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Ethnography and Political Opinion: Identity, Alienation and Anti-establishmentarianism in Rural Alberta

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Abstract

This article documents an ethnographic case study designed to provide deeper insight into the manifestation of political opinion in the rural areas of Alberta, Canada. Employing "a method of listening," the study demonstrates that rural Albertans, like rural Americans, are feeling politically alienated and angry in ways that go beyond ideological preference, age or income level. In fact, the grievances unveiled in this study are connected directly to key aspects of their social identites: to thier sense of belonging as Albertans, as "ordinary citizens" and as explicitly rural. Importantly, these forms of alienation are often experienced as being layered, frequently melting into each other and strongly informing both these citizens' strong support for anti-establishment politics and the rather negative fashion in which they interpret the plight of newcomers to Canada and of Indigenous Canadians.

Résumé

Cet article présente une étude de cas ethnographique conçue pour fournir un aperçu plus approfondi de l'expression de l'opinion politique dans les zones rurales de l'Alberta, au Canada. En utilisant « une méthode d'écoute », l'étude démontre que les Albertains ruraux, comme les Américains ruraux, se sentent politiquement aliénés et en colère d'une manière qui va au-delà de la préférence idéologique, de l'âge ou du niveau de revenu. En fait, les griefs dévoilés dans cette étude sont directement liés à des aspects clés de leur identité sociale : à leur sentiment d'appartenance en tant qu'« Albertains », en tant que « citoyens ordinaires » et en tant qu'habitants explicitement « ruraux ». Il est important de noter que ces formes d'aliénation sont souvent vécues comme étant superposées, se fondant souvent les unes dans les autres et structurant la forte adhésion des citoyens ruraux aux politiques anti-établissement et la manière plutôt négative dont ils interprètent la situation critique des nouveaux arrivants au Canada et des Canadiens autochtones en général.

Keywords: political ethnography; Alberta; rural-urban divide; public opinion; alienation; anti-establishment; racism

Mots-clés : ethnographie politique; aliénation; Alberta rurale; contre-pouvoir; racisme

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The gap between what we are yelling and what is being heard is growing every year.

—rural Alberta citizen

So, are you going to take this report and show it to someone who really matters? Someone who will really listen?

—rural Alberta citizen

I entered a McDonald's far earlier in the morning than I would have preferred, ordered a coffee I did not want and approached a group of five men engrossed in conversation. "Is this where the bullshitters gather?" I asked. The men looked up from their conversation, slightly confused, but a second later, the unofficial spokesman of the group replied, "Well, those guys at that table are much bigger bullshitters, but I suppose we know how to bullshit alright ourselves. Why don't you sit down and find out?" With that, my academic study had begun.

Replicating Cramer's (2016) pathbreaking study, *The Politics of Resentment*, this article documents an ethnographic case study designed to provide deeper insight into the manifestation of political opinion in the rural areas of Alberta, Canada. Over the course of the spring and summer of 2019, I immersed myself in the regularly occurring political conversations of 23 groups of acquaintances in 16 rural communities across Alberta. This aim of this work was not simply to ascertain where rural Albertans stood on particular issues but to employ what Cramer has labelled "a method of listening," with the intent of trying to better understand how these individuals came to hold their opinions. Indeed, the essence of ethnography involves the immersion of the researcher into the world of the subjects, with the explicit goal of seeking a deeper grasp of not just *what* they think but *how* they come to think these things. What better way to do this then to spend time with people "as unobtrusively as possible, to listen to what individuals say and how members of groups interact with one another, in the settings in which they normally meet, under the conditions they set for themselves"? (Cramer Walsh, 2009: 170). This article, centred on those conversations, provides a deeper consideration of how political opinions are currently formulated in rural Alberta, especially with respect to the role played by social identity. This study further provides a contribution to the emerging literature that argues for a wider adoption of ethnographic methods within political science, particularly as we grapple with shifting public opinion in an age of widespread political disaffection across the Western world.

The political implications of this disaffection, especially as they relate to the rise in support for populist, anti-establishment and even xenophobic parties, have not gone overlooked by scholars (Norris and Inglehart, 2018; Brown, 2019). Of particular interest in the American political context has been the rural/urban divide and especially the connection between the ongoing economic deterioration of rural America (Carr and Kefalas, 2010; Wuthnow, 2013) and the resulting anger and resentment felt in these communities that has fuelled anti-establishment movements (Cramer, 2016; Hochschild, 2016; Monnat and Brown, 2017; Wuthnow, 2018). The analyses central to this work move beyond traditional determinants of political opinion (age, income, education level, etc.) and highlight instead the

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importance of social identity—an individual's sense of "who they are" based on the groups they are a part of—as a key factor in the development of political attitudes. Cramer, in particular, grounds her analysis in theories that connect social identity to political opinion (Brewer, 2001; Conover, 1988; Cramer Walsh, 2004; Huddy, 2003) and convincingly demonstrates the role of "rural consciousness"—a sense that rural citizens understand themselves to be both fundamentally different from urbanites and often ignored by urban-focussed decision makers. Wuthnow (2018) largely concurs, arguing that rural communities are best understood as moral communities "in which people feel an obligation to one another and to uphold the local ways of being" and that rural citizens possess a deeply rooted identity in their particular town; an intense pride in being "practical, productive, and down-to-earth"; and a shared sense of "rage" that their moral community is felt to be "under siege" and "left behind" (4, 6–11). Hochschild's (2016) study of Louisiana, while not exclusively rural focussed, similarly identified shared cultural values and an emerging sense that "ordinary people" are literally feeling like "strangers in their own land," as the key to understanding the political resentment that motivated such strong support for the anti-establishment Tea Party movement.

What, then, of rural Canada? Rural areas across the country have long experienced economic decline similar to that found in America (Epp and Whitson, 2001; Parkins and Reed, 2013). Is there an accompanying sense of anger in these regions, tightly connected to a sense of rural identity and being left behind, that is ripe for exploitation by anti-establishment parties? Epp (2019) hints at a sense of growing rural resentment in Alberta, but additional survey work is required to tell us whether (and which) rural citizens are, in fact, growing more interested in such parties. However, I am not confident that correlation-based survey work, on its own, can disentangle the myriad reasons why this may (or may not) be so in any given community, especially if social identity is playing a role similar to what it plays in rural America. Thus, this article is premised on the notion that immersive ethnographic research that prioritizes citizens' ability to explain their thinking in their own words holds great potential to complement large-scale surveys and further bolster our understanding of political opinion formation, especially when considering the role played by something as subjective as social identity and its potential connection to political resentment and anti-establishmentarianism.

In the sections that follow, I will provide a more thorough overview of the ethnographic approach before unpacking the study and its central findings. In short, rural Albertans, like rural Americans, are feeling politically alienated and angry in ways that go beyond ideological preference, age or income level. In fact, each of the grievances unveiled in this study is connected directly to key aspects of social identity, to people's sense of belonging in particular groups, rather than to a more specific sense of personal economic well-being. Two sources of this discontent have deep historical roots in the province. First, and related specifically to provincial social identity, rural Albertans currently feel a strong sense of what has traditionally been referred to as "western alienation." This was unsurprising. The notion that the western region of Canada is being mistreated in a particular way by the federal government stretches back to the earliest days of Confederation and has flared up in Alberta on a number of occasions, especially when the province's resource-based economy faces the twin evils of low global commodity prices and a seemingly

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out-of-touch Liberal government (Berdahl and Gibbins, 2014; Gibbins, 1982). Second, and connected to their self-identification as "ordinary people," rural Albertans feel a broad political alienation centred on the notion that politicians do not listen to ordinary people—a populist and anti-party sentiment that echoes much of what emanates from contemporary rural America but also has a long history within the province's political culture, stretching back to the days of the agrarian revolt in the early twentieth century (Banack, 2016; Laycock, 1990; MacPherson, 1953). Finally, and most similar to contemporary rural America, rural Albertans feel a precise form of rural alienation related to their own sense of a rural identity and a corresponding belief in the idea that rural communities and citizens in Alberta are often unfairly treated, overlooked and even looked down upon.

Importantly, these forms of alienation are not always experienced as distinct irritations but rather as being layered, frequently melting into each other, especially as citizens work to make sense of other, seemingly unrelated, political issues. In particular, this sense of layered alienation frequently informs both rural citizens' strong support for anti-establishment politics (expressed variously as support for provincial separation, distrust of mainstream media and— especially—admiration of US president Donald Trump) and the rather negative fashion by which they often interpret the plight of both newcomers to Canada and Indigenous peoples. In fact, I argue that it is largely impossible to make sense of the political views of rural Albertans on these issues without grasping the manner in which this layered sense of alienation—connected to their social identities as Albertans, as "ordinary people" and as rural—is animating their thinking.

In demonstrating these layers of alienation and their implications, this article aims at three particular contributions. At the empirical level, the article demonstrates how a rural-specific sense of alienation works in tandem with other long-running forms of Alberta-based alienation to influence how rural Albertans interpret seemingly unrelated political issues, thereby providing an initial pathway to consider more comparatively the rural/urban divide and political opinion in Canada. At the methodological level, this article provides further evidence that ethnographic approaches can play an important role in our quest to understand political opinion formation, especially as it pertains to the role of various social identities. Indeed, the extent of the discontent felt—and, more importantly, the particular ways in which seemingly different political issues have come to be understood as tightly connected for many citizens in rural Alberta—became visible only after I participated in several of these coffee chats. That a replication of Cramer's approach in rural Wisconsin generated such similar findings in rural Alberta further shows that replication of results via ethnographic research—often deemed to be difficult and thus a weakness of the approach compared to survey work—is, in fact, possible. Finally, at the theoretical level, this article provides additional evidence that social identity is often an important (although sometimes underappreciated) factor in political opinion formation.

Studying Politics via Ethnography

Ethnographic approaches have a long and distinct history, especially in the fields of anthropology and sociology. In its basic formulation, ethnography involves "social

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research based on the close-up, on-the-ground observation of people and institutions in real time and space, in which the investigator embeds herself near (or within) the phenomenon so as to detect how and why agents on the scene act, think and feel the way they do" (Wacquant, 2003: 5). Schatz (2009: 5) has further elaborated on an "ethnographic sensibility" that utilizes direct observation or immersion in a community or group with the specific aim of gleaning "the meanings that the people under study attribute to their social and political reality." This search for underlying meaning often leads to a distinct mode of social inquiry, frequently labelled "interpretivism," which begins from the premise that humans are embodied beings whose actions are dependent upon their interpretations of the moral frameworks they live within. The task of interpretive social inquiry is thus to understand and make clear these frameworks and therefore provide an accurate explanation as to what the subject is doing by grasping why he or she is doing it (Bauman, 1992; Taylor, 1985).

Central to interpretive inquiry is the importance of "intersubjective," or communally shared, understandings, and thus an inherent recognition that a proper accounting of a particular action requires a more culturally bound answer than some modern researchers are prepared to allow. The interpretive inquirer accepts that people in similar situations can hold distinct reasons for doing the same action given their unique backgrounds, a notion that can problematize the explanatory power of large-N survey research that attempts to demonstrate correlations between personal attributes and political behaviour. As Geertz (2003: 27) has noted, the interpretive researcher does not seek to correlate behaviour but rather works like a detective, trying to get "a meaning frame to provide an understanding of what is going on. You want to understand what it is that is motivating people."

Ethnography is precisely this type of interpretive enterprise (Wedeen, 2009). Interpretivist ethnography tends not to begin with independent or dependent variables, nor does it usually propose a hypothesis. This is because, as Yanow (2006: 71–72) has argued, the researcher does not know what "meanings" will emerge in the interaction with the subjects. Instead, the researcher begins with a general hunch about how this meaning will be communicated, and it is this suspicion that directs the researcher in one way or another with respect to interactions with the subjects in the search for understanding. It is by way of this interaction with the subject that understanding emerges. This difference in approach does not imply, however, that an ethnographic form of interpretivism avoids the issue of rigour; it is rigour by a different standard. It does not borrow standards such as validity, reliability or generalizability from the natural science model; instead, it relies on logical argumentation, backed up by detailed, thick descriptions. It offers, in other words, a new interpretation of why a subject thinks or acts in a particular way, and it uses thick description to demonstrate why this interpretation makes sense.

Despite its popularity in other branches of the social sciences, ethnographic study of this sort has not traditionally been the method of choice among political scientists (Auyero, 2006). Clearly the strong emphasis over the past decades on quantitative methods accounts for much of this trend, yet it remains surprising that among dedicated qualitative scholars, such little weight is given to an approach that "is ideally suited to explain why political actors behave the way they do, and to identify the causes, processes, and outcomes that are part and parcel of political

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life" (Auyero and Joseph, 2007: 2). Indeed, much of what we do as political scientists is attempt to explain why specific politicians and/or policy makers pursue policy X rather than policy Y or Z or why citizens in any given country support Party A rather than Party B or C. No doubt there are a variety of ways to pursue answers to such questions, but it seems odd that ethnography has historically been utilized so little in this regard. Given that dedicated ethnographic immersion is so well suited to unearthing the individual's own understanding of the political, to "unravel the intentions and meanings people assign to their actions" (Kumar, 2014: 237), a variety of scholars of politics are now pointing to the potential inherent in this approach to problematize several traditional assumptions of political science and thus lead to opportunities for significant theorization, especially with respect to opinion formation (Bayard de Volo and Schatz, 2004; Baiocchi and Connor, 2008; Benzecry and Baiocchi, 2017; Boswell et al., 2019). Cramer's *The Politics of Resentment* is perhaps the pre-eminent model of this newly emerging trend.

Seeking to penetrate the web within which people make sense of their political world and subsequently form political opinions, Cramer immersed herself in several political conversations among people participating in regularly occurring coffee groups across urban and rural Wisconsin. In a way that traditional survey research missed, Cramer came to understand the manner by which a particular social identity, in this case a rural consciousness, shaped the political attitudes for rural citizens in Wisconsin. This consciousness, Cramer demonstrates, acts as the central lens through which most rural citizens make sense of politics, ultimately generating a strong anti-government sentiment that is rooted not in a straightforward acceptance of the logic of neoliberal or "low tax" anti-government ideology but rather in a sense of resentment of urbanites and the politicians who seemingly act in the interests of urban communities, rather than that of rural citizens. Once the role played by this consciousness is recognized, the seeming paradox of citizens from lower-income regions of the state strongly supporting anti-government politicians begins to dissolve. It is both the ethnographic approach employed by Cramer and the specific conclusions drawn by her that serve as a guide to my study of political opinion in rural Alberta.

The Study

Replicating Cramer's approach, I met with 23 groups across 16 communities throughout rural Alberta. Although ethnographic work of this sort precludes traditional random sampling, care was taken to ensure groups represented a wide cross-section of the population (See Appendix for breakdown of groups and participants). Following Cramer (2016: 29–30), I chose communities via a stratified purposeful approach, which began with a geographic breakdown of the province followed by a purposeful identification of communities in order to ensure variation in socio-economic background, including factors such as total population and population density, distance from a major urban centre, median household income and central economic drivers.

Although I initially planned to simply show up unannounced at coffee shops and restaurants within these communities and ask to join those groups who happened to be chatting over coffee, it quickly became apparent that such an approach would result in a group of participants that were almost exclusively men over the age of

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45. In order to widen the scope of participants, I had to be more deliberate in finding groups of both women and of citizens under the age of 45. This involved reaching out to pre-existing contacts in the communities to access a wider array of regularly meeting groups. Although men over the age of 45 are still overrepresented in this study, these steps allowed access to more women and younger citizens.

In each case, I began by introducing myself as political scientist from the University of Alberta who was studying political attitudes in rural Alberta and asked permission to join the group. Although there was some groaning, every group except one welcomed me to sit down. It was clear that my association with academia made a number of participants uneasy; universities were not viewed in a very positive light in many of the groups. However, one significant aspect of my background undoubtedly opened avenues to me that may not have been open to others. I grew up in a rural community and admitted early on in the conversation that my interest in rural public opinion was due partly to my own background. Not only did this admission noticeably ease some tension around the table, participants sometimes later referred to my background in a way that signalled to me that they trusted me to understand what they were saying.

Obviously, the fact that I have a rural background colours the manner by which I perceive various things, especially topics related to rural life. It was my goal to remain cognizant of this throughout the study, especially when it came to assuming I understood what participants were meaning in conversation with me and when analyzing the data generated by the study. In order to overcome the potential for faulty assumptions, I asked follow-up questions to ensure I was grasping meanings correctly, considered alternate meanings when rereading my transcripts and notes, and completed a round of member-checking at the conclusion of the study.

After joining each conversation, I asked permission to record the session (roughly half of the groups objected to this, so in those cases I took detailed notes) and began by asking them what their biggest political concerns were—a question that was so broad and open-ended that participants were free to take the conversation in any number of ways. There were places in the ensuing conversation where I would ask a follow-up question to ensure clarity or ask a more direct question in order to slightly guide the conversation back to politics (it was not uncommon for the conversation to drift in all sorts of directions), but overall my job was to listen. In the vast majority of conversations, participants quickly grew comfortable and the conversations flowed openly—these people clearly had things they wanted to say. In fact, one of the clearest themes to emerge in this work was the degree to which many rural citizens feel overlooked and ignored in general, and the people I spoke to often expressed gratitude that "someone who mattered" actually wanted to hear what they had to say.

At the conclusion of these chats, which lasted from 45 minutes to over 3 hours, I made brief field notes summarizing some of the patterns that stuck out in the conversation before eventually reading through the full transcript or note, handcoding them into specific topics and entering quotes into a master data display spreadsheet (Cramer, 2016, 42; Miles and Huberman, 1994; Verdinelli and Scagnoli, 2013). This document included basic demographic information for each group and separated the comments made by participants into a series of topic categories across the horizontal axis (such as: ideological preference, rural identity and rural-specific

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challenges, concerns over local economy, western alienation, environmental concerns, attitudes toward immigrants and Indigenous peoples, attitudes toward Donald Trump, etc.). This method of data reduction and organization allowed for a thorough and quick comparison of the comments made about a particular topic between various groups and also provided a clear visual cue about the topics that groups were most eager to speak to. Studying the evolving data display as the project progressed allowed for the identification not only of clear patterns of attitudinal positions across groups but also—and more importantly—of the ways in which topics were often linked together for participants across groups. As certain patterns began to become apparent, both in terms of what issues mattered most and how participants were making sense of these issues, I added certain questions or probes to my informal protocol in order to test whether or not the pattern persisted across other groups. After entering the data from my last coffee chat, I again studied the data display and identified the themes that were most consistently present. Finally, I engaged in a round of member-checking wherein I revisited four randomly selected groups and asked them directly about the central themes I had noticed and the ways in which these issues seemed to be connected. Not every group had initially spoke to one or all of the themes in our first conversations, but all four groups enthusiastically agreed with my findings and often elaborated on these themes in additional detail.

Ideology, Identity and Alienation in Rural Alberta

Although I encountered small pockets of ideological diversity, the vast majority of citizens I spoke with leaned strongly conservative in their ideology and party preference. This was not surprising. Until the surprise victory of the New Democratic party (NDP) in 2015, Alberta citizens had elected an unbroken string of conservative-leaning provincial administrations since at least 1935. Of course, it has been long established that the single-member plurality electoral system has consistently overcompensated conservative parties relative to popular vote count in the province (McCormick, 1980; Smith, 1992), and various surveys have routinely demonstrated that the majority of contemporary Albertans are not nearly as oriented toward traditional conservative positions as one might expect (Ellis, 2019; Stewart and Sayers, 2013). Yet it is also well known that this ideological diversity is not nearly as widespread outside urban areas of the province (Banack, 2015; Wilson, 1995). In fact, over the past four provincial elections, conservative candidates captured 67 per cent, 65 per cent, 87 per cent and 72 per cent of the vote, respectively, across rural Alberta.[1]

Ideological discontent surely surfaced often in the conversations I participated in, directed largely at the policies of the recently defeated Alberta NDP government and the current federal Liberal government. But over the course of these conversations, it became apparent that there was much more going on for these individuals than a general unhappiness with the ideological persuasion of certain governments. Rather, three distinct types of alienation emerged as important factors in how they were viewing political issues, each of which related much more strongly to a particular social identity than to a basic ideological preference or even to the particularities of people's personal situations. Indeed, the vast majority of participants across

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age and gender categories, including those most outspoken in their political anger, were either gainfully employed or comfortably retired. In other words, the various alienations identified throughout these conversations were not often the product of individuals struggling personally but rather strongly related to the notion that the groups the individual felt strongly connected to were being treated unfairly. In the following subsections, I briefly highlight the first two forms of Alberta-specific alienation widely expressed by participants before outlining in more detail a rural-specific alienation that has not yet been addressed in the vast literature on Alberta politics and political culture.

1. The persistence of western alienation

The most obvious source of political anger in rural Alberta is one that has incredibly deep historical roots and has recently re-emerged across the province. As recent polls have confirmed (Andrew-Gee, 2019; Angus Reid Institute, 2019), a strong sense of western alienation, or perhaps a more specific Alberta alienation, is influencing how citizens make sense of politics throughout the province. In nearly every conversation, the notion that Alberta was being treated unfairly—in many cases, the province was described as being "under attack"—was the first issue alluded to (and often elaborated upon in length). Central to this narrative, obviously, was a very strong identification by rural citizens as "Albertans."

Unsurprisingly, the leadership of Justin Trudeau, in particular, was frequently raised in this context in explicitly negative terms. Indeed, the level of resentment expressed toward Trudeau (and his father) in these conversations was, quite frankly, off the charts. Often referred to as "just a drama teacher" and someone who "doesn't care about the west," "only cares about Quebec" and literally plans to "kill the Oil Sands," Trudeau is the central target of their rage. However, most of the citizens I spoke with were keen to identify the broader structural conditions that have consistently, in their eyes, ensured Alberta's interests are often deemed secondary to the interests of central Canada. Some version of the following interaction—including direct references to the federal Liberal party, Quebec, federal transfer payments (often built upon an inaccurate understanding of how they operate) and the notion of Alberta separating from the federation—was observed in basically every group conversation.

Group 13

Me: So for you, the federal government is working against Alberta's interests?

Speaker 1 (female over 45): The Liberals are incapable of governing for the entire country. It's always the Eastern interests over ours. Always. All I want is fairness.

Speaker 2 (male over 45): The rest of Canada, or Ontario and Quebec at least, are not interested in what is best for all of Canada. They are not willing to help us at all. They don't even get it . . . [they are] not really interested in understanding.

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Speaker 3 (male over 45): I am fine with helping other provinces out when oil is $100 a barrel . . . but why are we still sending money to Quebec now? We are so hard pressed in this town . . . our government is bleeding money, it's a big deficit, and we are still sending money? I just don't understand. And they [Quebec] won't let our pipeline through? It pisses me off.

Speaker 2 (male over 45): Oh yeah, they will take our money but won't help us out—they won't agree to a pipeline. They are holding us up, while their citizens get free education and free day care.

Speaker 4 (female over 45): Ha! This country!

Speaker 2 (male over 45): I like Canada. I don't want to stop being Canadian, but why doesn't the rest of the country show any interest in helping us, after all these years of sending how many billions their way? I'm getting to think we should just take our oil and leave.

Interestingly, many of the most outspoken citizens on this topic had not been laid off or directly affected financially in a serious way by the perceived mistreatment Alberta has suffered but were either well-paid professionals, successful business owners or comfortably retired individuals, thus providing important evidence for the idea that it was their identity as Albertans, rather than their personal circumstances, that was key to understanding this anger.

2. The existence of political alienation among "ordinary people"

The majority of study participants, including many of the left-leaning citizens, expressed an acute sense of structural political alienation related to their strong identification as "ordinary people" as opposed to being "elites." The notion that "politicians do not listen to the people," that "the political game is rigged" and that party discipline means "the local politician is essentially useless" was rampant in these conversations. Like western alienation, this populist and anti-party sentiment stretches well back into Alberta's history: from Henry Wise Wood of the United Farmers of Alberta demanding that economic groups replace political parties, for the good of "the people" in the 1920s (Banack, 2016; Laycock, 1990; MacPherson, 1953), through to Preston Manning's Alberta-based Reform party's attempts to overthrow parliamentary traditions by shifting significant decision-making power in Canada to the "grassroots" in the 1990s and 2000s (Harrison, 1995). The essence of the following exchanges, which harkens directly back to this long-running anti-party sentiment and an identification as "ordinary people," was very common in the groups:

Group 4

Speaker 1 (male over 45): What is the point of speaking to our MLA [Member of the Legislative Assembly]? She can say she is going

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to act on something we want, but we all know if the leader doesn't like it, it's dead in the water.

Speaker 2 (male over 45): Well, it is not a democracy. Our MLA doesn't have any say. Sure, she might care about us, might understand the issues around here better than the leader. But it's just the 2 or 3 cronies at the top that make the decisions. How's that democracy? It isn't. And it hasn't been for a long time. At least in the US, Democrat or Republican, they can vote their conscience. You can't do that here.

Speaker 1 (male over 45): You know, just once I'd like to see someone come up with a good idea that everyone, however many hundred politicians there are in Ottawa, says, "Yes, Rick, that's a great idea," and they all vote for it. But, of course, that can't happen because it will make the other party look good.

Speaker 3 (male over 45): I think the political system is broken. It should be changed. It should not be controlled by party. It should be you vote for the individual. . . . Forget about parties. We would have a lot better system.

Group 19

Speaker 1 (male under 45): I am really upset that we have career politicians. These guys who just run every election.

Speaker 2 (male under 45): I agree. There was a time when a town had an issue, it would look for the best local person to send to Ottawa or Edmonton to fight for our town. And that person would agree to do it because it was the right thing to do for the town. But today it's just these guys who make a career out of it, who want to be a big shot and get that pension. It has nothing to do with what is good for our town, and they end up being in Ottawa for so long that they are not really part of our town anyway.

Speaker 1 (male under 45): And they are not listening to the people! It's all about voting party lines. So even if we send Kris here to Ottawa because he is a good guy, we like him, he's someone who knows the town and can try to make changes that benefit our town, he can't because the leader decides what is voted on. And the leader doesn't care about our town. It's all top down. Where are the grassroots?

3. The reality of rural identity and alienation

The deep-seated sense of rural identity—the sense that rural citizens are fundamentally different in important ways from urbanites—that has become so important in

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understanding political opinion in rural America was also present in almost every conversation of this study. Beyond a basic sense of pride in rural life, in the land that some of them tend, in the community spirit they feel, or in the type of work many rural people engage in, a loosely defined shared moral code emerged over the course of this study that was quite similar to that identified by Wuthnow in his study of rural America (2018: 9–11). This code proved to be important in terms of both how rural Albertans understood themselves in relation to non-rural citizens and how they interpreted various political issues. Often this code bordered on a brand of libertarianism, but with a unique collective streak. I heard several references to qualities such as common sense, hard work, self-reliance, being down-to-earth and treating people equally and with dignity, as well as an insistence that they were very much "ordinary people." Surely much of this code is standard conservative fare, but there was a clear sense that such an outlook was a key component of the moral fibre of the rural, as opposed to urban, community to which they belonged:

Group 16

Me: Do you ever think about moving?

Speaker 1 (female over 45): I'm not moving to Edmonton, thank you very much!

Speaker 2 (male over 45): I understand that city people probably look down on our way of life, that they could never imagine living here. Well, I could never imagine living there. And I tried. I was in Calgary for five years. Great job, but I could never feel at home there. It's just different in the city. The way people go about things. They don't seem to want to work hard. I have six grandchildren. I love them all equally, but I'd only hire two of them, the two that stayed here. They are the only two who truly know how to work.

Group 12

Speaker 1 (male over 45): We here in rural Alberta, in small towns, we just want to be left alone by government. We know how to solve problems; we know how to work together to solve issues we have in the community. We do not need the government getting involved, telling us how to do it.

Speaker 2 (male over 45): It's simple—rural Albertans believe each and every individual should be able to pull your own weight. We are self-reliant. If a guy is down on his luck, fine, we will help him. No problem. But we work hard and are not open to people looking for handouts. We feel shame if we end up on welfare or employment insurance. There are too many people in this country who don't feel that shame.

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Speaker 3 (male over 45): Too many provinces too!
Speaker 2 (male over 45): Right. They are okay with waiting for the next hand-out and complaining even louder if they don't get it.

Group 21

Speaker 1 (male over 45): There has been a shift in demographics in this area. You're getting an urban type of attitude coming into the rural area. Urban people moving onto acreages and stuff, commuting to Edmonton. And we're seeing our small community halls and such kind of fall apart because the people that have been doing it, the rural people, have been doing it for 25 years, right? And the urban-type people, they are not into community things, so they don't want to help out.

Even more interesting, the political anger that Cramer, Wuthnow and Hochschild documented in rural America that was related to the seeming lack of respect rural communities receive was an unmistakable ingredient in how many rural Albertans were making sense of their political world. Closely attached to any attempt to articulate what "being rural" might entail by study participants were denunciations of city dwellers and their governments overlooking rural areas, looking down on rural citizens and often taking advantage of them. Whatever the issue, there was a widely shared belief that, given the relatively small population of rural communities, the government was not truly interested in them. In addition, there was a widespread sense that the rural way of life was under attack, which could involve serious policy issues, such as rural crime ("nothing is being done about it") or the introduction of a carbon tax ("I have absolutely no other option. I simply have to pay more. I can't take the bus. I can't afford an electric car. And I couldn't plug it in anywhere if I could. How is this anything but an extra tax on rural people?"), or things seemingly more mundane (for example, the growing popularity of vegan burgers, which threatens the cattle industry). The sense that urbanites and "their" governments do not understand rural citizens was the link that tied these issues together and generated a widely shared source of latent anger, especially when paired with real-world concerns that these citizens felt were often ignored by governments. Note how three different groups responded to my question: "Do you think that people who live in larger cities understand rural areas, rural citizens?"

Group 19

Speaker 1 (male under 45): There seems to be a disconnect when it comes to how this country was built and the continuing importance of rural areas for this country. We are feeding you! And we are doing a good job of it.

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Our produce is safe and healthy, and we work hard to make sure it's done. We do not make much money doing that work, yet the cities completely turn their noses up at us. We are just a bunch of ignorant hillbillies, and whatever ideas we might have, whatever problems or issues we might raise, well, the politicians don't need to really listen.

Group 17

Speaker 1 (female over 45): Oh, they don't know we exist. I'm surprised you could find us, coming from a big university. Did you know we existed before you found us on the highway driving by?

Group 13

Speaker 1 (male over 45): Absolutely not! We might as well be from different planets. And the government workers, the politicians, the professors from Edmonton? They are the worst of all. They are on their high horse about all this shit. They simply don't understand what it is really like out here.

Speaker 2 (male over 45): Ah, most of those professors see us as rednecks who can barely get our pants on by ourselves. I don't have a college degree, so I'm an idiot. I know that's what they are thinking. I worked from nothing to a senior management position in a successful oil company. But I'll always be a redneck in their eyes.

Speaker 3 (female over 45): Oh yes, they think we are rednecks. Were you at that meeting where [Rachel] Notley was supposed to come, but at the last minute she sent some others from Edmonton instead? They looked at us like we were fools. They weren't listening to anything we said.

Speaker 1 (male over 45): Right, we told them, "Look, you have all these orphaned wells that need to be closed. We have all the equipment, the know-how, and we are just sitting. There's no work." So I said, "Hire us. Put us to work on these wells that need this service. Kill two birds with one stone." But that idea was just too practical for them, it made too much sense, so it went in one ear and out the other. We never heard another thing about it.

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Speaker 2 (male over 45): And that's just it. A chance to help us, but nope.
Speaker 1 (male over 45): Edmonton is a government town. There is no shortage of money floating around there. Our money! Taxpayers' money! Have they suffered over the last few years? I'm sure a few have lost their jobs. But the vast majority? They have no idea what suffering is.
Speaker 3 (female over 45): It is nice that you came out here. Nice that someone wants to listen. Do you think anyone will listen to what you write?

The Implications of Layered Alienation: Anti-establishmentarianism and Racial Prejudice in Rural Alberta

Overall, rural Albertans experience layers of political alienation related to the perceived poor treatment of three social groups they strongly identify with: "Albertans," "ordinary people," and "rural citizens." In their eyes, Alberta is being taken advantage of, politicians do not listen to ordinary people, and rural communities and rural citizens in particular are often misunderstood, looked down on or overlooked entirely by urban dwellers and "their" governments. Given the broad scholarly consensus on the connection between the increasing political alienation across pockets of the Western world and the rise of right-wing populism, it should come as no surprise that most of the study participants expressed strong anti-establishment sentiments, including an interest in provincial separation from Canada, a significant distrust in traditional media sources and, most frequently, a strong admiration for Donald Trump. The following are but a few of the many examples I heard of rural citizens connecting their approval of Trump, in particular, to the idea that he was someone who was finally saying what "ordinary people" were thinking, a group identity that strongly resonated with them:

Group 10

Me: Oh yeah? What is it that appeals to you about Trump?
Speaker 1 (male over 45): Because he's not a politician—he's one of us! Well, he's rich, but he gets it.
Speaker 2 (male under 45): Yes, he acts with common sense rather than playing politics all the time.
Speaker 3 (male over 45): He's definitely got an air about him, kinda arrogant, but he's getting done what he said he would get done. I don't care about personality. He's arrogant, but he's getting the job done. Trump wants to do a good job for the people.

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Group 16

Me:	Oh, so you really like Trump? Or you just like him because he is not Trudeau?
Speaker 2 (female over 45):	Absolutely, I'm a fan.
Speaker 3 (male over 45):	Trump is great because finally there is someone who is telling it like it is. He didn't have to kiss anyone's ass to get there, and now he's free to tell the truth, to say what regular people are thinking. And I hope that opens the door to more politicians who have the guts to say how it really is. No more of this phony bullshit. That is what I'm really hoping. That finally we will get some regular people in there, who will call a spade a spade, just like Trump. Enough of these crooks who haven't a clue what the regular people are thinking.

Group 19

Speaker 3 (female under 45):	The politicians don't listen to people—and it's all backroom deals anyway.
Speaker 2 (male under 45):	I'm jealous of the United States. I wish we had Trump. He's not about doing what looks good or what is politically correct. He's about doing what is right for the country, for the people.

Group 2:

Me:	So you like Trump?
Speaker 1: (female over 45):	You know, I don't mind him sometimes. He does do some good stuff.
Me:	Like what?
Speaker 1 (female over 45):	As far as immigration, I think he's doing the right thing. Why should everybody just be floating in to the USA? What is Canada doing? Nothing. They are just walking right across and getting whatever they want. Whereas him, he's holding his foot [down], and I think that's not a bad thing.
Speaker 2 (female over 45):	We have enough poor people here that need help. We have enough poor people in our small town.
Speaker 3 (female over 45):	He is doing some good in the United States, but we don't hear about that. We only get the negative. The fake news.

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Speaker 1 (female over 45): Maybe if we had him here in Canada, we wouldn't be the way we are. The government would be doing what the people actually want.

The strong desire to up-end the political establishment and institute a leader that is truly "for the people," was not, however, the only noteworthy connection many rural citizens are making as they process these layers of alienation and voice opinions on various contemporary political issues. As the last exchange above suggests, rural citizens are also making connections between the sense that they are being mistreated and overlooked in a variety of ways with a broader assessment of the advantages and benefits seemingly bestowed by government on newcomers to Canada and, in many cases, Indigenous peoples as well. Indeed, the level of anger that exists around such issues was somewhat startling. I definitely encountered examples of blatant prejudice expressed against certain cultural groups and the recitation of hurtful stereotypes. Frankly, I was expecting elements of this. But more common was the sense that for many rural Albertans—including several who expressed knowledgeable, nuanced and even sympathetic views toward cultural minorities, newcomers and Indigenous peoples—there exists a clear connection between their own sense of alienation, their sense of being overlooked and judged by others, and anger at state and societal efforts to address instead the concerns of cultural and religious minorities and Indigenous peoples. What emerged was a strong sense that central aspects of the broader moral code so present in rural Alberta, especially as it relates to hard work, self-reliance and equal treatment, are routinely violated by various levels of government when it comes to such issues. Echoing the precise sentiments of the Tea Party supporters in Louisiana interviewed by Hochschild (2016: 135–40), many rural Albertans feel that given the layered alienation they experience, they—rather than various minority groups—are the true losers in contemporary politics.

Group 17

Speaker 1 (male over 45): There is no celebration of the working man. The guy who spends his life heading to work at 6 a.m. every day for 40 years or 50 years. That's what we all did . . . [Today] it's all these special interests that get their hands out for this and for that. And government gives it to them. There's no money to fix the roads around here, but these refugees crossing the borders with their nice suitcases and cell phones? These immigrants you see sitting around the mall in the middle of the day, no need for a job? And Christ, these Natives? Don't get me started. The government will put its back out to help them. Jesus, the billions and billions. But

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	people like us? Our little town? Ha! I guess we are lucky to have the loonie for this coffee.

Group 8

Speaker 1 (male over 45):	You see them [recent immigrants] walking around town. You know the government is paying them. They don't have jobs, but they are living better than I am. I'm struggling to survive. I've been laid off for nearly a year. I'm looking for work, but there is none around here. I don't blame them for that. I know it's the oil field, the lack of a pipeline. Fucking Trudeau. And the fucking crime in the rural areas now. The government isn't doing anything to stop that. But the government always finds a way to help them.
Speaker 2 (male over 45):	Oh, they are too busy showering the Natives or the refugees with cash or flying around the world and staying in suites on the taxpayer's dime to worry about rural crime or jobs in Alberta. They don't care about us.
Speaker 1 (male over 45):	Right, why aren't the politicians sitting here with us like you are, asking us about how we see things? They come around at election time and that's it.
Speaker 2 (male over 45):	And if we do tell them that things are not fair, well then its "you don't understand your white privilege!" Jesus Christ. Do we look privileged? But we are just a bunch of racist hicks out here, right?

Although citizens routinely shared opinions about various cultures that spoke to an obvious lack of familiarity with their practices and beliefs, not to mention the very real struggles both newcomers and Indigenous peoples face, it was also true that many of the views expressed in these conversations, especially as they pertained to Indigenous peoples, were rooted in real-life experiences that rural citizens have lived through. Many of the social ills that plague Indigenous communities in Canada that academics frequently lament in statistical form are often encountered head-on by rural citizens in their daily lives and do much to shape their perceptions. Although somewhat jarring to hear, these experiences, in conjunction with the rural residents' own sense of grievance, were frequently alluded to as a justification of their anger at state support for Indigenous peoples:

Group 9

Speaker 1 (male under 45):	I went to school with many, many Natives. In elementary, it was almost 50/50, whites and Natives. Then every year, more and more drop out. So

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many Natives from my school would get tens of thousands of dollars from the Band and their oil reserves when they turned a certain age, and they immediately quit school and pissed it away. I didn't get that. My parents had barely enough to get by on, but they helped where they could. Their parents are drunk, they don't help. By the time I graduated, there was one Native in my class. One! All the others dropped out. That's on the system. Pouring money onto the reserve just makes it worse.

Speaker 2 (male under 45): I understand now, I think we all understand now, better than we did before, that some bad things happened in the past. I know what Nick has just described is related to this history. I'm fine with trying to make amends. But how long do we need to go on apologizing? How many more billions do we need to pour into these issues without seeing anything get better? The issues never go away. The reserves are shitholes. We see the houses trashed and broken when we drive through. We know about the crime, the drugs. We see the Natives wandering the streets, not working. The water's not safe to drink. Even after all the money poured in. Why can't they pull themselves up? Why don't they have that drive?

Speaker 3 (male under 45): Because they are coddled. They don't have to work like we do. It's a culture built on demanding handouts and getting them from government. Welfare breeds welfare.

Speaker 1 (male under 45): And it never ends. It's all about wanting more. And as soon as a group wants more than what is equal, I am going to have a problem with that.

Conclusion

By employing an ethnographic approach to study aspects of political opinion formation across rural Alberta, I came to see more fully the way in which the distinct grievances of these rural citizens are often layered together and how these issues—in conjunction with a self-identification as Albertans, ordinary people and rural citizens—directly animate general opinions about the political establishment, as well as opinions about newcomers and Indigenous peoples. Of course, in the process of expressing these forms of alienation, rural citizens frequently made claims built upon inaccurate understandings of, among other things, the structures of Canadian federalism, the manner by which Canada's immigration and refugee programs operate and the historical and ongoing relationship between Canada and its

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Indigenous peoples. But the broader point that emerges, beyond a certain level of ignorance around "who gets what," is that issues such as these are strongly linked in the minds of rural citizens to the forms of alienation they experience—to the ways in which they feel their groups are mistreated and overlooked. The same is true with respect to a penchant toward anti-establishment politics, represented most clearly in this case by attitudes toward Trump. Many rural Albertans see him as a symbolic beacon of hope for people who are politically, regionally, economically and culturally alienated. In other words, there is a certain logic at work in terms of the formulation of these views: to their way of thinking, there are winners and there are losers in contemporary politics, and they are increasingly viewing themselves as occupants of the latter category.

On one level, there is little new in claiming that a connection exists between a sense of alienation and increasing support for anti-establishment politics and resentment toward minority groups. Indeed, many of the findings of this study are essentially identical to what recent analyses have unveiled across rural America. What is novel in this study is the demonstration that this sentiment is present in at least some regions of Canada. Further, this study also provides additional evidence that ethnography can uncover connections between issues that are being made by citizens in the formation of specific political opinions and can do so in ways that surveys may miss. This is especially so in terms of unveiling the specific ways in which citizens directly connect various issues in their minds, through the prism of social identity, when discussing politics among themselves. More practically, the unveiling of this process of opinion formation by ethnographic immersion can be a significant help for policy makers and community educators tasked with preserving broad support for the norms of liberal democracy, holding Canada together or addressing issues of racial prejudice or reconciliation with Indigenous peoples in an age of increasing xenophobia. In other words, any attempt to address these issues in rural Alberta will, I expect, encounter resistance from citizens unless the deep-seated layers of alienation related to social identities are acknowledged within such efforts.

Of course, this was but a limited study into a single region in Canada. The degree to which we can generalize such findings across the rest of the rural prairies, let alone the rest of rural and remote Canada, is unclear without additional survey and ethnographic work. But, as I hope this article demonstrates, there is much to be gained by pursuing these various avenues, as we work to make better sense of the rural/urban divide and the potential for anti-establishment politics in Canada and to facilitate broader comparisons between Canada and other countries in an age of increasing political disaffection and xenophobia.

Supplementary material. To view supplementary material for this article, please visit https://doi.org/10.1017/S0008423920000694

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Note

1 Although this is not a perfect representation of the rural vote in Alberta, these calculations demonstrate the percentage of vote share captured by both the Progressive Conservative party and Wildrose party candidates in the 2008, 2012 and 2015 provincial elections and the United Conservative party candidates vote share in the 2019 provincial election in ridings excluding those in Edmonton, Calgary, Red Deer and Lethbridge.

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