# Place-Based Partisanship: How Place (Re)produces Americans' Partisan Attachments

## Abstract

How does place shape and sustain Americans' partisan attachments? This paper takes up this question by drawing on four rounds of interviews with residents across two Midwestern cities, which share several demographic characteristics but have voted differently in presidential elections for decades. These cases pose a puzzle to existing scholarship, which often argues that place-based politics is rooted in local structural characteristics – economic conditions and demographic composition. Instead, I argue that local organizational arrangements mediate residents' experiences of local structural conditions and national politics, leading them to cohere around shared understandings of their social problems and how their social identities fit into national party politics. This can lead similar people to identify with different political parties. By identifying local organizations as a key mechanism linking place to partisanship, this paper contributes to classic and growing literatures on the relationship between place and politics, and also sheds new light on political variation across the industrial Heartland.

Americans' place of residence tells us a lot about their political behavior. Beyond the well-known red-state/blue-state distinction, urban voters tend to favor the Democratic Party while rural voters tend toward the Republican Party (Brown and Mettler 2023; Jacobs and Munis 2023; Rodden 2019); and even within the same city, residents of certain neighborhoods tend to share the same partisanship (Brown and Enos 2021). In other words, place-politics—or the correlation between where people live and their partisanship—exists at multiple geographic scales. And while many studies argue that place-politics is merely the result of the kinds of people who live in certain places and the politics they carry with them (Bishop 2009; Gimpel and Hui 2015), there is mounting evidence that place itself affects Americans' partisanship (Brown and Enos 2021; Kuriwaki et al. 2023; Perez-Truglia 2018).

These findings raise the question: *how* does place inform Americans' partisan attachments? In what follows, I develop a theory of place-based partisanship that identifies new mechanisms by which place contributes to the production and reproduction of Americans' partisan attachments. To do so, I draw on four rounds of longitudinal, in-depth interviews with 54 residents collected in two similar cities—Motorville, WI and Lutherton, IN—between April 2019 and the November 2020 presidential election.[1] I further triangulated these findings with an additional 58 interviews with community leaders, as well as ethnographic observation, archival evidence, and social media data from both places. The cities share several characteristics that should lead to shared electoral outcomes: they are both largely White, industrially-dependent, Midwestern cities. And yet, for decades Lutherton residents have been largely Republican, while Motorville residents have remained Democratic.

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[1] Per IRB protocol, the city names are anonymized but the states are real. Please see the Data & Methods section for more information about this methodological decision. In an earlier publication, I referred to the cities by different pseudonyms (Motorville as Iverson and Lutherton as Meriville, see Ternullo 2022). I changed the pseudonyms so that they recall defining features of each city.

This poses a puzzle, as existing accounts of partisanship and place-politics cannot entirely explain why residents' of each city have distinct partisan tendencies. First, prevailing understandings of partisanship argue that individuals form partisan identities when they link their social position, e.g., their race, class, and religion, to party politics (Campbell et al. 1960; Lipset and Rokkan 1967; Manza and Brooks 1999). In other words, similar kinds of people should vote the same way when facing the same efforts by party elites to cultivate their loyalties (De Leon, Desai, and Tuğal 2009). Such arguments adeptly explain individual-level and macro-historical variation, but they offer less insight into variation across places – especially when those places are composed of similar kinds of people.

Second, scholarship examining the effects of place on political behavior tends to define places by their *structural conditions* – economic conditions and demographic composition. In this vein, scholars have argued that macroeconomic shocks have restructured local economies in White, postindustrial cities like Motorville and Lutherton (Autor et al. 2020; Baccini and Weymouth 2021; Ferrara 2023; Frey, Berger, and Chen 2018), threatening Whites' economic and racial privilege (Gest 2016, 2016; Gidron and Hall 2017; Mutz 2018), and making parties' right-wing appeals more resonant (Bonikowski 2017).

Both sets of scholarship on partisan identity and place-effects would predict that Motorville and Lutherton should be following a similar turn to the Right. In contrast, I draw on a growing body of scholarship that points to an alternative conceptualization of place and its effects: that places are distinguished not only by their structural conditions, but also by the way they order social interaction and discussion (Gieryn 2000; Molotch, Freudenburg, and Paulsen 2000), thus shaping how residents understand themselves and their communities (Brown-Saracino 2015; Nelson 2021; Small 2004). More specifically, I argue that places matter for residents' partisanship because they contain local organizational arrangements—public and private entities and their relationships to one other—that mediate residents' experiences of local structural conditions and the macro political context, making it more likely that residents cohere around two cultural frameworks: 1) *diagnostic frames* for how to define and solve their social problems; and 2) *narratives of community identity* that tell them who they are as a community and where they fit into party politics. If individuals' social group memberships and national party politics provide the broadest constraints on how they might form partisan attachments (De Leon 2014), then place makes it more likely that they will adopt certain partisan identities rather than others. In my empirical cases, the result is that Motorville makes a durably working-class, Democratic city out of much the same demographic material as exists in Lutherton, which instead creates a White, Christian, Republican city.

In theorizing place-based partisanship in this way, I do not negate the importance of other factors that help reproduce political differences between the two places (see also: Wright and Boudet 2012). As we might expect, individual-level factors such as parents' partisanship and psychological differences also matter for residents' partisanship (Campbell et al. 1960; Gerber et al. 2010; Hetherington and Weiler 2009; Jennings and Niemi 1968). But shared political understandings within each city—across lines of education, occupation, and organizational memberships—as well as systematic differences between the cities, suggest that local organizational arrangements and the cultural frameworks they support are key to answering not just this empirical puzzle, but understanding how place matters for Americans' partisanship more generally.

These findings offer several contributions to political sociology. First, they are most relevant to studies of political behavior in White, postindustrial cities across the U.S. (Baccini and Weymouth 2021; Cramer 2016; Gest 2016; Pacewicz 2016) and Europe (Ansell et al. 2022; Broz, Frieden, and Weymouth 2021; Cavaillé and Ferwerda 2023; Patana 2020; Scheiring et al. 2024). Such studies often imply that political change across these communities has been uniform, but the comparison of Motorville and Lutherton – two ostensibly similar places that lead to different partisan tendencies among residents (e.g., Brown-Saracino 2018; Emigh 1997) – draws our attention to an organizational theory that can better explain variation not just in postindustrial politics, but in the relationship between place and political behavior more generally. As such, these findings build on ethnographic research showing that place is foundational to how Americans think about politics (L. L. Ashwood 2018; Cramer 2016; Gest 2016; Pacewicz 2016; Silva 2019) by identifying new mechanisms by which place links people to the party system.

Second, this paper offers a new way of thinking about the role of organizations in politics – as more than sites of democratic training or arenas for political socialization (Bean 2014; Han 2016; Putnam 2000). Instead, I argue that because local organizations are *dually emplaced*—made by historical place-processes and now re-making place by structuring local interaction, discussion, and public opinion leadership (Bell 2020; McQuarrie and Marwell 2009)—they shape residents' politics *far beyond those who are directly involved in their activities*.

Finally, and perhaps most ambitiously, this study contributes to research highlighting the contingent process of translation from social group membership to partisan attachment, at both the micro- (Huddy 2001; Kane, Mason, and Wronski 2021) and macro-levels (De Leon et al. 2009; Desai 2002). Here, I show how place serves as one meso-level factor that can help guide similar kinds of people toward different political parties. In so doing, this account of place-based partisanship revives and updates an earlier era of work on American political behavior, beginning with the voter studies of Lazarsfeld and colleagues at Columbia, which also identified local organizations as key to shaping partisan attachments (Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee 1954; Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet 1948; Putnam 1966). But like many early urban sociologists, these studies saw organizations as “empty shells” (McQuarrie and Marwell 2009:254) that merely brought together similar people whose discussions reinforced the relationship between social structural position and vote choice. Instead, by conceptualizing local organizational arrangements as dually emplaced, this paper shows how they can lead similar kinds of people toward different politics – particularly, as I describe below, among cross-pressured voters.

### ***Micro- and Macro-Level Explanations of Partisan Attachments***

Early accounts of American partisanship in sociology and political science argued that party systems express a country’s underlying social structural divisions (Lipset and Rokkan 1967), and individuals join the party that represents them and others who share their position in that structure (Berelson et al. 1954; Campbell et al. 1960; Lazarsfeld et al. 1948; Lipset 1960). Taken to the extreme, the argument implies that an individual’s partisanship can be read directly from their demographic attributes. Although decades of scholarship have passed since social scientists advanced these arguments, the notion that people identify politically as they are socially has remained central to theories of partisan attachment (Achen and Bartels 2016; Kane et al. 2021; Manza and Brooks 1999; Mason and Wronski 2018:264).

More recently, scholars have clarified both the macro- and micro-level factors that guide the translation from objective social structural position to partisan identity (Huddy 2018). At the macro-level, sociologists in the political articulation school argue that parties are *semi-*

*autonomous* organizations that exploit ruptures in politics-as-usual to redefine social cleavages through mobilization, communication, and engagement with civil society (De Leon et al. 2009; Desai 2002). Parties may recognize an individual as any one of a multitude of political subjects—within the constraints of social structure—by choosing which identity to emphasize and link to a particular "imaginary" cause (De Leon et al. 2009:198).

Such macro-level party maneuvering creates a set of party meanings; these meanings further shape the micro-level process of partisan identity formation. This is because, according to the "groups" account of partisanship, individuals form party attachments based on which party is home to their "kinds of people," not based on the parties' policies (Green, Palmquist, and Schickler 2002; Achen and Bartels 2016; Kane, Mason, and Wronski 2021; Mason and Wronski 2018; Claassen et al. 2021; Lee and Hajnal 2011). As such, even people with little formal knowledge about politics can be guided toward a partisan attachment as party elites tell them "which groups affiliate with each party" (Kane et al. 2021:1786).

This micro-level research explains *individual-level variation* in the relationship between social and political identity (Huddy 2001), just as macro-level studies explain *historical variation* in the relationship between social groups and political parties (Eidlin 2018; Karol 2009; Schlozman 2015). But neither is well-suited to explaining systematic variation in partisan composition across similar places that are full of similar kinds of people.

### ***Moving Beyond Structural Accounts of Place***

In fact, one explanation for place-politics follows directly from these micro- and macro-accounts of partisanship: places merely aggregate individuals' politics and place itself has no additional effect on residents' political behavior (see Gimpel and Schuknecht 2003 on the "compositional effect"). In contrast, an alternative “contextual” account does attribute a causal role to place in shaping political behavior (Key 1949; Lazarsfeld et al. 1948), but it does so primarily through the *structural dimensions* of place – local economic conditions and demographic composition.

In this vein, a growing body of scholarship has documented the link between local experiences of deindustrialization and right-wing voting (Autor et al. 2020; Baccini and Weymouth 2021; Ferrara 2023; Frey et al. 2018). Economic decline profoundly destabilizes communities’ social fabric (Broughton 2015; Pacewicz 2016; Silva 2019), often leaving residents to feel that the state is a malignant rather than beneficent force (L. Ashwood 2018; Cramer 2016; Hochschild 2016; Ternullo 2024). Other scholars predict more local variation in this outcome, arguing that Whites’ feelings of racial threat grow when racialized minorities are an increasing proportion of the population (Enos 2017; Hopkins 2010; Newman 2013). But these accounts still conceptualize places as sites of interaction or distance between individuals of different social groups, meaning they expect a city’s demographic composition to explain its politics.

Taken together, these literatures imply that Motorville and Lutherton should share the same right-wing, postindustrial populism because they are both White, postindustrial cities. As we will see, this is not true of either city, but this account particularly fails to explain Motorvillians’ resolute Democratic partisanship. To explain this puzzle and better understand the mechanisms by which place shapes and sustains partisan attachments requires thinking about place as defined by more than just structural dimensions – as several urban sociologists have recently argued (Harrison 2017; Paulsen 2004; Small 2004). [2]

These scholars have forwarded an alternative conceptualization of place, arguing that ostensibly similar "kinds of places" are distinct because of how local structural conditions interact with organizational and cultural dimensions (Kaufman and Kaliner 2011; Molotch et al. 2000; Paulsen 2004). Taking up this account of place, other scholars have shown how these dimensions of place shape residents' social identities and interactions (Brown-Saracino 2018; Small 2004). Building on this research, I argue that *local organizational arrangements* help link the structural and cultural dimensions of place: not just quantitative differences in organizational resources or even qualitative differences in organizational types across places, but also how organizations relate to one another and define their role in a community (Molotch et al. 2000; Putnam et al. 1993; Safford 2009). These arrangements are emplaced in a dual sense: they are *products of* a place's historical development, and *productive of* a place and its meaning today (Bell 2020; Fischer 1975; McQuarrie and Marwell 2009; Molotch et al. 2000; Nelson 2021).

In the first sense, local organizational arrangements are not randomly distributed across the country (Allard 2009; de Vries, Kim, and Han 2024). Rather, they are products of cities' path-dependent evolution (Pierson 2000): when community leaders respond to external political-economic transformations, they also shape local organizational arrangements; over time it becomes more difficult to depart from existing patterns of action because local organizations carry forward past cultural logics and make certain kinds of collective action more likely (Molotch et al. 2000; Nelson 2021; Safford 2009). This means that organizational arrangements are not merely derivative of local factors (McQuarrie and Marwell 2009; Vargas 2016; Vélez and Lyons 2014); instead, because places are nested (Kusenbach 2008), local organizational arrangements emerge as the result of residents' and city leaders' response to changes in state and national contexts (Pacewicz 2015).[3]

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[2] In particular, these scholars have argued that research in the "neighborhood effects" tradition (Morenoff, Sampson, and Raudenbush 2001; Sharkey and Faber 2014; Ternullo, Zorro-Medina, and Vargas 2024; Wilson 1987) tends to reduce "place" to ecological measures of demographic composition.

But local organizational arrangements are also emplaced in another way: they help make and remake place (McQuarrie and Marwell 2009; Molotch et al. 2000; Nelson 2021) by providing "the infrastructure of repeated interactional patterns" for residents (Swidler 2000:94). These place-processes sustain the cultural frameworks that residents use to make sense of their community and themselves (Bell 2020; Brown-Saracino 2018; Small 2004).

This conceptualization of place as a bundle of structural, organizational, and cultural factors suggests a possible explanation for political differences between places that, like Motorville and Lutherton, share several structural characteristics: these are actually distinct places, defined by how local organizational arrangements shape residents' shared cultural frameworks.

### *How Place (Re)produces Partisan Attachments*

But how do these dimensions of place matter for residents' partisanship? A recent set of ethnographic studies offers a starting point, showing that place provides an interpretive framework through which residents make sense of national politics. For example, Katherine Cramer (2016) has shown how rural residents' perception that state government benefits urbanites at their expense turned them toward Republican Governor Scott Walker who promised to downsize state government. As others have argued, the political lessons that residents draw from their communities may vary according to their individual experiences (Silva 2019), the way community leaders responded to deindustrialization (Pacewicz 2016), and the role that government historically played in local economic development (L. L. Ashwood 2018).

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[3] Although scholars have studied place at multiple scales —from neighborhood (Small 2004), to city (Brown-Saracino 2018), to state (Kaufman and Kaliner 2011), to region (Griswold and Wright 2004)—much of this research has focused on cities as key sites for observing the historical emergence of place distinctiveness (see Paulsen 2004 for a summary).

But these studies rarely address the link between place and *partisan attachments* as outcomes.[4] This is consequential because, as noted above, places do not create party meanings—parties do. As such, to understand how place informs *partisan attachments*—beyond political opinions—we need to understand how it shapes residents' interpretation of their social structural position, *and* how it helps residents map those interpretations onto the party system. To do so, I argue that local organizational arrangements mediate residents' experience of both local structural conditions and national politics, making it more likely that they cohere around two cultural frameworks: 1) *diagnostic frames* for defining what their problems are and how to solve them politically (Benford and Snow 2000); and 2) *narratives of community identity* that tell residents what kind of community they are and where they fit into the party system (Brown-Saracino 2018; Small 2004). Within the constraints implied by individuals' social structural position and national party politics, place helps guide people to the party that best represents them.

These processes unfold over time, through repeated interactions between community leaders and residents. First, even facing similar challenges, leaders from different cities will diagnose those challenges and seek to address them in different ways depending on the organizational resources available to them and the relationships they have with other community stakeholders (Molotch et al. 2000; Pacewicz 2016; Safford 2009). Local opinion leaders are thus products of their organizational arrangements, and they speak about their city and its challenges with place-specific diagnostic frames (Katz and Lazarsfeld 1955). Through repeated instances of collective problem-solving, residents learn to use past experiences of what has "worked" as reference points to make sense of new social problems and identify political solutions (Martin and Desmond 2010; Sewell Jr 1992; Strand and Lizardo 2015). The result is that residents tend to share place-specific diagnostic frames for defining their problems and identifying political solutions (Benford and Snow 2000).

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[4] This is true more generally of studies that define local context as the spatial distribution of interethnic/interracial groups (Nathan and Sands 2023). This literature tends to focus on outcomes such as out-group attitudes (Fox 2004; Gay 2006; Hopkins 2010; Velez and Lavine 2017); political engagement (Enos 2016, 2017); and preferences for policies that may benefit the out-group (Alesina, Baqir, and Easterly 1999; Alesina and Glaeser 2004; Gay 2006; Hopkins 2009; Trounstine 2016).

Second, as Brown-Saracino (2015, 2018) has argued, the social construction of identity is often emplaced, as people produce accounts of themselves and others like them in routine social interaction and discussion that is ordered by local organizations (McQuarrie and Marwell 2009; Swidler 2000). These accounts, or narratives of community identity, tell residents what the community is and who they are as individuals – they are the rules of the local "game" (Borer 2006). They become widespread not just through direct organizational participation, but because residents consume information about their community that is also embedded in local organizational arrangements: local news or social media posts cover the perspectives of local opinion leaders; people learn from others who have read or discussed local media accounts; and residents speak with friends and neighbors who participate in community organizations (Brown-Saracino 2015; Cheng 2013; Fine 2012). As such, when parties attempt to cultivate citizens' political subjectivity (De Leon et al. 2009), these efforts will resonate more in places where they coincide with residents' existing cultural frameworks for understanding themselves and their social problems (Benford and Snow 2000; McDonnell, Bail, and Tavory 2017). For example, the notion that the Democrats are the party of the worker resonates with Motorvillians who live in a town defined by union organizing linked to the Democratic Party, while in Lutherton, where residents are surrounded by blue-collar workers who are Republican, this association feels counterintuitive.

By developing and then empirically illustrating this theory of *how* place shapes and sustains partisan attachments, I am not arguing that place is the only reason for the production or durability of Americans' partisan attachments. Even as places change, we have several reasons to expect that individuals' psychological attachment to their party will persist (Green, Palmquist, and Schickler 2002). Instead, I am building on growing evidence *that* place shapes partisanship to show *how* it does so (on this point, see: Wright and Boudet 2012). In short, while social-psychological, structural, and political processes shape much of American party politics, my argument is that place is one factor that helps residents navigate within the constraints of structure and national party maneuvering, guiding them toward certain social and political identities.

## Data & Methods

To elaborate these arguments, this paper draws on three months of in-person fieldwork; 242 in-depth interviews with 112 residents of Motorville and Lutherton conducted between May 2019 and November 2020; newspaper archives dating back to the 1930s; and Facebook posts by local politicians during the 2020 election cycle.

### *Case Selection*

I chose to study Motorville and Lutherton as part of a larger research project designed to explain contemporary variation in White political subjectivity as a legacy of historic political realignments. As such, I began the case selection process with a set of all U.S. counties that could be considered part of the White, working-class foundation of the New Deal Democratic coalition in the 1930s and 40s, and continue to be White and working-class to the present. Figure A1 of the Appendix maps these counties. I then used a hierarchical clustering analysis of these counties' presidential voting histories to identify a cluster that stayed Democratic and a cluster that turned to the Republican Party in the 1960s during the Racial Realignment (Schickler 2016).[5] Aggregate voting patterns are not necessarily indicative of individual residents' partisan attachments, but they are reasonable proxies for partisan composition.

Within those two clusters, I focused on the Midwest for two reasons: first, to hold region constant; and second, because postindustrial cities in this region were the kinds of places seen as essential to victory in the 2020 presidential election. I did not contain the comparison within one state because I was interested in how state-level variation was affecting place, as noted above. I then narrowed the search to include only counties containing small cities of between 16-28,000 residents. This was because, amidst increasing rural-urban polarization (Rodden 2019), there is decreasing political variation within "like places." Small cities like Motorville and Lutherton offer more of this variation.

Within this set of possible cases, only a few still voted Democratic – 4% of the original New Deal counties. After identifying the only Democratic county within a 12-hour drive, I further narrowed the case selection for the other cities so that they would even more closely match Motorville's demographic characteristics, and ultimately chose Lutherton.[6]

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[5] See Appendix Table A1 and Figure A1 for further details.

[6] At this point I could not see how choosing one site over another would be better for theory-generating purposes. When presenting a map of my possible field sites to colleagues, one mentioned a contact in Lutherton, so I chose to go there. Motorville and Lutherton are pseudonyms, although the states are real. Other recent studies of place and politics have similarly maintained the anonymity of their field sites (Cramer 2016; Pacewicz 2016), but this is a

This kind of research design—similar places with different outcomes—is similar to other studies showing how place shapes social interaction and identity (Brown-Saracino 2015). But even as I used county-level data to identify Motorville and Lutherton, I was not originally interested in the relationship between place and partisanship. Instead, I used county-level data to find *individuals* with similar social positions whose partisanship varied. The importance of place as an explanation for this variation only emerged from an iterative process of data collection and analysis, as described below.

### *Data Collection*

I began data collection in spring 2019. Between June 2019 and February 2020 I spent six to eight weeks in each field site observing City Council meetings, labor council meetings, kaffeeklatsches, civic events, church services, county fairs, and political events, including fundraises and political party meetings. I also recruited interview participants during this time, seeking interviews with two different types of community members: the first are "community leaders," or elected officials, party activists, pastors, nonprofit leaders, and union officials. I spoke to 58 people in this category, 32 in Motorville and 26 in Lutherton. I began recruitment in both places by contacting people formally involved in local politics – party activists and elected officials – via email or Facebook. In Lutherton, I stayed with the former Chair of the county Republican Party for the duration of my fieldwork. She helped me gain access to those involved in Republican Party politics, who also dominated local elected office. To balance my access to

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methodological choice that has clear drawbacks (see: Jerolmack and Murphy 2019). Nevertheless, I made this choice when I applied for IRB approval before starting fieldwork because I worried about gaining access to community leaders without guaranteeing their anonymity—and this required anonymizing the field sites or masking their data. This would have posed several limitations, particularly according to the original research design, which included observing local campaign activities for several months leading up to the 2020 presidential elections. To overcome some of the limitations of anonymity, I provide as much evidence of the cities' similarities and differences as possible, so that it is possible to evaluate the empirical evidence for *how* place shapes partisanship, beyond just the structural characteristics of each city.

Lutherton's Republican Party, I made my own connections within the Democratic Party and volunteered with the 2019 Democratic mayoral candidate. In both cities, I approached additional community leaders at public events or if other leaders or residents talked about them. My sampling strategy thus focused on leaders who are local decision-makers and help shape residents' perceptions of the community (Katz and Lazarsfeld 1955).

The second group of interviewees falls into a category I refer to as "residents" – people who are not formally involved in local politics. I spoke to 54 people in this category, 24 in Motorville and 30 in Lutherton. I recruited people in-person and via purposive snowball sampling from several sources (see Small 2009 and Weiss 1994). I met people at community events, in Facebook groups, and via responses to flyers, and I also recruited strangers in coffee shops, at bars, and at the YMCA. After an initial interview, I asked people to connect me with certain kinds of acquaintances so that I could achieve a sample with variation on characteristics that I thought might shape the relationship between place and politics: organizational affiliation, occupation, strength of partisan attachment, and political knowledge. Often, people who responded to solicitations from Facebook or flyers were those most interested in talking about politics, so I routinely asked people to point me toward their "least political" acquaintances to capture the experiences and beliefs of residents with less knowledge about politics and weaker political attachments.[7] This kind of variation also helped me assess when I had achieved theoretical saturation, as I was able to evaluate when additional interviews from different kinds of people were no longer shedding light on new elements of the key patterns (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Low 2019). In each field site I also spoke to several people who are county-wide actors

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[7] Snowball sampling was useful for achieving variation in the sample, but it also means that some participants know each other. This was not an overwhelming issue, but when I did conduct multiple interviews form the same social network, I took care when analyzing the data to ensure that my findings were not driven by the views of this one clique.

(party leaders) or elected officials, as well as residents who lived in the smaller towns of the county outside the central cities of Lutherton and Motorville. These interviews were important to understanding the role of local organizational arrangements in shaping political behavior, given the nested nature of places (city dynamics are shaped by county dynamics) and existing evidence of political variation within counties (Rodden 2017).

Table 1 summarizes the characteristics of the 54 residents interviewed in Motorville and Lutherton. I spoke to more Democrats and people with union ties in Motorville, and more Republicans and churchgoers in Lutherton, but the samples are similar in terms of college education, retirement status, and duration of time living in the community. Given that the research was designed to explain variation in White political subjectivity after the Racial Realignment, as described above, all residents included in the longitudinal study are White. Although I interviewed activists, nonprofit leaders, and other residents of color in each city, I include those data in the sample of community leaders.

**[Table 1 about here]**

The combination of interviews with community leaders and residents was essential for identifying the dimensions of place that matter for residents' partisanship. To produce an account of organizational actions, I relied not just on interviews with community leaders, but also on observations of city and organizational meetings and administrative data that document local organizational resources, public spending, and quantifiable measures of social problems. I then analyzed interviews with residents—as described below—to reveal patterns in how they tell stories about their cities and draw political implications from those stories (Pugh 2013).

### *Longitudinal Design & Data Analysis*

Over the course of 18 months, I conducted one interview with each community leader and four interviews with each resident. On two occasions between rounds of interviews, I ceased data collection to carry out analysis. The repeated rounds of interviews and the periods of analysis in between data collection served two purposes. First, because I collected baseline interviews well before primary voting began in each state, I was able to capture change and stability in residents' political beliefs during the COVID-19 pandemic and the 2020 presidential election (see also: Ternullo 2022). Second, the periods of analysis in between interviews allowed me to generate theories from the data, which I probed in later conversations (see Hoang 2018).

Data collection and analysis proceeded as follows: after collecting the first set of interviews in summer and fall of 2019, I spent the winter coding them openly, searching for emergent themes that might explain the empirical puzzle (Saldaña 2009). I analyzed data from residents and community leaders separately. One of the central patterns that emerged from Luthertonians was that they tended to articulate a communitarian version of anti-statism (Fischer 2008). Moreover, they often expressed support for communities taking care of themselves as a social welfare strategy by referring to their own experiences in Lutherton, where they observed churches and nonprofits solving problems. This was a surprising pattern, insofar as White anti-statism, particularly in postindustrial cities like Lutherton, is often understood through the lens of resentment toward the state – either on the grounds of rural identity (Cramer 2016; Jacobs and Munis 2023) or racial resentment (Hochschild 2016; Tesler 2012). After the first round of coding, I developed a more explicit line of questioning in the second-round interviews to further probe this and other important patterns. Those interviews began in March 2020.

By that time, COVID-19 had halted in-person fieldwork, so I conducted the remaining interviews using virtual means and incorporated new questions related to the pandemic. As an example of how I used the longitudinal interviews to generate and probe my theory of the case, during the second-, third- and fourth-round interviews I asked several questions about the extent to which the COVID-19 pandemic had disrupted residents' experience of community problem-solving or altered their thinking about the role of the state in their lives. I completed the second round of interviews in early April and moved onto the third in late April and May, as states were beginning to lift their stay-at-home orders. I did not have time to transcribe or code between these rounds of interviewing, so I analyzed both the second- and third-round interviews during summer 2020. My approach was much more deductive this time, as I was searching for evidence that altered, falsified, or supported my emergent theory of the case.

I again used these analyses to develop new questions for the fourth round of interviews, which took place in September and October 2020. After concluding data collection, I did two further rounds of coding, both focused on change/stability over time. The first analysis focused only on participants' thoughts about the government's handling of COVID-19, and how they evolved between March and November 2020; the second searched for more general changes over the 18-month period between summer 2019 and November 2020. Between the first- and fourth-round interviews, I retained 74% of the original sample. I also gained an additional participant in Motorville during the round two interviews.[8] Amongst interviewees who participated in all four interviews, I spoke to them for, on average, about 4.5 hours over the course of 18 months.

In sum, my process of data collection and analysis was akin to a longitudinal version of abductive reasoning (Timmermans and Tavory 2012), much like what Hoang (2018) employs. She describes her approach as "a creative inferential process of theory building based on surprising research observations" (666).

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[8] See Ternullo (2022) for a discussion of how I retained participation throughout the project.

### *Triangulation*

The original research design included several additional months of in-person fieldwork, but after the COVID-19 pandemic interrupted these plans in March 2020, I further triangulated my findings with two additional data sources to help identify how residents were learning about their communities from within a local informational ecosystem (Small 2011).

First, with the help of research assistants I collected public Facebook posts from all local politicians from January-November 2020. Depending on the field site, this included posts from city councilors, county commissioners, and representatives in the U.S. House of Representatives. In total, we collected data on 3,436 posts. I then qualitatively coded these for issue content and created measures of issue popularity based on the number of likes and comments each post received, to assess differences in the content that Motorvillians and Luthertonians receive from local politicians. See the Appendix for further details on data collection and analysis.

Second, I collected the front- and editorial-pages from both cities' local newspapers during the days preceding and following important national political events from 1932-2016 (see Table A1 of the Appendix for a full list of dates).[9] These searches rendered hundreds of pages of archival material that indicated local media portrayals of organizational activities without biasing the selection process, as the dates were determined by national rather than local events.

Taken together, triangulation amongst these data sources was essential for allowing the analysis to move beyond identifying patterns in meaning-making through interviews, and to begin to show how the outside world "gets in" to shape those patterns (Swidler 2008).

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[9] I analyzed these pages deductively to probe findings from my interviews: first, I counted how often the local newspapers mentioned these major national events; second, I analyzed the content and political stance of editorials, letters to the editor, and local stories (as opposed to those written by the Associated Press and run in the local paper, for example) pertaining to those national events; and third, I counted front-page references to churches, service-oriented nonprofits, and unions during these dates. I also conducted key word searches for "Roe vs. Wade," "strikes," and the names of the local labor councils in each city.

## Findings

I present my argument in four parts. I begin by considering purely structural explanations for political differences between Motorville and Lutherton. I argue that while demographic composition and economic conditions are relevant for understanding each city's politics, these are *insufficient explanations* for their differences (Small 2004). Next, I describe the contemporary organizational arrangements in Motorville and Lutherton, briefly pointing to the historical place-processes that made them so distinct today.[10] Then, in the third and fourth sections, I show how local organizational arrangements sustain the cultural frameworks that help guide residents toward their partisan attachments: shared diagnostic frames for defining and solving postindustrial social problems; and narratives of community identity that tell residents who they are and where they fit in the party system.

### *Ruling out a Purely Structural Explanation*

The existing literature offers two structural explanations to account for political heterogeneity between Motorville and Lutherton: first, that they have always been composed of different kinds of people; and second, that their composition has more recently diverged due to different experiences of deindustrialization. As noted above, I selected cases specifically to rule out these explanations (see Table A1 of the Appendix). That said, there are still important structural differences between Motorville and Lutherton, as shown in Figures 1 and 2. Here and throughout the manuscript, I draw primarily on county- rather than city-level data as this is the closest unit of analysis for which we have historical data.

**[Figure 1 about here]**

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[10] See Ternullo 2024 for further details about these historical processes.

**[Figure 2 about here]**

Figure 1 summarizes each county's demographic composition and total population from 1980-2020. For context, it shows the counties' White, non-Hispanic population, median household income, college education rate, and median age as a proportion of the U.S. national figure; it shows total population as a proportion of 1980 population to indicate change over time. Figure 2 summarizes the extent to which each county's economy had shifted from industrialized labor to service sector work by the 21st century. Each panel shows data from the Bureau of Economic Analysis (BEA) on the share of the county's total GDP produced by the three most unionized private sector industries from 2001-2019 (per Hirsch and Macpherson 2019), in the solid black line, and the share produced by the service sector, in the dashed grey line.[11]

Beginning with the top panel of Figure 1, we can see that both Motorville and Lutherton are largely White, blue-collar places: for the past 40 years they have been less-educated, less affluent, and Whiter than the rest of the country. Moreover, they have both weathered the storm of deindustrialization, to varying degrees. Throughout the period shown in Figure 2, both economies were still based in the most unionized industries (manufacturing, transportation, and construction) rather than in the service sector. Those industries made up about 20% of U.S. GDP during that time, but they usually contributed more than 35% of GDP in each of Motorville and Lutherton. Both counties also managed to avoid the negative feedbacks between economic downturn, population decline, and brain drain typical of other postindustrial cities (Carr and Kefalas 2009; Johnson 2013): Figure 1 shows that, while both populations are aging, their college education rates have actually improved relative to the country as a whole.

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[11] To identify the most unionized industries, I took the average of Hirsch and McPherson's annual unionization-by-industry data for the whole 2001-2019 period.

But the figures also reveal important differences between the two places. Per Figure 1, Motorville has always had somewhat higher rates of college education than Lutherton, due to a small college in Motorville County, although Lutherton began closing the gap from 2010-2020. Moreover, Lutherton's economy has clearly remained much more industrialized than Motorville's, with less reliance on service sector work. It has also grown faster: total GDP per capita, based on the same BEA data from Figure 2, was $30,000 in Lutherton in 2001 and $25,000 in Motorville (in current dollars); by 2020, those figures had risen to $58,000 and $43,000, respectively. By the time of my fieldwork both counties were at full employment, but Lutherton's unemployment rate sat at a historic low—close to 2%. And as Figure 1 shows, these economic differences have supported skyrocketing population growth in Lutherton: county population has grown by just over 20% between 1980-2020, while Motorville's has nearly held steady, declining about 2% over 40 years.

But Lutherton's relative employment and population successes have not translated to better welfare for its citizens, as shown in Figures 1 and 3. Figure 3 depicts three indicators of poverty and opioid use in each county (again relative to the national average) as these are social problems common to postindustrial cities in the 21st century (Simes 2021). Although both counties' incomes have fallen relative to the U.S. (per Figure 1), Motorville has seen real wage growth of over 12% between 1980-2020, compared to Lutherton's 4%. This translates to a recent rise in poverty rates in Lutherton, as indicated by the portion of children eligible for free or reduced lunch in Figure 3. Perhaps for these reasons, the opioid crisis is also more severe in Lutherton, based on both drug overdose rates and opioid prescription rates shown in Figure 3.

**[Figure 3 about here]**

In short, Lutherton's economy in the postindustrial era is far less "postindustrial" than Motorville's, but this success has coincided with sustained (and rising) economic precarity. This dynamic is related to immigration from Mexico and Central America in the past 15 years, which has supported Lutherton's growing economy. We might expect that the combination of postindustrial decline and rising immigration fueled Luthertonians' Republicanism due to feelings of racialized status threat and anti-immigrant sentiment (Hopkins 2010). But the native-born White residents I spoke to recognize that immigration is precisely what sustains Lutherton's growth: when I asked people what would happen if ICE deported anyone without documents, I heard again and again that it would destroy the local economy.[12] Moreover, Lutherton was already a solidly Republican place by the time immigrants began arriving.

In sum, Figures 1-3 do not prove that the cities' demographic differences, and changes therein due to deindustrialization, play *no* role in explaining their political differences; rather, they suggest that these are *insufficient explanations* for each city's politics. In particular, judging simply by industrialized employment rates (per Figure 2), growth in GDP per capita, and population trajectories (per Figure 1), we should expect that Motorville would provide an even more fruitful setting for right-wing populism than Lutherton. And yet, Motorville residents continue voting for Democrats up and down the ballot. This suggests that, to understand *how* Motorville and Lutherton lead similar kinds of people toward different partisan attachments, we must understand how *both* the constraints of local structural conditions and distinct organizational contexts shape the way residents makes sense of their social problems and political identities (Paulsen 2004).

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[12] In fact, despite several probes over 18 months, it was incredibly rare for anyone I spoke to in Lutherton, of any class or education status, to express concerns that immigrants were an economic or symbolic threat to them or the community. These residents actually sound more an earlier version of the Republican Party that viewed immigrants as an economic boon to businesses (Karol 2009).

## Distinct Organizational Arrangements

This section briefly describes each city's organizational arrangements and shows how they shape community leaders' approach to defining and solving their postindustrial social problems. While the empirical argument that follows focuses on unions and churches as central to organizational arrangements in Motorville and Lutherton, respectively, my argument about is not reducible to aggregate counts of unions and churches. Given links between unions and the Democratic Party since 1936, and between evangelical churches and the Republican Party since the late 1970s, such an argument could be derived from existing research (Eidlin 2018; Karol 2009; Schlozman 2015; Williams 2010). Rather, I am arguing that these organizations are dually emplaced: first, because Motorville has historically protected politically engaged unions while Lutherton has cultivated civically engaged churches, unions in Motorville do different things than do unions in Lutherton, and vice versa for churches; and second, those distinctive organizational arrangements today lead *members and non-members alike* to think similarly about their social problems and community identities because they create a shared context for meaning-making. As such, I detail not just quantitative differences in churches and unions between the two cities, but also the different ways that they relate to other organizations and define their roles in each city. I show that unions mobilize politically for better economic outcomes in Motorville, and churches and nonprofits facilitate a private but collective problem-solving network in Lutherton.

### *Civically Engaged Churches in Lutherton*

Lutherton's organizational arrangements today are defined by the civic engagement of well-resourced churches that facilitate a private but collective problem-solving network; in contrast, many Motorville churches are struggling to keep their doors open. But differences in the cities' church ecologies were not always so clearcut: as Figure 4 shows, Lutherton and Motorville counties had similar rates of church adherence in 1971, and saw similar declines from 1971-1990, which leveled off thereafter.

**[Figure 4 about here]**

But the cities had longstanding denominational differences, and over time, these led to differences in the quality of their church membership even as adherence rates remained quantitatively similar. As Putnam and Campbell (2010:105) show, after Catholic and mainline Protestant adherence declined in the 1960s, evangelical Protestant adherence began rising in the 1970s, and their adherents were also more likely to show up to Sunday services. These national trends had clear implications for Motorville and Lutherton: in 1980, Catholics made up just 4% of Lutherton's population but 23% of Motorville's; evangelical Protestants made up 36% of Lutherton's population, but just over 6% of Motorville's.[13] This means that, from the 1990s onward, Lutherton not only had more church adherents than Motorville, but the church adherents it did have were more likely to attend services.

Lutherton's impressive quantity and quality of church members persist today. We can see this partially through Table 2: Lutherton County has nearly three times as many assets per capita housed in service-based nonprofits as does Motorville County, and they took in more than double the revenue in 2020. These figures don't include all religious organizations, which do not have to report their assets and revenue to the IRS unless their gross receipts equal or exceed $200,000 annually or their total assets equal or exceed $500,000 at the end of the tax year. There are two church-affiliated organizations that meet these qualifications in Lutherton and none in Motorville. But Table 2 also indicates that this relative wealth of private resources in Lutherton is balanced by a dearth of public resources: relative to Motorville, Lutherton collects 85% of the tax revenue per capita. This is exacerbated by state policy, as Lutherton County received only 4% of the per capita funding from the state as did Motorville in 2017—very nearly $0.[14]

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[13] Based on ARDA statistics.

**[Table 2 about here]**

In addition to their greater financial resources, churches in Lutherton today do different things than do churches in Motorville. Belonging to a church is often a cradle-to-grave experience in Lutherton that requires more than just Sunday morning attendance. All but four of my interviewees in Lutherton continue to attend church with the same frequency they did as children, and 17 of 30 people describe participating in some volunteer work through the church. The result is that, much like in other places, Lutherton's churches are training residents in the skills of civic engagement, which they can then apply in other contexts (Beyerlein and Hipp 2006; Johnston 2013; Park and Smith 2000; Pattillo 1999). For example, Veronica from Lutherton tells me that being a good citizen "means doing my part as far as helping. […] being involved with a church and using your resources that you can help."

And while high rates of church attendance are part of evangelicalism, this kind of civic engagement is not: evangelicalism is typically *less* associated with non-religious volunteerism than mainline Protestantism or Catholicism (Driskell, Lyon, and Embry 2008). But Lutherton's evangelical churches have, over time, come to be understood as community resources—regardless of denomination, to an extent.

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[14] Although Indiana took the Medicaid expansion under the Affordable Care Act, while Wisconsin did not.

The result is that Lutherton’s churches contain a wealth of financial and human resources, and they are also situated at the center of a group of nonprofits and other churches that allow them to coordinate collective action when a new challenge emerges in the city. For example, each month, Lutherton’s pastors still meet at the Lutherton County Consortium of Churches (LCCC) and listen to nonprofit leaders present about their work in the community and learn how the churches can help. According to Pastor Brown, who preaches at one of the largest congregations in Lutherton, the LCCC provides a venue for pastors to “… look at things that are broader than our own parish and that probably affect all of us one way or the other, and we can all kind of cooperate with.” Church leaders are so much a part of city leadership that, the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, several pastors were included on daily phone calls of local elected officials and business leaders.

These relationships among well-resourced churches, nonprofits, and local volunteers make it more likely that community leaders will address emergent social problems through private rather than public means (Safford 2009; de Vries et al. 2024). For example, during my fieldwork Lutherton was in the middle of an ongoing response to a tragedy that occurred in winter 2017, when police found an unhoused man frozen to death in his car. The shocking death brought together several residents in support of an organization with a long-term vision for serving unhoused residents: Service & Action Ministries (SAM). SAM hopes to coordinate the provision of social services within Lutherton by pooling other churches’ and nonprofits’ resources. As its founder, Karla, tells me: SAM “is where churches can give their benevolence money” and SAM, in return, will do “a little bit more than what the normal church is able to do” by “responsibly” managing money and keeping track of people in their care.

Much like other community problem-solving in the past, SAM's founding and growth was facilitated in part by local churches. In fact, it grew out of an earlier effort to provide temporary shelter for unhoused residents within church buildings. To build support for SAM as a longer-term solution, Karla and her husband spoke in front of individual churches and the LCCC; but as Pastor Brown told me, he had already heard about SAM from his congregants before they got to the LCCC. Ultimately, churches began offering financial and human resources to support SAM's growth.

As a result, Lutherton began building a private, centralized problem-solving apparatus outside the state. This arrangement, moreover, is agreeable to local government officials. As Lutherton's Mayor Redner explains of the many nonprofit efforts to resolve growing homelessness and housing insecurity in the community: "As a city, we're lending support to those organizations (providing social services), but we're not doing the work." Consider also the dearth of state transfers that Lutherton receives relative to Motorville. Lutherton is a place where state and local policy combine to make private, collective action seem reasonable—and even preferable—to government intervention.

In contrast, Motorville's elected officials rarely mention nonprofits and churches, in part because those organizations lack the resources available to their counterparts in Lutherton, per Table 2. The three pastors I spoke to in Motorville care about serving the community, but they struggle to find the financial and human capital to do so. But these quantitative factors are just one part of what defines Lutherton's organizational arrangements: as the case of SAM illustrates, it is the fact that churches see themselves as community actors, maintaining ties with other organizations through the LCCC, the Chamber of Commerce, and through their many congregants, which allow churches and nonprofits to deploy their collective, private resources when new problems emerge.

### *Politically Mobilized Unions in Motorville*

But Motorville's organizational arrangements are not just defined by the absence of civically engaged churches; they are also defined by politically active unions and their ties to local elected officials. As we already saw from Figure 2, these organizational differences are not structurally determined: Lutherton has retained far more employment in unionized industries than Motorville. But in the 1970s, when Lutherton's largest employer relocated out of state, the Lutherton Gazette recorded rumors that they left because of labor costs—it had been a United Auto Workers (UAW) shop. The same year, a smaller manufacturer moved into the building and re-employed a third of the workforce, but the UAW failed in two separate bids to organize them. Instead, workers voted for an apolitical employees' association, which continues in that same plant today. Within a few years, Lutherton's local labor council—an organization responsible for coordinating community engagement and political action across various locals within a geographic area—had also disbanded after 40 years of activity.

Contrast this to how Motorville's labor movement emerged from a similar period of economic stress. One quarter of the city's largest employers from the manufacturing, transportation, and construction sectors in the 1950s had disappeared by the 2010s, and several others had merged together or changed ownership.[15] But of the major employers that remained, several are still unionized. Those unions also remained active, not just through strikes, but also in their advocacy for local "labor candidates." Moreover, in the 1960s, Motorville's private sector unions were joined by active public sector unions in both Motorville and the surrounding cities.

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[15] According to phone book records.

This growth was aided by a new Wisconsin state law, passed in 1959, that was the first in the nation to legalize collective bargaining for public sector unions (Dixon 2020). Indiana passed a similar law for teachers in 1973. But even as Indiana state policy moved in directions favorable towards organized labor, and Lutherton's economy recovered and then accelerated from the 1990s onward (per Figure 2), unions never regained a foothold in the city.  Previous failures to organize had fully decimated the local labor movement.

In contrast, Motorville's past successes in protecting its organized labor movement have made it possible for them to remain engaged in local politics today, even as labor has faced an increasingly hostile state policy context: Republican Governor Scott Walker made it a priority to disempower organized labor during his administration, signing Act 10 in 2011 and right-to-work in 2015. Act 10 revoked collective bargaining rights for public sector unions and required 50% of employees to vote to re-certify their union each year, rendering a devastating blow to public sector unionization across the state.

Act 10 also affected Motorville, effectively wiping out its municipal employees' union, AFCSME. But the labor movement itself has persisted; and, according to the mayor and several local labor leaders, is even working to revitalize its engagement in local politics. This revitalization is only possible because organized labor retained core elements of movement infrastructure after deindustrialization. First, Motorville unions still have quantitative advantages relative to other similar places: we can see from Table 2 that Motorville has four times as many labor organizations per capita than Lutherton, 16% of which have revenue >$25,000 (whereas Lutherton has none). And Motorville teachers' union (the AFT) usually maintains between 70-80% membership, according to their current President, while more than half of Wisconsin school districts failed to vote in a union in 2017 under Act 10's onerous requirements (Beck 2017).

But quantitative measures are just one component of local organizational arrangements: what also matters are qualitative and relational aspects of how unions engage with the community. Motorville has retained its labor council, the Motorville Federation of Labor, or MFL. While most councils, like Lutherton's, have been "weak or moribund" for decades (Clawson and Clawson 1999), the MFL remains responsible for coordinating union endorsements, canvassing, and donations for local political candidates.

In short, Motorville organized labor today still believes their economic challenges can be solved through political action. And in small-city politics, even Motorvillian labor's diminished resources give them outsize political clout: as Table 2 indicates, 4 out 10 City Councilors during the time of my fieldwork were also labor leaders. The result is that, among the elected officials I spoke to, organized labor was the only support they sought when running for office.

This stands in contrast to unions nationally, whose political impact has been declining in recent years (see Rosenfeld (2014) and Figure A3 of the Appendix). But in Motorville, and other places where unions have managed to remain actively engaged in politics, they are still able to generate material benefits for workers (Brady, Baker, and Finnigan 2013; Cummings and Boutcher 2009; Sachs 2011). For example, Mark, a former City Councilor, rushed to ratify city workers' union contract amidst threats that Republican Governor Scott Walker's administration would dismantle their collective bargaining rights. As told me, this kind of decision just made sense because:

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

In short, because Motorville's labor leaders remain actively involved in local politics, the elected officials driving local problem-solving tend to agree with labor's point of view, as Mark says.

The result is that Motorville's community leaders converge on a shared diagnostic framework: the city's challenges are rooted in systemic economic declines that have caused a drain of good, union jobs. For example, Elliot, who is part of Motorville's Business Industrial Development committee, explains the community this way: "We struggle in this area. We were built on manufacturing and transportation and that sort of started to shift and move away."

Within this root-cause framework, community leaders interpret other problems—including housing insecurity and the opioid crisis—as merely *symptoms* of these systemic challenges. For example, when Mayor Hayte described Wisconsin's struggles with the opioid crisis in summer 2019, he noted the challenge was particularly acute in Motorville because: "our area with our much higher poverty rates is among the worst hit for addiction." This root-cause framework keeps community leaders focused on good jobs as the solution: as Wendy, an elected official in Motorville County, tells me, the community will only resolve its opioid crisis through more "decent-paying jobs with benefits."

Such a focus may seem unsurprising, but it stands out in light of the "race to the bottom" among cities in a global, neoliberal economy (Brenner, Marcuse, and Mayer 2012). It also stands out from Lutherton, where residents and community leaders like describe their biggest problem in summer 2019 as having *too many jobs* for what their workforce can support. As former Mayor Lubock says: "The economy is booming here…Everybody can't find enough people [to work]." These different framings are rooted in real economic differences between the two cities, as described above. But even though Motorville was at full employment, with an estimated 300 vacant positions in summer 2019, people did not think of the economy as “booming.” Instead, community leaders fretted over the lack of good jobs: quality, not quantity, was paramount.

Local organizational arrangements play two roles in leading to these divergent interpretations: first, they constrain and enable how community leaders address social problems (Safford 2009). Motorville’s Mayor Hayte simply can’t step aside and “support” nonprofits in addressing the city’s economic precarity, as does Lutherton’s Mayor Redner, because Motorville doesn’t have a comparable pool of private, collective resources. And second, community leaders—who serve as opinion leaders for other residents (Katz and Lazarsfeld 1955)—are themselves products of these organizational arrangements. Councilor Mark, for example, won office with union support and then fought to protect unions. But often, unions don’t have to fight to ensure this framework persists, because community leaders are themselves Motorvillians who grew up learning many of the same diagnostic frames that residents share today – as former Councilor Mark said, he agrees with labor’s point of view.

The result of these different organizational arrangements is that Motorville’s elected officials are relentlessly focused on solving their systemic challenges by bringing *good jobs* to the city, even though Motorville has less poverty and more wage growth than Lutherton (per Figure 1); while Lutherton’s leaders are relentlessly focused on bringing *more jobs* to the city and leave churches, nonprofits, and local volunteers to address emergent social problems through private rather than public means.

## How Local Organizational Arrangements Shape Diagnostic Frames

These organizational arrangements lead residents to shared cultural frameworks that—within the constraints of individuals’ social structural positions and party meanings—help guide similar residents of each city towards different partisan attachments. This section takes up the first of these: shared diagnostic frames for understanding postindustrial social problems.

### *Lutherton: Social Problems as Community Challenges*

Lutherton's private, collective problem-solving arrangement provides the context in which Lutherton residents make sense of how to define and solve their city's challenges. The result is that, even when residents identify a "genuine" problem related to poverty, they define it not as an individual or systemic problem, but as something in between: a community challenge, which should be resolved privately and locally.

Highly salient experiences of private, collective problem-solving, like SAM's emergence, help reinforce the notion that churches and nonprofits can and should take care of social problems: they provide opportunities for Luthertonians to observe and discuss what these organizations are already doing. This understanding is also sustained through routine experiences. Church members learn about or participate in their congregations' service activities and non-members hear about this through discussion and information-gathering. Because Lutherton's churches tend to be heavily involved in local service work, church members think of local churches as *community* resources, not just religious edifiers. As Kyle, a young Independent, tells me: "A lot of the churches, if there's a need in the community and they need help, the churches are the first places that people contact."

But as non-churchgoers explain, they also learn about churches' service activities through friends, Facebook, and the local newspaper. My analysis of the local informational ecosystem corroborates these accounts. Based on my data collection from local newspapers during national events between 1932-2016, 29% of the Lutherton Gazette's front pages mentioned local churches, while only 2% of the Motorville Post's did. Today, as Figure 5 shows, communitarianism (posts lauding local nonprofits or churches for service work) remained the 6th most popular topic among Lutherton politicians' Facebook posts from January-November 2020, even with the tumult of the 2020 elections and the COVID-19 pandemic.[16] The idea of "the local" re-emerging on social media may seem counterintuitive, but over 75% of people I spoke to in both Motorville and Lutherton estimated that more than half of their social media contacts are from their respective counties. Much like other people, their online networks mirror their face-to-face networks (Bond et al. 2012); and in Motorville and Lutherton, those networks are not only local, they are embedded in local organizational arrangements.

**[Figure 5 about here]**

Not only are Lutherton residents *aware* of their city's private, collective problem-solving efforts, but almost everyone I met in Lutherton agreed that it is successful—regardless of whether it does, by objective measures, resolve housing or hunger issues. Patty, for example, is a Republican and a union member who does not belong to a church, but explains: "You know, our community really does a good job at that [helping people in need of food or shelter]." She then lists *four ways* the "need is being met" through church- and nonprofit-based services in the community. Patty is both well-informed about these activities and shares the common view that Lutherton takes care of itself through such private, collective means—and she does not need to attend a church to learn this. In short, there is a city-level tendency toward this belief (Wright and Boudet 2012).

Because many residents like Patty believe their city's problem-solving works (Lizardo and Strand 2010), they routinely categorize a whole range of social problems—both local and national—as appropriate for private, collective response rather than state intervention. In other words, they transport these diagnostic frames to other contexts (Sewell Jr 1992). This is clear in a conversation I have with Mallory, a local teacher, churchgoer, union member, and Republican, in March 2020. I ask her how she thinks society can best take care of people's needs – drawing her attention to extra-local problems – and she responds with a local reference point: "I think the things we're doing now." Like Patty, she then lists the various services available through churches and nonprofits throughout the county, revealing that by "we," she means Lutherton County and its many non-governmental organizations.

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[16] Please see the Appendix for further details on how I coded the posts.

Much like Mallory, many people I spoke to in Lutherton draw on these kinds of local experiences of community problem-solving as reference points not only for how to address future *local* challenges, but also how to address *national* challenges. As a result, these Luthertonians articulate a particular kind of anti-statism – driven partly by the familiar American division between *people* who are "deserving" or "undeserving" of help (Katz 1986) and also by a place-based division between *social problems* that require private or public solutions. Cal, for example, is a retired teacher and Republican. When I ask him what the Republican Party stands for in summer 2019, his comments articulate these dual divisions.

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

Cal's argument that "able bodied" people should take be able to take care of themselves reflects the (un)deservingness distinction common in studies of Americans' attitudes about social welfare. Moreover, because the media portrays welfare recipients as Black and undeserving (Gilens 2000), Cal and others may be thinking of Black Americans when they refer to "some people" as "worthless and lazy." These concerns clearly do turn some Luthertonians away from public solutions.

But it is local organizational arrangements that turn most residents I spoke to *toward* private solutions and, more specifically, toward community provision: after parceling out the portion of people that are "deserving" of assistance, Cal explains that he prefers to address their needs through non-governmental entities.

That's because many Luthertonians share the definition of their social problems as *community* challenges and coalesce around appropriate political solutions as *private, collective efforts* because they encounter those challenges from within an organizational context that supports this understanding. Moreover, because these beliefs are reproduced at the city-level, they extend (to some extent) across lines of partisanship, occupation, and even organizational affiliation, as Patty's comments above illustrate. But place does not determine everything. For example, two residents I spoke to—both self-identified as Democrats or progressives—do prefer more statist solutions for national issues. Place is just one piece of what shapes Luthertonians' opinions; what the foregoing illustrates is *how* it accomplishes this.

### *Motorville: Social Problems as Systemic Challenges*

A similar process leads to a different outcome in Motorville. As we saw above, Motorville's organizational arrangements are defined by unions' active involvement in politics, ensuring that local elected officials understand their city's problems as rooted in systemic challenges, such as declines in domestic manufacturing and political attacks on unions. It is within this organizational context that Motorville residents make sense of their city's problems and come to understand their challenges as beyond any individual's or the city's control.

Brenda, for example, is a Democrat from Motorville who echoes Mayor Hayte's description of the city's central challenge in summer 2019: "So I am concerned because, again, if there is not a lot of good jobs and you are concerned about that, besides drinking, opioids are gonna be really cheap…And so I can understand that, you know, these things just kind of keep this horrible cycle going." Even as problems pile up in Motorville, residents like Brenda identify the root cause as a lack of good jobs.

These diagnostic frames persist among residents in Motorville for the same reasons as they do in Lutherton: through highly-publicized moments of local problem-solving, like when Mike and other City Councilors rushed to protect labor unions during Scott Walker's administration, and through everyday social interactions in which residents make sense of their own and others' experiences in the local economy. While Luthertonians' discussions are shaped by the church- and nonprofit-based social networks in which they are embedded, Motorvillians instead hear about their social problems from local opinion leaders like Mayor Hayte, from friends with ties to local unions, or from "friends of friends" (Fine 2012) who agree: Motorville is a city suffering from a lack of good jobs.

We can see how this framework circulates given the way residents talk about their experiences in the local economy. For example, on my very first evening in town, I spent the night on a tour of local bars with Elaine, who was born and raised in Motorville. As we drove, she described the poor quality of housing, alcoholism, and other social problems that go along with living in a "depressed" community—a word she routinely uses to describe Motorville. As Japonica Brown-Saracino (2018) has shown, it is precisely through these kinds of interactions that newcomers are socialized into a community and learn what a place is about. And what Motorvillians learn is that they are an economically disadvantaged community, through no fault of their own, and that their other problems are mere symptoms of systemic economic challenges. This notion persists despite the fact that Motorville is *not* a depressed economy: it has seen better real wage growth than Lutherton over the past 40 years, per Figure 1, and its unemployment rate was below 4% in summer 2019. But these objective realities do not prevent Motorvillians from converging on this shared understanding of their local economy.

Moreover, when other Motorvillians share stories of their difficulties finding meaningful employment, as Elaine does during our tour of the town, they insist that these difficulties are not the fault of any individual, but rather, the result of living in a "depressed" community. Christopher, for example, is a young professional who told me his view of the city's economy the first time we met, weaving his story in as he went along:

> I can tell you from trying to find a job in this market, in this area, it's really hard. ….Because just due to the way this area is, your typical college level or non-educated level, entry jobs are usually getting filled by people that have much more experience.

Christopher is frustrated by his unfulfilling job with poor benefits, but he does not blame himself. Rather, he sees his own experiences as further evidence of the city's systemic economic challenges.

When Motorvillians tell each another these stories, they reaffirm that their city has, as Christopher says, "always been" struggling economically. This diagnostic frame for understanding their social problems shapes the kinds of solutions residents identify as appropriate. For example, as Christopher, who is not in a union, goes on to explain: the solution to everything from the opioid crisis to hunger to housing is jobs "that create wealth." Other Motorvillians I spoke to—regardless of their own organizational affiliation—tend to agree with this assessment. Much like we saw in Lutherton, *this is a city-level tendency that extends beyond direct ties to organizations*.

Not only do residents within Motorville tend to agree on this diagnostic frame, they diverge markedly from their counterparts in Lutherton: there, only three residents mentioned job quality when discussing the community’s social problems or evaluating the local economy. Instead, residents told me again and again that the economy was booming. As Ken, a former long-haul truckdriver told me: “I could go out every day of the week and get a different job every day of the week.” For the Luthertonians I spoke to, addiction, hunger, and homelessness was part and parcel of a booming economy, rather than a sign of economic decline.

It would be difficult to explain Motorvillians’ relentless focus on “good jobs” and root cause solutions through any combination of party action and objective material conditions. First, Motorvillians continue to propose root-cause solutions at a time when the Democratic and Republican parties are both embracing a neoliberal logic (Mudge 2018). Second, Motorville’s objectively slower growth, relative to Lutherton, *could* lead Luthertonians to be more optimistic about their economy than Motorvillians; but these material differences do not explain why people working in similarly precarious conditions articulate critiques about systemic economic decline in Motorville and praise the local economy in Lutherton. Instead, these differences exist because residents within local organizational contexts that lead them to shared cultural frameworks for understanding their cities’ economies (Small 2004). Via both highly public moments of problem-solving and everyday encounters during which people discuss their own and others’ challenges, local organizational arrangements shape how residents of Motorville and Lutherton interpret similar social problems—in Motorville, those problems are rooted in postindustrial decline; in Lutherton, they are community challenges.

## From Local Organizational Arrangements to Narratives of Community Identity

The place-processes that lead residents toward shared diagnostic frames are important, but insufficient, evidence that place leads residents towards different political parties. For this, we have to understand how similar place-processes also lead residents to shared narratives of community identity.

### *Lutherton: Republicans are the Party of Christian Communities that Takes Care of Themselves*

The Luthertonians I spoke to articulate a shared understanding of who their community is and which political party best represents them: Lutherton, as I heard again and again, is a "Christian community", in Kyle's words, that takes care of itself. And in a political world organized around lines of Christian morality and local control, the Republican Party is the party for them. Much like diagnostic frames, these narratives of community identity are rooted in both collective experiences of problem-solving as well as routine social interaction and discussion ordered by the local organizational context.

Many residents describe Lutherton as a Christian community, but just as many describe it more specifically as a *German Lutheran* community. This claim is in part rooted in objective reality: adherents of Lutheran Church of the Missouri-Synod churches (LCMS, or "German Lutherans," in Luthertonians' parlance) did make up about one third of all religious adherents in the county as of 2010. But the city's ethno-religious composition is changing amid immigration from Mexico and Central America, which is swelling the ranks of the town's Catholic church and leading to Spanish-language masses on Sundays.

And yet, Lutherton's German Lutheran identity persists—although I never asked about the city's ethnic or religious composition, I heard about it routinely. This is in part because residents use church membership to locate each other within a local social hierarchy. Several people use the phrase "Lutheran mafia" to refer to the social status that accrues to members of German Lutheran churches. Fred, for example, is a member of a large and prominent German Lutheran church in Lutherton. During summer 2019, he introduced me to a group of his retired friends who have coffee together most mornings, saying: "You know, all of us go to the same church. Immaculate. It's the biggest church in town. The current mayor goes to our church." Fred repeats this same introduction when I join the group again a few months later.

In sum, Luthertonians understand themselves primarily in ethno-religious terms: they are a White, Christian community.[17] Because ethno-religious divisions are so salient in Lutherton, residents tend to see party politics as an expression of divisions around morality, race, and the appropriate role of the government—not an expression of class (in contrast to Motorville, as we will see below). These associations emerge from Luthertonians' experiences within church and their observations of their neighbors. For example, as Fred describes Republicans: "They're churchgoers. Most of the people I know that are Republicans fall into that category." Because Luthertonians like Fred know that their friends and family are both churchgoers and Republicans, they believe that Republicans and Christianity go together. This association requires little political knowledge in the formal sense (Kane et al. 2021)—instead, it is made through routine social interaction ordered by the local organizational context.

Churches, of course, also shape residents' *individual* politics: evangelical residents I interviewed care deeply about issues such as abortion, gender, and marriage, and see these issues as best represented by the Republican Party.[18] But churches also serve as community-level actors that shape residents' perceptions of their community as a German Lutheran community, *regardless of their own church ties*.

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[17] This means that White racial identity does implicitly undergird not only Luthertonians' community identity but also their anti-statism, not as a form of out-group resentment but as a form of *in-group* pride expressed through community-level ethno-religious identification (Cole 2020; Jardina 2019).

[18] Although these individual-level relationships are important for understanding the politics of many Lutherton residents I interviewed, I focus here on the place-based dynamics that cannot be reduced down to the direct effects of church membership or religious beliefs. This is not to negate the importance of religion in Lutherton or America politics, but rather, to add new insights about community-level dynamics to a longstanding literature showing the link between Christian conservatism and Republican partisanship (Bean 2014; Claassen et al. 2021; Mason 2016; Whitehead and Perry 2020).

And while no one I interviewed argued that there is a political party representing German Lutherans per se, many Luthertonians agree that the parties are divided around race: that Republicans represent White people and Democrats represent people of color. Although this racialized understanding of party politics is *not* place-based—residents of both Motorville and Lutherton, Democrats and Republicans, routinely describe the parties in this way—it does reinforce for Luthertonians that Republicans are the party of White Christians. For Luthertonians living in a German Lutheran community, the Republican Party feels like their home.

Not only are Republicans the party to represent *people like Luthertonians*, they also represent *places like Lutherton*: echoing Patty's comments above, residents see their community as a place where, in Todd's words, "we always take care of our own." And as Cal's comments suggest, Republicans represent communities that prefer to take care of themselves. Katherine—a retiree who relies on government assistance to make ends meet—articulates how these multiple conceptions of the Republican Party combine to make it common sense for Luthertonians to remain Republicans. When I ask her what the Republican Party stands for, she tells me: "…keep the government out of it as much as we can, that everything should be more or less on a local level. Let the states or the local level take care of things […] And I think they believe in protecting the unborn." Like Katherine, other Luthertonians I spoke to saw Republicans as the party for communities like theirs: White, Christian communities that take care of themselves.

### *Motorville: Democrats are the Party of the Have-Nots*

In Motorville, the idea that their city is stagnating amidst profound economic challenges leads residents to cohere around a different narrative of community identity: that they are a community of *have-nots*, who would benefit from Democrats leveraging state power to address systemic inequalities. Residents articulate this understanding in two ways. The first is a positive reflection on Motorville as a place that has always militated against the haves: Motorvillians often explain that they live in a *working town*, built on the back of organized labor. Luke, for example, is a non-union member who describes Motorville this way:

> It's a good blue-collar town….we have factories, we have processing, you get all that. So if you think like almost the standard, like Midwest American town, it really does encompass a lot of Motorville.

Many Motorvillians I spoke with agree with Luke's definition, and when they offer their own, they similarly refer to the visible signs of the town's industry or list the large union employers that remain in the city to express pride in their blue-collar roots. As Figure 5 shows, Motorvillians are also more likely to see pro-union messages from local politicians than are Luthertonians.

But as we saw above, residents also share many difficult experiences in what they agree is a troubled economy, leading them to view their city, and by extension themselves, as disadvantaged by macroeconomic factors. Danielle, a county employee from Motorville, exemplifies this stance. In fall 2019 I ask her what she would change about the country if she had a "magic wand," she moves quickly from universal healthcare to inequality. As she concludes:

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

I quote Danielle at length here because her comments indicate a worldview I heard among many Motorvillians I met: she positions herself as among the "struggling," a beneficiary of potential state intervention to redress economic inequality.

Danielle’s interpretation of her own social position is not just a function of her individual economic circumstances: that interpretation extends across residents with different occupations, organizational affiliations, and education levels—again suggesting a role for place in shaping social identification. College-educated Christopher sounds much like non-college-educated Danielle and Elaine, as well as many other Motorvillians who describe the challenges of attaining or retaining economic stability amidst the pervasive economic precarity and class inequalities of contemporary U.S. society.

Within this context, the Motorvillians I spoke to turn to the Democratic Party as the party that will attend to these inequalities, often by bringing in the state. Both union and non-union members I met tend to agree: Democrats are the party of the workers, the middle-class, and in general—the “have-nots.” Part of the reason for this is the political nature of Motorville’s unions, which means that rank-and-file members—as well as other residents who share even the most tenuous connection to a union—articulate a particular set of politics. Isaac, a member of the railroad union, is emblematic of this. As he says, he thinks of a Democratic voter as “someone that’s hopefully more labor, kind of like a labor-orientated person, obviously.”

Although Isaac’s view of party politics is partly reducible to direct political socialization within his union, it is also about place: because of the historical processes described above, Motorville’s unions today are still *political* organizations, while those that do exist in Lutherton are purely economic. Recall that this was in part by choice, not by chance: the auto workers in the 1970s voted in an apolitical employees’ association, unaffiliated with the AFL-CIO. As one Lutherton teacher told me, she views her union card as an “insurance policy” in case something goes wrong in the classroom.

Moreover, this definition of party politics resonates with most of the Motorvillians I spoke to, regardless of their own union status: Motorvillians tend to agree that Republicans represent the “haves” and Democrats the “have-nots.” As Kayce, who has never belonged to a union, tells me succinctly, Democrats favor “humanity” while Republicans favor “money.” These interpretations circulate beyond union circles through the same modes of communication described above. For example, while I watched the presidential primary debates in a Motorville bar during summer 2019, the owner admitted to us in a confessional tone: “Growing up, as a citizen, I was always a Democrat! And now, as a small business owner, I feel myself pulling toward the red. You know? And I hate it! I hate it!” This “confession” shows how easy it is for Motorvillians to learn this key political association (that Republicans are the party of business), just as I learned from Elaine that Motorville’s economy is depressed.

The result is that most Motorvillians I spoke to, regardless of their individual ties to unions, their occupation, or their education levels, imagine themselves as struggling in an unequal system. They also view the Democrats as the party that will call on the state and support unions—to their benefit. As a result, the Democratic Party is for them—a community of have-nots. A macro-level account, such as the one offered by the political articulation school, might suggest that this is because of Democrats’ co-optation of organized labor (Eidlin 2018). But these accounts offer less insight into why this party meaning resonates so much more with Motorvillians than with Luthertonians, and why it resonates with Motorvillians regardless of objective class position or union membership. And yet, it does. As the foregoing has shown, this is because Democrats’ longstanding, though often uneven, effort to inculcate a working-class political subjectivity resonates particularly well in Motorville where—regardless of class—residents are used to attributing economic precarity to factors beyond their control and demanding state intervention and good jobs as solutions (Benford and Snow 2000; Bonikowski 2017; McDonnell et al. 2017).

This is not to say that Luthertonians don't recognize an association between the working-classes with the Democratic Party and the affluent with the Republican Party—many people I spoke to do. But they also noted that this association was a mistaken stereotype—as Abigail told me, this just did not jive with her experience of growing up in a "blue collar community," much like Lutherton, that is full of Republicans. In other words, neither Motorvillians nor Luthertonians are ignorant of the many issues and social cleavages that structure American politics (Karol 2009), but they see party politics through the same lens with which they interpret their social positions.

## Discussion & Conclusion

### *Summary of Findings & Contributions*

In this paper, I have argued that place shapes and sustains residents' partisanship because local organizational arrangements mediate residents' experience of local structural conditions and national party politics, making it more likely that they will cohere around two cultural frameworks: 1) *diagnostic frames* for defining what their problems are and how to solve them politically; and 2) *narratives of community identity* that tell residents what kind of community they are and where they fit into the party system. When Motorvillians go about their everyday lives, they encounter social realities that make Democratic partisanship commonsense in a community of have-nots who want good jobs and state intervention; while Luthertonians have experiences that make Republican partisanship commonsense in a community of White Christians who prefer local control. Although I am not ruling out all other explanations for the beliefs I heard from residents, including partisanship itself (Campbell et al. 1960; Green et al.

2002), I have provided several pieces of evidence that point to how place reinforces residents' partisanship: residents within each city—across class, gender, age, and even organizational affiliations—tend to agree on who they are, what their problems are, and which political party best represents them.

As such, these findings offer several contributions to literature in political sociology. First, this paper builds on a growing body of work showing that place is *one* factor, among others, that shapes residents' political beliefs (L. L. Ashwood 2018; Cramer 2016; Hochschild 2016; Silva 2019) and ultimately their partisanship (Kuriwaki et al. 2023), by showing *how* it accomplishes this through local organizations. This mechanism allows us to better understand the relationship between place and politics: although a longstanding literature links place to political behavior, much of that literature defines places via their structural dimensions – either local economic conditions or demographic composition, particularly the spatial relationships between different ethnoracial groups (see Nathan and Sands 2023 for a review).

The organizational mechanism also sheds light on variation in political outcomes across the industrial Heartland (see also: Ternullo 2024). Neither Lutherton nor Motorville fits the mold of a city under threat from deindustrialization or rural decline that sees the state and its support for minorities as yet another threat (per Hochschild 2016): Lutherton's Republican anti-statism emerges from a context in which residents experience social problems as *solved*, rather than unresolved, and Motorvillians' Democratic populist sentiments turns them toward the state (in contrast to Cramer 2016). Thus, while these findings do not contradict evidence of the link between deindustrialization, White racial resentment, and the rise of right-wing populism, they do shed new light on additional sources of variation in White Americans' political identities—the local organizations that shape their communities. Moreover, understanding this variation is crucial to contemporary political outcomes: predominantly White states remain central to U.S. elections even as the country becomes increasingly multiracial (Rodden 2019), and largely White, rural communities within those states are still able to tip their states into one electoral column or the other (Monnat and Brown 2017).

Second, this account of place-based partisanship offers one way of reviving a social-contextual account of how partisan attachments form and endure. Early American voter studies theorized that, much like I have argued here, partisanship was confined within the relationship between social structural divisions and party maneuvering, but social context helped guide people's politics within those constraints (Lazarsfeld et al. 1948:138). But despite calls for new empirical research identifying the mechanisms by which social contexts shape political identities, this tradition has largely been sidelined (Bonikowski 2016; Smith 2004). By developing a theory of how place shapes and sustains partisan attachments, this paper provides a way forward for other scholars interested in understanding how social contexts shape the contingent process of political identity formation. A theory of place-based partisanship is just one way of reviving this approach, because place is just one dimension of voters' social contexts; as such, future research should consider how other factors, such as social networks (Carlson, Abrajano, and García Bedolla 2020; Mutz 2002) and career trajectories, also contribute to shaping and sustaining partisan attachments.

Finally, this paper moves beyond traditional accounts of organizations as sites of political socialization that directly link members to political parties (Bean 2014; Schlozman 2015) or shape political participation (Han 2016; Putnam 2000). Even the Columbia School's social-contextual accounts of partisanship described local organizations as merely *reflections* of the kinds of people who live in a place, rather than community actors that help give places meaning (see McQuarrie and Marwell 2009). Instead, as we have seen in both Motorville and Lutherton, local organizational arrangements create shared contexts for political meaning-making for residents far beyond their direct members, because they shape local-problem-solving, structure discussion networks, and help produce certain kinds of local opinion leaders. For this reason, union- and non-union members of Motorville sound much more similar than do union members of Motorville and Lutherton.

Although these findings make important contributions, there are also limitations to this study. Because the research was not initially designed to study place, it compares cities in two different states. As such, while I conceptualize the historical emergence of cities as rooted partly in state policy contexts, the research design poses challenges in fully disentangling the role of state-, county-, and city-level factors in shaping political behavior. Although I am able to examine the historical emergence of each place in greater detail through the archival evidence (Ternullo 2024, *Forthcoming*), this remains a limitation, and future scholars should consider within-state comparisons that allow them to rule out state-level variation.

### *Extending the Theory to Other Cases*

Extending this theory of place-based partisanship to other cases requires thinking about three kinds of variation: the kinds of people who live in the place; the kind of place it is; and the national party system. First, this argument suggests that place plays the most important role in sustaining partisan attachments among cross-pressured voters – people, like the White working- and middle-class residents of Motorville and Lutherton, whose social group memberships might lead them to affiliate with either political party (Lipset 1960; Mason 2016). This is because social group memberships and party politics provide the least constraint on these individuals; as such, place can help them interpret their social identities and how they fit into party politics. This also means that, because place is just one source of variation in Americans' partisanship, we should not expect that Asian, Black, or Latinx Americans living in a civic-minded community will become Republicans like Luthertonians, nor that wealthy business owners living in a town full of union workers will be Democrats like Motorvillians. In other words, individuals' social group memberships and party elites' strategizing will continue to shape the range of possible political interpretations open to people, regardless of place.

Second, in other kinds of places, we might expect different organizations to matter more for residents' politics. Unions and evangelical churches have long provided the organizational links between the working-classes and the Democratic Party, in the case of unions, and evangelical Christians and the Republican Party, in the case of churches (Bean 2014; Hout, Manza, and Brooks 1999; Schlozman 2015; Williams 2010). As such, they are particularly important for understanding how place shapes partisanship in largely White, Christian, postindustrial cities (Gazmarian and Tingley 2022). That is not to say that straightforward counts of organizational adherents are sufficient indicators of how place shapes partisanship: per Appendix Figure A3, not all postindustrial cities with unions will keep workers in the Democratic fold, but those that still have politically active unions—like Motorville—might. And in different kinds of places, other kinds of local organizations will be more important in shaping social interaction, discussion, and problem-solving: instead of churches and unions, we might find networks of business associations, nonprofits, and politicians are key to shaping local problem-solving in larger cities or cities with historically active chambers of commerce (Marwell, Marantz, and Baldassarri 2020; Safford 2009). Similarly, in countries with welfare states that have not experienced the kind of devolution and marketization the U.S. has seen since the 1960s, we might expect that nonprofits and churches would play much less of a role in welfare provision and, therefore, in shaping place-based partisanship (Pacewicz 2016; Salamon, Gronjberg, and Salamon 2002). But as recent has shown, the role of local organizations in shaping problem-solving is hardly limited to Motorville and Lutherton: the supply of civil society organizations is associated with pro-social behaviors such as mutual aid in communities across the country (de Vries et al. 2024).

Regardless of the organizations involved, to understand whether local problem-solving arrangements are shaping residents' politics through similar mechanisms to what I have shown here, scholars should assess whether they lead residents to think about certain social problems as (in)appropriate for state intervention. This suggests that place is perhaps least relevant to residents' politics in affluent city centers where young professionals come and go frequently and do not involve themselves in the community, read local news, or speak to their neighbors. As other scholars have shown, in-migration does not destabilize place-meanings, and in fact can reinforce them (Brown-Saracino 2015), but this requires a pre-existing cultural framework that new residents learn and then convey to others. In neighborhoods with extremely high rates of residential turnover, developing this kind of sticky place character in the first place may be difficult.

And finally, the mechanisms by which place helps shape and sustain residents' partisan attachments might also translate to other countries, but to do so, scholars must remain attentive to country-specific processes of party elite maneuvering. For example, Fitzgerald (2018) finds that attachment to one's locality increases radical right voting in several European counties, but participation in local organizations decreases it, suggesting that certain forms of participation in community life can mute the feelings of social marginalization associated with right-wing populism (Gidron and Hall 2020). We might even expect that, in European party systems more defined by social class divisions than the U.S., unions are particularly important in containing the tendency toward right-populism in postindustrial cities (Mudge 2018). But for unions or any other local organizations to play this role of leading residents away from right-populist partisanship, those organizations must create cultural frameworks that link voters to an alternative party – and one half of that local-national link depends on the parties themselves.

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# Tables & Figures for “Place-Based Partisanship”

## 1 Tables & Figures in Main Text

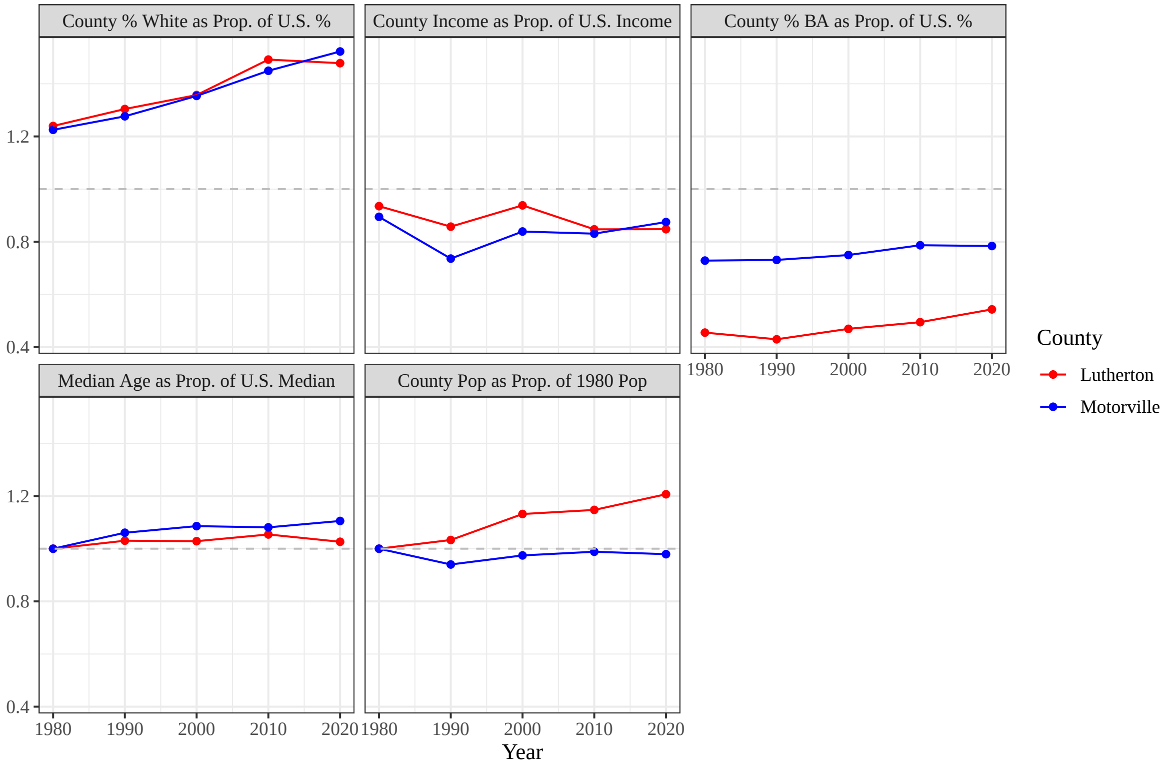
Table 1: Sample Political & Demographic Characteristics

| *Political Characteristics* | Motorville | Lutherton |
|---|---|---|
| % Democrat | 54 | 20 |
| % Republican | 13 | 63 |
| % Independent | 25 | 17 |
| % Don't Know | 8 | 0 |
| Avg. Political Engagement [1] | 2.5 | 2.6 |
| *Demographic Characteristics* | | |
| % Union Household | 53 | 30 |
| % Women | 63 | 47 |
| % College Graduate | 50 | 53 |
| % Church Member | 25 | 87 |
| % Retired | 21 | 23 |
| % Unemployment during COVID [2] | 17 | 7 |
| % Born in Motorville/Lutherton | 63 | 63 |
| If not born there, avg. length of residence (yrs) | 14 | 27 |

[1] Based on the author's qualitative coding, respondents were ranked on a scale from 1-4, where: 1 = little sense of what differentiates the major parties, does not watch the news, may or may not vote; 2 = some sense of what differentiates the major parties, may watch the news, votes with regularity; 3 = knowledgeable about partisan differences, watches the news regularly; 4 = avidly attuned to politics.

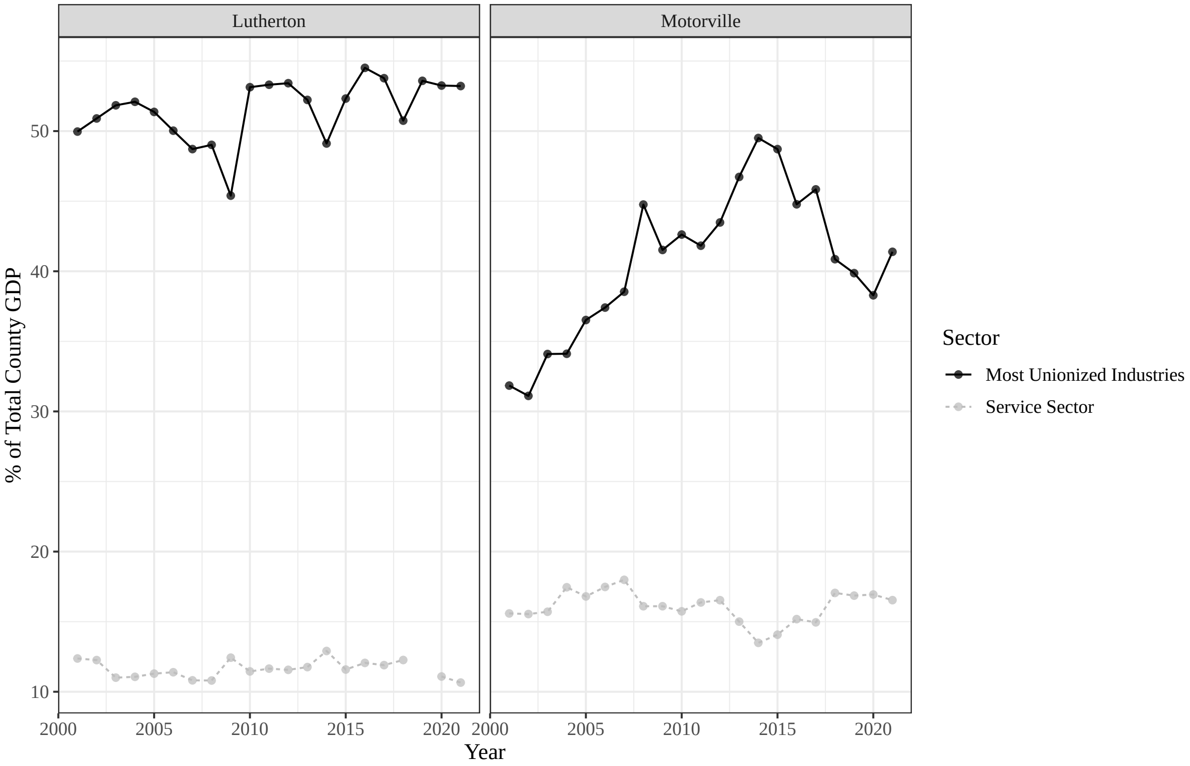
[2] 1 if a member of the respondent's household received Unemployment Assistance during the period from March 2020-November 2020; 0 otherwise.

Figure 1: County Changes in Race, Income, Education, and Age, 1980-2020



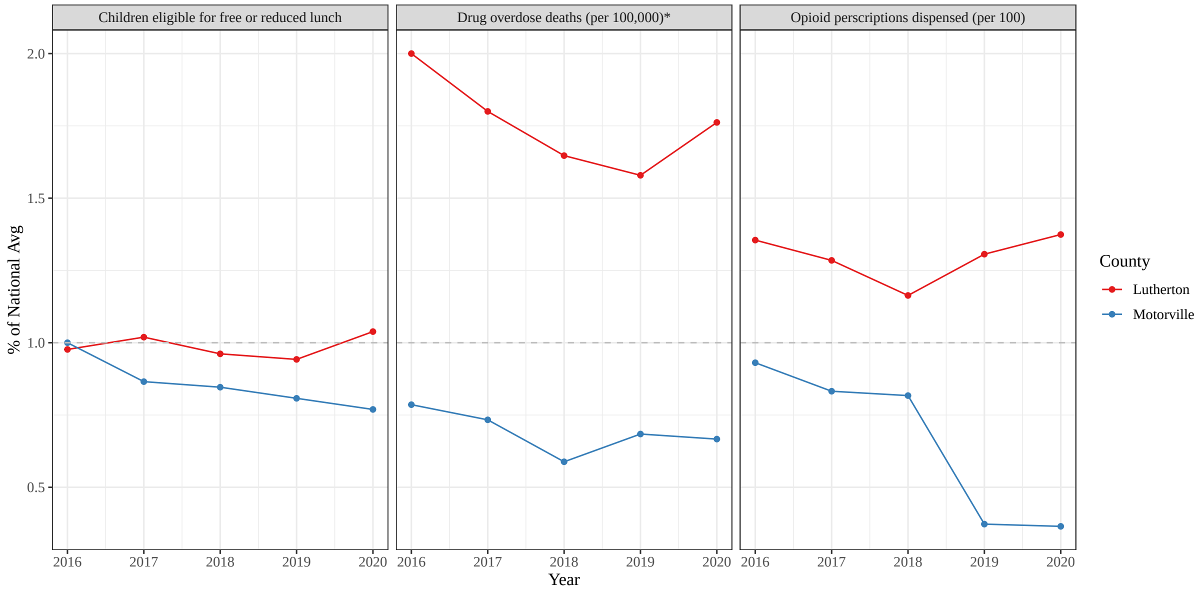
*Note:*Data are from Census decennial counts for 1980-2000 and ACS 5-year estimate for 2010 and 2020.

Figure 2: County GDP by unionized industries vs. service sector, 2001-2019



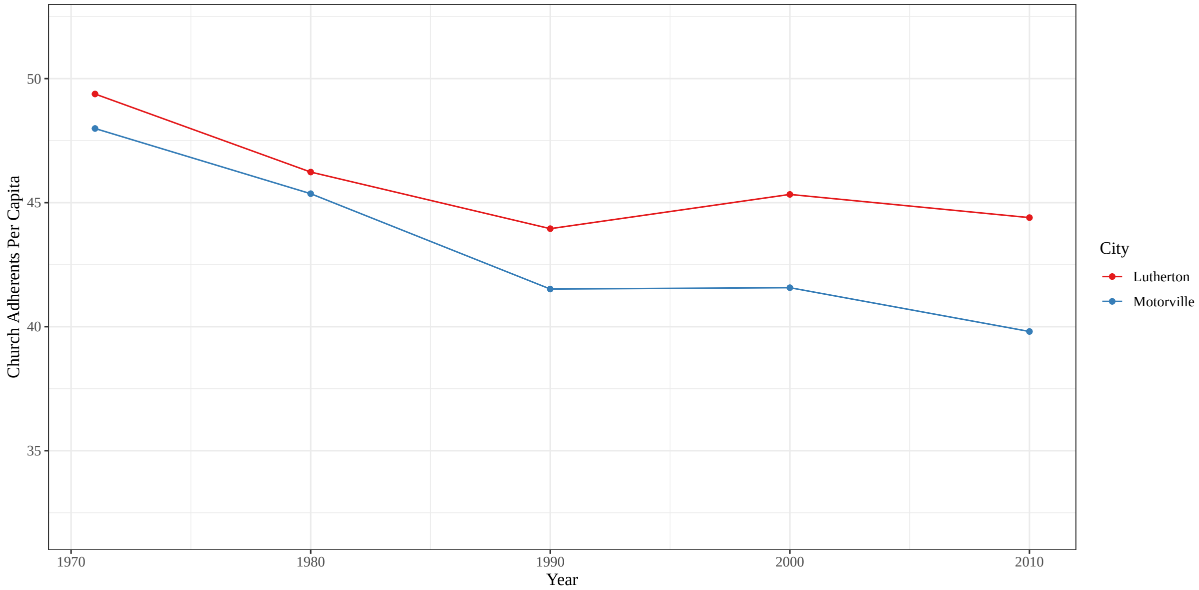
*Note:* Data are from the Bureau of Economic Analysis. They show the share of total county GDP produced by the service sector and the most unionized private sector industries, according to 2012 NAICS industrial codes. According to Hirsch and McPherson's (2019) unionization-by-industry data for 2001-2019, the most unionized private sector industries were—on average—transportation and utilities, construction, and manufacturing. The BEA data are missing several years of service sector output for Lutherton.

Figure 3: Postindustrial Social Problems in Motorville and Lutherton, 2016-2020



*Note:* Data on eligibility for free and reduced lunch and drug overdose deaths are from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation's 2020 County Health Rankings, www.countyhealthrankings.org. Data on the rate of opioid prescriptions dispensed are from the CDC: https://www.cdc.gov/drugoverdose/data/statedeaths.html.

Figure 4: Changes in Church Adherence, 1970-2010



*Note:* Data are from the Association of Religion Data Archives (ARDA). Before 1980, ARDA does not provide comparable longitudinal data on churches or church adherence. To ensure comparability over time, this count thus holds constant the denominations that were most popular between 1950-2010.

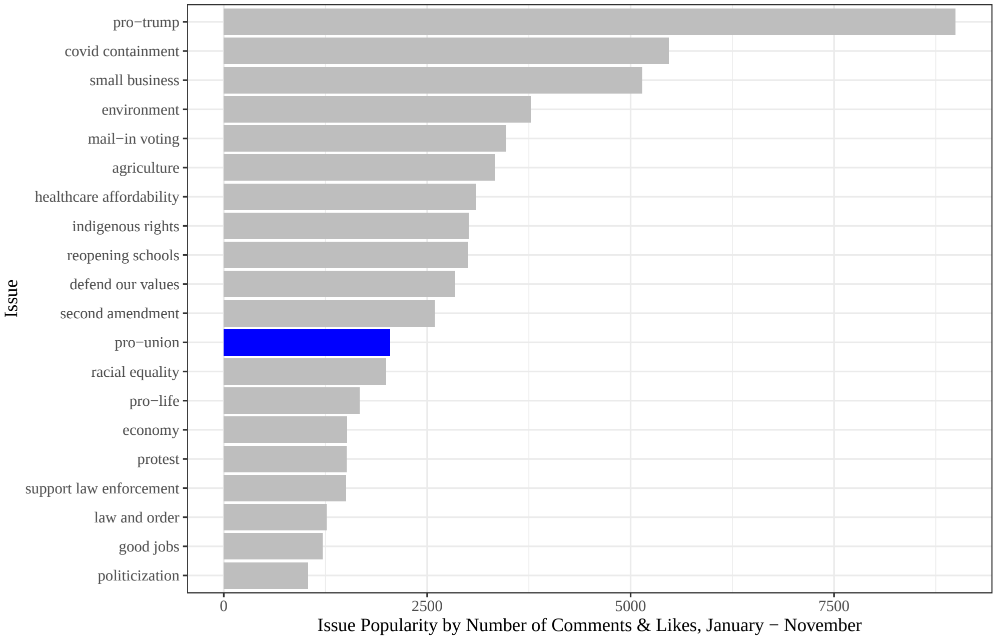
Table 2: Local Organizational Arrangements

| | Motorville | Lutherton |
|---|---|---|
| Tax Rev. per Capita, 2017$ | 0.5 | 0.4 |
| Local Welfar Expend. per Capita, 2017$ | 0.3 | 0.0 |
| State Aid per Capita, 2017$ | 0.4 | 0.0 |
| No. Service Nonprofits per 1,000 Residents, 2020 | 1.7 | 1.9 |
| Service Nonprofits, Rev. per Capita, 2020$ | 156 | 609 |
| Service Nonprofits, Assets per Capita, 2020$ | 372 | 1652 |
| Labor Orgs per 1,000 Residents, 2020 | 0.4 | 0.1 |
| % of Labor Organizations with ¿ $25,000 in Revenue | 16 | 0 |
| Religious Congregations Per 1,000 Residents, 2010 | 1 | 2 |
| City Councilors who are also labor leaders, 2019 | 40 | 0 |
| City Councilors with church/religious affiliation in bio | 0 | 57 |

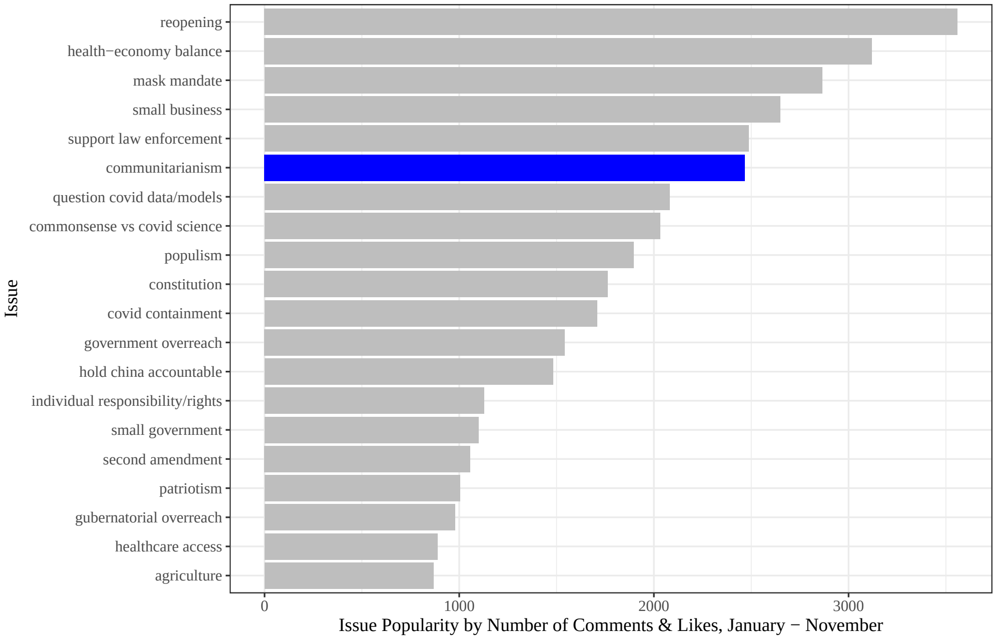
*Note:* Revenue and spending data are from the Census Bureau's 2017 Survey of State and Local Government Finances, using the "Government Finance and Employment Classification Manual" to aggregate revenues and expenditures (see https://www2.census.gov/govs/class/classfull.pdf.)
Data on labor organizations and service nonprofits come from the Based on the Urban Institute's National Center for Charitable Statistics IRS Business Master File from April 2020. Data on religious congregations come from the Association of Religious Data Archives county-level data from 2010.

Figure 5: Most Popular Issues on Facebook, January-November 2020

(a) Motorville



(b) Lutherton



*Note:* This includes all publicly available posts from local politicians, from City Council up through the U.S. House of Representatives. After qualitatively coding the posts for content, I weighted each post by the number of likes and comments they received to create a measure of topic popularity.

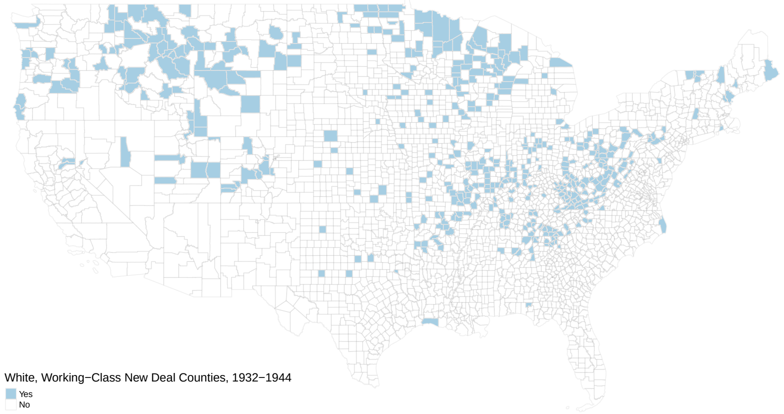
# 2 Appendix

## 2.1 Case Selection

As noted in the main text, my study of Motorville and Lutherton is part of a three-case comparison designed to explain contemporary differences in White political identity as a legacy of the Racial Realignment of the 1950s and 60s. To accomplish this, I wanted to find similar individuals whose parents and grandparents may have once shared the same political party, but who differ in their own partisan attachments. To find those individuals, I relied on county-level data. More specifically, I identified the three counties for the larger study using a data set containing presidential voting and demographic data from 1932-2016 from every county in the contiguous United States. Within this data set, I first identified all counties that could be considered part of the largely White, blue-collar, New Deal Democratic coalition in the 1930s and 40s, which have also remained demographically similar to the present. More concretely, these were counties that were a vast-majority White, with an above-average portion of the work force employed in manual labor occupations or in the manufacturing sector throughout the period from 1932-2016. These counties were also "New Deal Democrats" because they voted, on average, Democratic in every presidential election from 1932 to 1944. There were 467 counties that fit these criteria.

Because demographic change is an obvious explanation for places to diverge in their political trajectories, I sought to "hold this constant." Jonathan Rodden (2019), for example, has recently offered an account of how demographic change might account in part for a growing urban-rural partisan divide. Figure A1 maps shows the geographic distribution of these counties.

Figure A1: Map of White Working-Class Counties, Part of the New Deal Coalition, 1932-1944

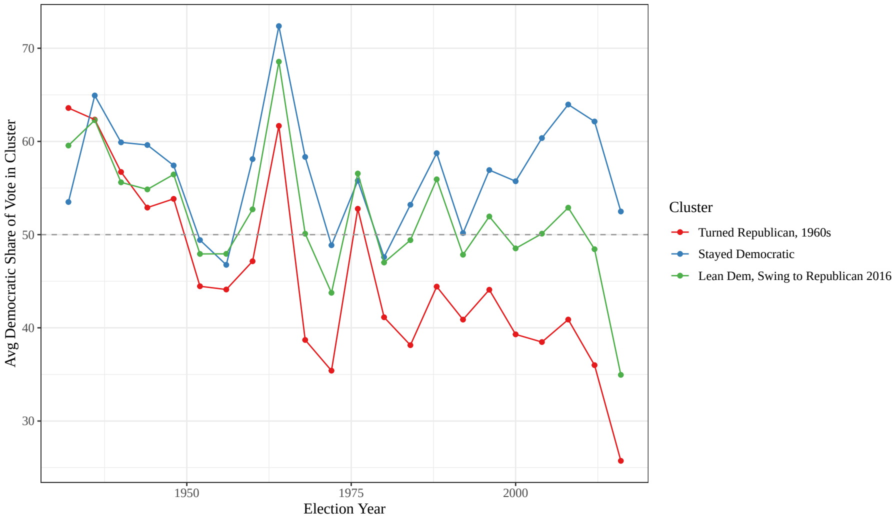


*Note:* Counties were coded 1 if they voted, on average, Democratic from 1932 to 1944; had third tercile employment (for all U.S. counties) in craftmen, operatives, or laborers occupations or the manufacturing sector in the 1940 and 1950 census; had third tercile employment in construction, maintenance, transportation, or production occupations and third tercile employment in service occupations from 2000 to 2016; and were more than 90 percent White in 1940 and remained more than 85 percent White and Non-Hispanic in 2016, according to the American Community Survey's five-year estimates.

From within these 467 counties, I wanted to identify three types of voting trajectories after the 1964 Racial Realignment: a group of counties that turned Republican after the realignment; a group that became more competitive ("swing" counties), and a group that stayed Democratic to the present day. As such, I first relied on a hierarchical clustering analysis (using Ward's minimum distance to minimize variation within clusters) to inductively identify different trajectories. A 4-cluster analysis rendered one "swing" cluster, two that turned Republican in 1964 or 1968, and one that stayed Democratic until 2000. Then I took a more deductive approach, working within the Democratic cluster to identify a sub-cluster that stayed Democratic until 2016 (the most recent presidential election, at the time). Only a handful of counties (4.1%) stayed Democratic until 2012 or after.

Figure A2 plots the average Democratic Party vote share of each cluster (Republican, Democratic, and Swing) in all presidential elections from 1964-2016. Motorville was even more Democratic than other counties in its cluster in 2016, and remained in the Democratic camp through 2020.

Figure A2: Voting Trajectories by Cluster



*Note:* The figure shows the average Democratic presidential vote share from 1932 to 2016 for all counties that were part of the same clusters as Motorville ("Stayed Democratic") and Lutherton ("Turned Republican, 1960s").

Table A1 shows the average occupational and racial characteristics by cluster in both 1940 and 2016.

Table A1: Occupational and Racial Characteristics by Cluster, 1940 & 2016

| | Turned Republican, 1960s | Stayed Democratic |
|---|---|---|
| % Employed as Laborers, 1940 | 20 | 14 |
| % Employed as Craftmen, 1940 | 8.8 | 12.1 |
| % Employed as Operatives, 1940 | 16 | 24 |
| % Employed in Most Unionized Industries, 1940 | 26 | 39 |
| Change in Unionized Industry Employment, 1980-1990 | -2.8 | -4.9 |
| % Employed in Maintenance, 2016 | 4.3 | 3.4 |
| % Employed in Construction, 2016 | 6.6 | 5.6 |
| % Employed in Production, 2016 | 9.8 | 6.1 |
| % Employed in Transportation, 2016 | 8.3 | 6.2 |
| % White, 1940 | 98 | 99 |
| % White, Non-Hispanic, 2016 | 92 | 90 |

*Note:* Demographic data are from the 2019 ACS. Presidential voting history data are from political scientist Peter Nardulli (1994). The "unionized industries" measure includes manufacturing, construction, and transportation/communications/utilities employment from the 1940 industry codes; and construction, manufacturing, transportation, and communications/utilities from the 1980 and 1990 industry codes. These are the private sector industries that were most unionized during the time period for which we have unionization-by- industry data (Hirsch and Macpherson 2019).

## 2.2 Data Collection & Coding of Politicians' Facebook Posts

Before the fourth round of interviews in September and October of 2020, with the help of three research assistants I collected all publicly available Facebook posts from "local" politicians in each field site that were posted between March 1-August 31, 2020. I later extended the data to include all posts from January 1-November 3 (the day of the U.S. presidential election). Within the scope of "local" I included all candidates and incumbents from city and county offices, up to the community's U.S. House of Representatives seat. I focused on Facebook posts as interviewees had overwhelmingly indicated in previous interviews that this was their preferred social media platform. I collected three pieces of information from each post: the content, the number of likes, and the number of comments. Based on the content, I then qualitatively coded each post for its issue content. For example, posts that questioned the scientific logic of COVID-19 containment measures and the data they are based on were coded as "question covid data/models." Posts coded as "reopening logic" questioned a seeming arbitrariness to the COVID-19 closures. Each post could have several codes.[1]

I then weighted posts by likes and comments to identify the most prevalent issues and themes from political elites in each community in the months leading up to the election. I used this analysis in two ways: 1) to assess the extent to which each community had a distinct local political discourse online, indicated not just by the prevalence of different issues but by a focus on local or state over national content; and 2) to develop questions for interviewees in the fall. I asked if they were aware of or concerned about the most popular issues that characterized their communities' local Facebook discourses. I also asked participants several questions about their social media usage and the geographic distribution of their social media networks.

I found that when my interlocutors logged onto Facebook, they learned about local politics in two ways: first, they learned about their community itself from friends who were also neighbors and politicians who posted about local issues. And second, they saw national politics discussed in ways that privileged local understandings of what is at stake in party politics (as shown in Figure

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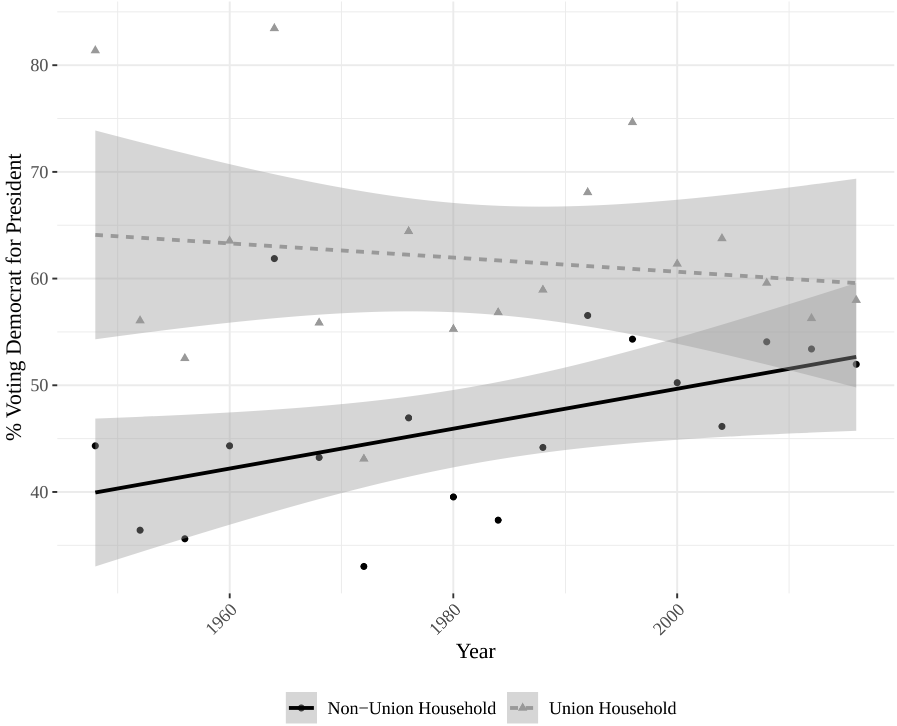
[1] In addition to the hand-coding, I also used structured topic modeling and word clouds to see what topics and words stood out in the data. While neither summarizing technique contradicted the hand-coding, both were far less informative.

5 of the Main Text).

Figure A3 shows the total percentage people voting for the Democratic presidential candidate, within union and non-union households, from 1948-2016. The data come from the American National Election Studies.

Figure A3: Democratic Party voting in union and non-union households, 1948–2016



*Note:* Data come from the American National Election Studies (ANES) Cumulative Timeseries file. In calculating percentages for each year, I have applied the appropriate weights.