rights and voice? And who has the capacity to shape the rules? Richardson argues that the United States is experiencing an authoritarian turn rooted in long-running fights over inclusion. The present danger is not just rhetorical populism but the weakening of guardrails—independent courts, free media, professional civil service—that prevent temporary majorities (or well-organized minorities) from entrenching power.

Reading Richardson through an economist’s lens clarifies what is often obscured in “voting against self-interest” narratives. First, economic interests are plural: people care about material outcomes *and* the process—fairness, status, recognition—by which outcomes are reached. Voters frequently prioritize the means (who decides, who benefits, whether the process is dignified and impartial) as much as the ends. Second, markets cannot be separated from the political and social institutions in which they operate. Economists commonly argue that policies like free trade yield net benefits that could compensate the losers. But compensation requires capable, legitimate, and trusted institutions. When institutions are weak, captured, or distrusted, compensation rarely materializes—discrediting the promise of technocratic policy.

As Fiona Scott Morton (2024) argues in her review of Acemoglu and Johnson’s *Power and Progress*, innovation and productivity gains translate into broad-based welfare only through effective governance. The same holds for the looming questions around AI: whether society benefits depends less on the technology’s frontier potential than on democratic institutions’ ability to steer diffusion, set rules, and share gains. Without robust, accountable democracy, the capacity to distribute benefits fairly—and to weigh costs like environmental harm or community dislocation—diminishes. Worse, populist or authoritarian governments may dismiss expertise altogether, imposing tariffs, undermining climate policy, or tampering with monetary institutions for short-term or identity-driven reasons.

Richardson’s story resonates with arguments in Jacob Hacker and Paul Pierson’s *American Amnesia* (2016): mid-century prosperity was built by public and private sectors working together, and forgetting that partnership undermines shared growth. Where Hacker and Pierson assess the payoffs of that model, Richardson focuses on how and why it fractured—through racialized backlash, strategic elite mobilization, and institutional erosion. Together, these works suggest that rebuilding prosperity and democratic legitimacy requires rebuilding the state’s capacity and the public’s sense of reciprocal obligation.

Richardson aligns with Schaller and Waldman in highlighting rural political mobilization as a central force in today’s conflicts. Yet she also insists that responsibility does not rest with voters alone. Elites repeatedly exploit vulnerabilities in democratic culture and design to channel economic anxiety and cultural grievance into anti-democratic outcomes. American institutions—malapportionment in the Senate, gerrymandered districts, and the outsized role of money in politics—amplify these strategies by enabling durable anti-majoritarian results. The consequence

is a polity in which a shrinking coalition can entrench power while claiming to speak for “the people.”

### III. *Rural Voters as a “Threat”: White Rural Rage*

In *Rural White Rage*, the authors Schaller and Waldman’s main thesis is at its heart a belief that white rural voters present a unique threat to democracy. In the prologue they say this succinctly: “rural Whites are the least committed to our system” and as a result “democracy is threatened by a White rural minority that wields outsize electoral power” (pages 5-6). Indeed Chapter 1 is titled “essential minority, existential threat”. In this chapter they lay out four problems with rural Whites. The first is “racism, xenophobia, anti-urban disdain, and anti-immigrant sentiment”. The second is “acceptance of conspiracies as facts”. The third is “undemocratic and anti-democratic beliefs” and the fourth is that they are not only violent, but they believe in the “justification of violence”.

There are two problems with these theses. The first is that the data simply does not support a clear-cut finding that those in rural areas are a homogenous voting group distinct from those in urban areas. The second is that their own barely concealed disdain for these voters adds legitimacy to the complaint of rural voters that elites disdain them.

The first problem is empirical. In any study of differences that focus on place, a coherent set of definitions must be determined. There is more than one acceptable way to define rural and the authors themselves acknowledge in an authors’ note that definitions vary across researchers, institutions, and even “how Americans self-describe their residency” (p. 252). This creates challenges for a book whose central thesis is that the problem is the actions of rural people. They abdicate their scholarly responsibility to define what they mean by rural, arguing instead that they “remained agnostic” (p. 252) on the definition.

This problem was pointed out by many reviewers including scholars that the book cites (Jacobs, 2024; Harper, 2024). As one political scientist told *The Atlantic* “This book amounts to a poor amalgamation of disparate literatures designed to fit a preordained narrative” (Harper, 2024). Schaller and Waldman reported “the categories and definitions that each pollster, scholar, or researcher used.” Since these definitions often differ, there is no consistent group of people on whom they are testing their thesis. Instead, they cobble together a picture of “rural” people by assembling facts about people who live in disparate communities, with disparate demographics, norms, and often beliefs to paint a picture of the type of person they argue is threatening to erode democracy.

When the authors refer to rural people are they talking about a social identity or the density of the location in which they live? Which matters and why? It is quite possible that even with more

precise measurement of the attitudes and actions of rural, white people the data would show that they are more likely to hold racist views and be more opposed to immigration. They may be more susceptible to believing conspiracies as facts. They may hold a less developed understanding, and thus support for, democratic principles. And they may be more inclined to use and believe in violence. But even so, “more likely” does not mean “all rural voters”. And it’s not even clear that the driving force behind those views is whiteness or ruralness. Why not focus on education? On income? On a sense of purpose or meaning? On family? On religion?

The challenge with exclaiming that it is rural voters that pose a problem is that rural voters are not evenly aligned and these scholars, like populist leaders, are attempting to create an us-versus-them divide when these are simply not two homogenous, antagonist groups. Populism can be defined as creating a narrative that separates society into “two homogenous, antagonist groups: ‘the pure people’ and ‘the corrupt elite’” (Guriev and Papaioannou, 2022; Muddle and Kaltwasser, 2017). Schaller and Waldman are describing the people putting American democracy at risk by embracing populism, and yet, they are in the process spinning a populist narrative with urbanities and academic elites as “the pure people” while the “corrupt people” are the rural white racist voters. For example, Schaller and Waldman argue that white rural people embrace conspiracy theories. As they marshal evidence for this claim they point to the fact that 47% of rural Americans polled agreed that the election was stolen compared to 30 percent of those in suburban areas and 22 percent of those in urban areas (p. 174). They state “These regional differences are statistically significant.” (p. 254). But as any first-year graduate student in economics hopefully learns, statistical significance tells us about the precision of the estimate not about its significance in understanding the world. The majority of people did not think that the election was stolen and that is true in urban and rural areas. Or to look more directly at voting patterns, nearly two-thirds of white voters without a college degree voted for Trump in the past three elections and one-third did not.

This is not to say that there is nothing to be learned from their theses or even that they are wrong to highlight racial and geographic differences in attitudes about politics. Voters in urban areas vote for the democratic candidate by wide margins, while voters in rural areas vote for the Republican candidate by wide margins. But the different outcome of the 2024 from that in 2020 did not hinge on this distinction (Hartig, et al, 2025). Trump gained share in urban areas in 2024 compared to 2016. And it was the large shift of black voters, particularly black men, and Hispanic voters toward President Trump in 2024 that cemented his victory.

There are clearly differences between rural and urban communities. Education rates are higher in urban areas compared to rural areas. Incomes are higher in urban areas, particularly among the highly educated. Marriage, divorce, parenting, and poverty all play out differently in rural versus urban settings. Rural women have more teen pregnancies, have children younger, marry younger, marry more often, and yet are more likely to be single parents and more likely to divorce

(Brown, et al, 2025; Daniels, et al, 2018; Livingston, 2018). Schaller and Waldman would have been better able to make their case if they had looked more carefully at these differences in the lived experiences of rural white people to understand what is driving their frustration.

Instead, their resentment of these voters is palpable both on the written page and in the tone of the audio version (the narrator of the audio version of the book is an actor whose reading is thick with disdain). In discussing how rural voters embraced Trump and rejected Clinton, the authors write “White rural voters don’t actually demand that candidates be like them, come from where they come from, have a deep appreciation for their lives and their concerns, or sincerely want to help them.” Instead, they argue, rural voters turned to Trump because he joined them in their hatred of elites and validated their sense that they “deserve to feel this way” and that they were right to hate people who try to make them “feel bad for being White and being a man and being American” (pages 129-131). On the one hand there is a group of voters for whom this is true and they are more likely to live in rural or suburban areas. But perhaps the more important question is not addressed by Schaller and Waldman: why do these messages resonate so strongly with these voters.

Schaller and Waldman thesis is in many ways an extension of the thesis explored in *What’s the Matter with Kansas*. Frank (2004), as discussed earlier, first posed the question of what leads people away from pocketbook issues. The answer Frank lays out begins with Republicans redefining the heartland as the moral center of the nation—its people bound by faith, family, and hard work. In his account, conservatives persuaded many working- and middle-class voters that defending those cultural ideals mattered more than pursuing material self-interest. Hard work, even with low pay, is not something to fight against, but rather part of the puritan work ethic that defines the American heartland.

Frank’s telling is a more sympathetic explanation of communities seeking to preserve the values they believe define a good life and a just society. Meaning, after all, matters as much as material gain in shaping political behavior. The Japanese concept of *Ikigai*—a “reason for being” that blends purpose, belonging, and daily satisfaction—offers a useful lens. *Ikigai* emphasizes participation in community, relationships, and small acts of contribution; it is not static happiness but a sense of progress through purposeful engagement (Kamiya 1966). In this light, the heartland voters Frank described were not merely “voting against their economic interests” but defending a worldview that locates dignity in work, faith, and community—the very sources of their *Ikigai*.

Rural communities were at one time bustling centers of American *Ikigai*. The anxieties of many Americans—in both rural and non-rural areas—reflect real changes. Rural areas have had population loss, church closures, school consolidations, and job loss that have all combined to reduce their sense of control in their communities (Parker et al, 2018). The sociologist Robert

Wuthnow writes compellingly in *The Left Behind: Decline and Rage in Rural America* about the anxieties these changes have provoked in rural people (Wuthnow 2018). In his work, he avoids political binaries, instead focusing on the values held in rural community—values like responsibility, order, and community—that are increasingly difficult to maintain and how those challenges have left those in rural communities feeling morally abandoned.

Recognizing that pursuit of meaning complicates the economic story helps explain why appeals to identity and belonging have proved so politically potent, and why efforts to rebuild the social contract must speak to purpose as well as prosperity. And yet, the idea that rural communities are the “heartland” where meaning, family, and community once thrived is criticized by Schaller and Waldman as romanticizing of rural communities. They refer to the “incessant veneration of rural White culture and values as somehow superior to those of almost every other group of Americans” (p.15). This is where a discussion of rural social identity versus place would have been quite useful rather than dismissing the true longing for small town life that many people feel. Every year the Hallmark channel tops the charts with a clichéd story about a big-city woman returning to small-town home and finding love, fulfillment, and meaning (Fitzgerald, 2021). The recipe works for Hallmark year after year partially because small towns connote authenticity, continuity, and community.

There is certainly some truth that Americans “reflexively” praise rural, small-town life as Schaller and Waldman claim, there are overlaps in values and culture. Pew found that 41% of people in rural areas thought that their values were similar to those in urban areas, while 46% of people in urban areas say that people in rural areas share their values. Just like throughout the book, these statistics can be interpreted as highlighting either similarities or differences. Most people in rural (and urban) areas don’t think that they share the values of the other and that view is even more likely to be held in rural areas. And more than two-fifths of people do think that they share the values of the other. But the group of people who perceive shared values are too large to be ignored and must be an important part of the story.

Abandonment like that described in Wuthnow’s *The Left Behind* can create resentment and anger, which is the focus of the lens that Schaller and Waldman take to the problem. Their interpretation is much more sinister—it is not wholesome values, but racism, rage, and homophobia that animates white rural voters and leads them to vote against their own economic interests. Schaller and Waldman take the position that uniting behind a common enemy is a force greater than that of one’s own economic or even cultural self-interest. Rural white voters may have been abandoned and left behind, but now they want to burn the whole place down, so everyone shares in their pain. The politics of cultural backlash is one of resentment-driven politics that are a threat to multicultural democracy.

Another, far more generous interpretation was offered by sociologist Arlie Hochschild in *Strangers in Their Own Land* (Hochschild 2016). She too documents resentment-driven political views as she attempts to understand the Tea Party movement. She calls vocal opposition to government by the very people who need it a “Great Paradox.” Like Schaller and Waldman, she points to white people, particularly those in rural areas, who have come to believe that “others” are getting help at their expense. While Schaller and Waldman highlight empirical data on attitudes, Hochschild uses ethnographic, person-by-person listening to describe what policies feel like to people and why those feelings can override material calculus. The subtle difference here is that anger is not a deep hatred of a common enemy, but a sense that someone is cutting in line in front of them. If America is doing well economically and they are not, then who is?

Consider the experience of boys growing up in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. By middle school, they often see girls pulling ahead academically and socially. Boys are more than twice as likely to face disciplinary consequences such as suspension and expulsion as girls (U.S. Department of Education, 2023). Girls graduate from high school at higher rates and even among graduates are more likely to go immediately on to college. Girls outperform boys in college and pursue graduate degrees at higher rates. Yet even as many young men watch their female peers excel, they also hear constant messages about gender discrimination and how male behavior has contributed to an unequal playing field for women.

The challenge is that many of the biases facing women are subtle, cumulative, and often invisible to those who do not experience them directly. Meanwhile, young men may see female peers outperforming them and increasingly encountering women who outearn them as the overall gender wage gap has narrowed substantially among young workers. Taken together, many young men have grown up immersed in conversations about gender inequality without personally witnessing its effects. To some, these efforts toward gender equity can feel as though they are being left behind. For young men being left behind like those in rural areas, the success of the women in their high school classes can, unfortunately, breed resentment.

This is not to suggest that gender discrimination has disappeared—it has not—or that the push to eliminate it has gone too far—it has not. But gender inequality compounds over time, like a snowball gathering mass as it rolls downhill. For those seeing only its early stages, the problem may seem small or even invisible. The challenge for boys is not competition from women, minorities, or immigrants. Rather, it is the sense of unfairness and dislocation that arises when the story society tells about privilege and disadvantage feels disconnected from their own lived experience. That feeling, however misplaced, poses a real challenge for educators, policymakers, and society at large.

The anger that Schaller and Waldman documents is real and deserves attention wherever it arises. That it is more pronounced in rural areas does not make those communities a threat; rather, it underscores the structural and cultural forces fueling their discontent. In recent work,

the political scientists Jacob Hacker and Paul Pierson argue that right-wing populism around the globe is being driven by “the rise of the knowledge economy” and that explains why it also has a “strong geographic dimension” (Hacker and Pierson, 2025). Rural areas are being left out of an economy that is being built on knowledge and creative based services, while cities are thriving. It is this growing gap that they say is cleaving voters.

Hacker and Pierson note that this “geospatial divide mirrors and motivates many others, cleaving voters across lines of education, occupation, race, ethnicity, religion, age, and immigration status.” In offering advice for politicians attempting to get these voters to focus on pocketbook issues, Hacker and Pierson note that such “policies should reinforce a sense of dignity and status tied to democratic citizenship.” Schaller and Waldman, however, fall into the trap of treating voter anger itself as the problem rather than as a symptom of deeper structural change. By moralizing about the anger instead of engaging with its sources, they risk turning polarization into a self-fulfilling prophecy.

#### *IV. Partisan Identity over Interest: Why We Are Polarized*

Ezra Klein’s *Why We Are Polarized* stakes out a middle ground: more scholarly than punditry to assessing the partisanship and polarization that is characterizing post-Great Recession American political views. Drawing on political science, psychology, and electoral data, Klein argues that contemporary polarization is powered by group identity—racial, religious, cultural, geographic, and ideological—and by the way those identities have come to align almost seamlessly with party labels. Although Klein is a journalist, his craft is synthesis: he distills complex literatures into a clear account of how readily humans form in-groups and out-groups. Belonging, he argues, is not an incidental feature of politics; it is the point. The human brain, he argues, wants to belong.

The familiar “football” metaphor captures his insight. We pick a team and then define ourselves against its rival. As a professor at a large football university, I see how visceral that loyalty can be—think Ohio versus Michigan—sometimes spilling over into the sort of excess Schaller and Waldman associate with rural rage. Klein’s deeper question, however, is not why people join teams but why their political team has fused with their personal identity.

Historically, parties were coalitions broad enough to contain real disagreement; neighbors who looked alike and lived alike often divided over policy without rupturing social ties. When political views were connected to policy preferences people with similar identities and in the same community could, and did, hold differing policy views. But culture, society, and institutions have evolved in ways that confound policy dispute with personal identity. Parties have realigned along personal attributes like race, religion, geography, and education. The result

is stronger emotional attachment, higher hostility toward the other side, and politics that feels existential rather than negotiable.

Like Richardson and Schaller and Waldman, Klein builds a case for cultural and institutional changes having shifted many citizens' focus from material welfare to status, belonging, and social meaning. People increasingly adopt policy stances based on partisan identity rather than rational calculations of self-interest, explaining why voters might support politicians whose platforms seem contrary to their material well-being.

In Klein's telling, polarization is not merely ideological; it is psychological and structural. The consequences spill far beyond actual policy preferences or politics. Partisanship has led to intensified conflicts that are emotional and difficult to reconcile. Today, only 8% of married couples are made up of one Republican and one Democrat. A pair like the fictional Archie and Edith Bunker of 1970s television fame would likely struggle to make their marriage a success today. Indeed, political polarization is causing dating and family formation challenges for today's youth. Most young women want political agreement in a romantic relationship (53%) compared to 42% of young men. Perhaps not surprisingly then fewer than are confident that they will have kids and only 53% are confident that they will get married. (Harvard IOP Youth Poll; Spring 2025). More broadly, the Survey Center on American Life found that 73% of single college-educated women stated that they would be less likely to date someone if they were a Trump supporter (Cox and Hammond, 2025).

Media systems intensify the dynamic: social platforms and cable news amplify provocative voices, create echo chambers, and algorithmically feed identity-affirming content. Gender gaps in political views intersect with divergent media diets, widening the space between young men and women who are not seeing the same stories—or even the same country. As competing narratives harden, Americans lose a shared account of who “we” are. In Klein's telling the circle of belonging is not expanding or contracting, it is separating.

Those narratives are often mirror images. Where Richardson emphasizes expanding circles of belonging, many conservatives hear a story of a nation under siege—by “invaders” and by citizens who, in their view, do not carry their weight in the social compact. In an earlier era, shared civic spaces and a more limited media environment forced narrative blending; today's digital architectures foster narrative collision. Declining social trust and weakened communal ties deepen the divide.

A quarter-century ago, Robert Putnam's *Bowling Alone* chronicled the erosion of civic life: fewer clubs and congregations, thinner neighborhood ties, more isolation (Putman 2000). The result has been a crisis of loneliness that politics is ill-equipped to heal. Many Americans now turn to media—broadcast, streaming, and social—to find community, opting into like-minded groups that reinforce prior beliefs. Newer technologies add another twist: interactions with

chatbots and parasocial online “companions” can create intense feedback loops that soothe anxieties while further reducing incentives to engage across difference offline.

Klein connects these cultural shifts to institutional dynamics. Identity-driven sorting produces self-reinforcing feedback: people cluster in communities, congregations, workplaces, and media ecosystems that align with their party identity; distrust of the other party grows; compromise becomes harder because disagreements feel like threats to selfhood. In that environment, anger and performative partisanship thrive—and the readiness to see political opponents as enemies becomes less shocking than routine.

In essence, Klein demonstrates how identity-based polarization shaped by demographic change, religious decline, and transformation in family structure has come to define contemporary American politics. His analysis underscores that polarization is not merely ideological but deeply social: it is rooted in where people live, whom they marry, and how they find meaning. Anger and violent partisanship have grown in the United States alongside an epidemic of loneliness and anxiety. With fewer people connected to families, faith communities, or civic organizations, many Americans turn to politics as a primary source of belonging and identity. In this vacuum, political affiliation has taken on the emotional weight once carried by religion or community, amplifying both tribalism and distrust.

A thread tying these books together is the role of racism and fears of lost status in producing votes that look, at first glance, “against interest,” and in normalizing authoritarian temptations. Schaller and Waldman argue that rural communities—struggling with poor health, economic stagnation, and social despair—are especially vulnerable to appeals that fuse identity grievance with anti-democratic rhetoric, including racism, xenophobia, conspiracy, and a willingness to endorse violence. Klein’s framework helps explain why such appeals resonate: They activate deeply felt identities in a context where social belonging is fragile and meaning is scarce. At the same time, it is a mistake to treat this as a purely rural phenomenon. The data Schaller and Waldman marshal show that the most extreme attitudes exist across regions; recent election polling underscores that authoritarian sympathies are racially and geographically diverse, not confined to any single zip code.

Klein does not end in despair. He proposes institutional repairs—electoral reforms that reduce zero-sum incentives, and media restructuring that rewards bridge-building over outrage—to blunt identity-based division. Whether or not one endorses his specific proposals, the impulse is constructive: change the rules and incentives to change the behavior.

What these books largely underplay is how profoundly American family life has changed, and how those changes interact with polarization. Lifestyle patterns limit cross-class and cross-partisan contact: in many schools, children of highly educated mothers have mothers 10–15 years older than their classmates’ mothers, narrowing the chances for friendship and mutual understanding across lines of age, class, and circumstance. Polarization is both shaping marriage

and shaped by it. Later marriage, declining marriage rates among some groups, rising female labor force participation, and widening educational divides have opened new cultural fault lines. Attitudes toward gender equality, childcare, and economic roles are now deeply entangled with party identity—further sorting Americans into politically homogeneous families and social networks. Richardson links the GOP’s authoritarian turn to broader cultural shifts since the 1960s and 1970s—shifts that included dramatic changes in the family. Schaller and Waldman invoke family breakdown, too, though neither book makes family structure a central explanatory variable.

Finally, trust—both in institutions and in one another—runs through this story. Each book touches it; none fully centers it. In work I published with Justin Wolfers in 2011, we showed that rising unemployment eroded public confidence in key institutions during the Great Recession and argued that low trust would hinder policy effectiveness when it was most needed (Stevenson and Wolfers 2011). Cross-country patterns linked larger unemployment shocks to bigger drops in institutional trust, offering hope of recovery as economies healed. That recovery never fully came. The persistence of low trust helps explain why appeals to identity outcompete appeals to expertise, why compromise feels illegitimate, and why a politics of existential threat is so hard to dislodge.

Taken together, Klein’s analysis and these adjacent books suggest a bleak but actionable conclusion: identity-based polarization is not a mood swing but a system—rooted in how we sort ourselves, how our media reward attention, how our institutions translate incentives, how our families and communities are structured, and how much we trust one another. Any serious response will have to operate on all those fronts at once.

## *V. Conclusion*

Taken together, these books make a blunt claim: when institutions fail to deliver broadly shared security, anti-pluralist projects gain legitimacy and space to maneuver. Material security—good jobs, reliable social insurance, predictable rules—is not just an economic objective; it is a democratic guardrail.

For economists, one certainty follows: enlarging the pie is not enough. We have to reckon with the ways economic change is braided together with culture and identity. A growing body of work already does so—on identity and political preferences (Akerlof & Kranton 2000; Bonomi, Gennaioli & Tabellini 2021; Gennaioli & Tabellini 2024) and on how rising inequality shapes outcomes (Piketty, Saez & Zucman 2018; Chetty et al. 2017). But the through-line in these books is not that inequality alone explains our predicament. Rather, identity politics has fused with a diffuse dissatisfaction that extends well beyond those who have fared poorly since the late twentieth century. The result has been a deep erosion of institutional trust and, increasingly, a

willingness to weaken the very institutions that once underwrote broad-based growth (Stevenson & Wolfers 2011, ).

Policy signals reflect this shift. What's winning at the polls is rarely an agenda to improve distribution directly; instead we see a turn toward protectionism that travels alongside authoritarian temptations (Rodrik 2018). Today's dominant populist message often rejects capitalism's ethos—competition, comparative advantage, gains from specialization—even if it avoids the label of anti-capitalism. In practice, the United States is “doing deals,” squaring off against China, and showing a new openness to top-down industrial policy that borrows the style, if not the politics, of authoritarian economic management. This approach began in earnest with the election of President Trump in 2016, and many aspects of the tough on China and top-down industrial policy were continued President Biden, illustrating that these tendencies are not driven completely by partisan politics. Increasingly, the United States is fighting China for dominance, while softening to its authoritarian top-down economic approach.

For many economists, this is perplexing. Over the past century, real global GDP has soared; life expectancy and living standards have improved in country after country (Koyama & Rubin 2022; DeLong 2022). It is hard not to view the spread of market economies and (imperfect) liberal democracy as a life-enhancing revolution. So why the collapse of trust in economic expertise? Are voters and leaders on left and right simply abandoning once-mainstream positions—on trade, Pigouvian taxation to price externalities, or the risks of unsustainable debt? Or, as the New York Times asked in declaring economists “in the wilderness”, have we failed to account for how policies intersect with culture, identity, and institutions—with how they feel as well as what they do (Casselman, 2025)? Some critics argue the problem is our technocratic language and forecasting misfires; others, like Glenn Hubbard, fault a perceived dismissal of the problems people actually live with (Caseelman, 2025); still others, like Oren Cass (2024), indict comparative advantage itself, and James Galbraith targets global integration (Galbraith, 2025). The disagreement is instructive: even debates about economic ideas now run through identity, power, and the legitimacy of institutions.

This is not to say economists have ignored culture, identity, or institutions—far from it. These literatures are flourishing, and economic tools have proven powerful for studying them. What remains is to make this synthesis central rather than peripheral: to build an economics that measures not only growth but the lived experience of communities in which growth occurs; that treats distribution and dignity as features, not afterthoughts; and that recognizes how policy credibility depends on the trust citizens place in the institutions that administer it.

Two additional political economy facts sharpen the picture. First, as Schaller and Waldman emphasize, those thriving in the new economy likely outnumber those flailing—but institutional design amplifies some voices over others. Rural areas wield outsized power in the Senate and Electoral College, and population trends have magnified that tilt: more than half of rural counties

have lost residents since 2000, yet rural voters remain overrepresented. The system, they argue, “weights votes unequally, mostly to the benefit of rural Whites and at the expense of everyone else” (p. 88). Hacker and Pierson add the reinforcing roles of a two-party system and money in politics (Hacker & Pierson, 2025). Second, the diagnosis in *White Rural Rage* risks overreach. In prosecuting the case against rural voters, the authors sometimes slip from testing a hypothesis to marshaling evidence for a verdict. That prosecutorial posture—and its condescension—can read as confirmation bias. As social science, a more balanced, hypothesis-testing approach would both persuade more readers and better serve the rural Americans it scrutinizes.

Where does that leave us? With a practical agenda. Economists need to do the analytical work we know how to do—quantify trade-offs, evaluate interventions, model incentives—while also engaging the social context in which policy lands. That means translating ideas in plain language; designing institutions that spread both the gains and the dignity of work; rebuilding trust through visible, reliable delivery; and aligning economic efficiency with a sense of belonging. It means asking, always, not just how to make the pie bigger, but how people experience the slicing—and whether the process commands their respect.

The promise of the last century—comparative advantage, decentralized markets, independent central banks—remains real. But prosperity is a political project as much as an economic one. If material security is a democratic guardrail, then shoring up democracy requires attending to identity, culture, and institutions alongside growth. That is the common lesson of *Democracy Awakening*, *White Rural Rage*, *Why We Are Polarized*, and their forebears: democracy, identity, and economics are intertwined. Policy that ignores that fact will fail on its own terms; policy that acknowledges it can still secure both freedom and flourishing.

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