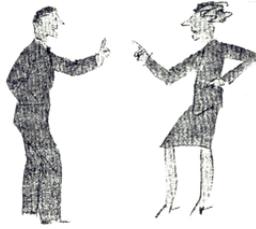


SMALL TOWN POPULISM AND THE RISE OF ANTI-GOVERNMENT POLITICS¹



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The 2008 economic recession spurred U.S. conservative populist movements characterized by claims that an expansive government was threatening American “ordinary hardworking folks.” Before the recession, in a predominantly white former manufacturing town in central Maine, allegations of wasteful spending, dishonest government officials, and elevated taxes infiltrated battles over revitalization projects and town budgets. While community development efforts failed to address the interests of the economically insecure, business owners and others calling for decreased spending and lower taxes acknowledged the struggles of working- and middle-class residents. Decades of national politics linking market-centered political ideologies to the racialized (i.e., white) concept of the “ordinary American” helped small-government advocates connect with voters. (Conservative populism, neoliberalism, community development, Maine)

The income gap in the United States has been expanding for decades, jobs are increasingly unstable, and since the 2008 recession, job loss and housing foreclosures have advanced to crisis proportions. But some of the strongest voices of dissent to this upheaval have not been asking for higher wages, more job opportunities, or a check on corporate profit. Rather, they are demanding that government be scaled back and taxes minimized to allow hard work and competition to determine success. The Tea Party, an amalgam of protesters calling for limited government, lower taxes, and individual responsibility, grew rapidly across the U.S. in the early months of the economic recession and the Obama presidency. These primarily white middle-class dissenters sought to decrease taxes (including for the wealthy), minimize the regulation of capital, and eliminate or restrict social safety-net programs. Thus, when the working and middle classes were particularly vulnerable, many Americans supported policies that decreased the capacity of government to respond to their needs. This article addresses how “small government” politics gain acceptance from working- and middle-class people. It focuses on a pre-recession political reaction to economic decline in a small central Maine town.

In late 2006 and early 2007, a small group of angry residents in Skowhegan, Maine, claimed that “the people” were victims of over-taxation and secretive, dishonest government officials. Populist antigovernment discourse entered local debates, culminating in an acrimonious town meeting

in the summer of 2007. Vocal townspeople charged government officials with inefficiency, overspending, and “living better than the people.” They opposed health insurance coverage and equipment updates as luxuries and indicators of an expansive government. Claiming that Skowhegan’s time to invest in the town’s infrastructure had passed with the loss of industry, they urged government officials to adapt to a leaner budget, to “take a hit” and find a way to “do without.”

In the months preceding this town meeting, a loosely defined group of middle-class newcomers and locals had been working to transform Skowhegan into a postindustrial community with a vibrant downtown, a thriving group of artists, a bustling farmers market, and a new stratum of “professionals.” These development plans rarely considered the interests of working-class and blue-collar middle-class residents. At the same time, business leaders skeptical of development efforts used populist language and culture to connect with “ordinary folks.” Conservative populist sentiment gained strength in debates over spending for revitalization projects. The shift to low-wage jobs, a decline in funding for services, the costs of building a new jail, and state-wide municipal spending limits fueled economic insecurity and engendered the growing opposition to government spending and taxes. While revitalization efforts addressed white-collar middle-class interests, those promoting smaller government and lower taxes gained support in Skowhegan with their populist recognition of “the people’s” struggles.

Scholars and journalists have explained U.S. economic conservatism as deriving from a consistent culture of individualism (Bellah et al. 1985; Hartz 1955; Lilla 2010; Sennett and Cobb 1972; Sherman 2009), or pointed to the white working- and middle-classes’ rejection of the 1960s anti-establishment revolt (i.e., the civil rights, feminist, and gay rights movements), antipoverty programs, and other liberal social issues (Edsall and Edsall 1991; Frank 2004; Harvey 2005; Rieder 1989, 1985). Discomfort with these changes, according to this argument, persuaded white workers to embrace conservative politics and neoliberal economic policies and ideologies. But over the last 50 years, corporations, political leaders, and government policy have promoted the idea that Americans should be liberated from the constraints of government in order to reap the rewards of the market (Harvey 2005). In the absence of policy addressing the needs of the economically insecure, market-centered political ideologies presented as qualities of the “ordinary hardworking American” become particularly powerful.

Global processes like economic restructuring and neoliberalism do not indiscriminately act on communities and people (Gregory 1998b; Ho 2005; Tsing 2004), but have been implemented, adopted, contested, and ignored in different global contexts (Kanna 2010; Ong 2006). Poor, working-class, and

rural people are not simply passive receptors of economic policy and ideology, but actively resist (and influence) the confines of low wages and bad work conditions, whether through political activism (Gregory 1998a; Susser 1982; Wagner 1993) or through everyday “meaningful acts” (Anglin 1998, 2002; Leach 2005:4). This article is not meant as a counter to the scholarship on workers’ resistance. To the extent that neoliberalism fed the economic decline of the postindustrial economy, conservative populism in Skowhegan can ironically be considered both a resistance to and support of neoliberal policies. In addition, only a segment of working- and middle-class residents in central Maine would have described themselves as advocates for small government. The interview and survey data that I collected revealed a diverse ideological approach to class and the economy. Respondents, for example, attributed the economic problems in the area to a decline in well-paying jobs as well as to an abundance of welfare recipients. They attributed value to working hard and persisting through difficult times, but they also blamed their financial troubles on structural economic change, low wages, and greedy corporations. Advocates of limited government, however, dominated the response to the costs of building a new jail, revitalization plans, and increases in the municipal budget.

Several recent articles argue that capitalist economies themselves generate support for neoliberal ideologies. One demonstrates how the promise of consumption lures struggling middle-class Mexicans into becoming committed entrepreneurs even when profits are lacking (Cahn 2008). Another argues that neoliberal ideologies naturally emerge from competitive social relations in a Bolivian marketplace (Gordon 2011). But support for small government in Skowhegan neither resulted simply from state or corporate ideological coercion nor from competition for subsistence or the lure of the rewards of labor. Rather, this political response was influenced by national conservative movements and community-level politics; namely, the exclusion of working-class and blue-collar middle-class interests from development plans, and the ability of vocal business owners to connect with voters.

GROWING DISCONTENT IN SKOWHEGAN

In 2006 and 2007, the unemployment rate in Skowhegan, Maine fluctuated between 6 and 9 percent (compared to a national rate of 4.6 percent), poverty rates were consistently well above the state average, and the teen pregnancy rate was one of the highest in the state. Yet this mostly white, working- and middle-class town of almost nine thousand residents could easily have been described as ordinary. Almost four hours north of Boston, Skowhegan fit the myth of the quaint, peaceful New England town with its quirky, wholesome,

20 ETHNOLOGY

hardworking residents. Its economic story was also familiar: a boom in manufacturing in the late nineteenth century led to a sharp growth in the town's population. Immigrants came to work (especially from French Canada), and businessmen came to invest. From lumber mills and textiles to shoe manufacturers and paper mills, the town had since witnessed the cyclical growth and demise of its industries. Like elsewhere across the country, retail and service jobs were replacing manufacturing jobs through company cut-backs or closing small mills. New Balance Shoes and a paper mill owned by the South Africa-based Sappi, Inc. still employed hundreds of workers, but the threat of their closure loomed in town planning and in workers' lives. Skowhegan, as the county seat, was the regional center for health, social, and legal services, and for corresponding middle-class jobs. The hospital, a mental-health services company, the state social-services offices, the courthouse, and the county jail all had major expansion or rebuilding projects in the years surrounding my research.

Politically, Maine has been known for a balanced party divide, for electing moderate Democrats and Republicans, and for a growing number of independent voters. In the mid-2000s, slightly more voters in Skowhegan registered as Democrats than as Republicans. The town, though, had previously supported conservative populist candidates, particularly the 1992 presidential candidate, Ross Perot. The well-paying unionized paper mill, the nonunionized shoe factories, and the communities of former "back-to-the-landers" (who moved to the area in the 1960s and 1970s) all influenced central Maine political divisions. A binary of liberal "hippies" versus conservative "locals" underscored political discussions in the region.

Following a town-meeting style government, Skowhegan elected several part-time selectmen who hired and had authority over a town manager and other department heads. The town manager and board of selectmen held meetings every two weeks, during which members of the public could request to speak to the board. A small number of residents consistently challenged government spending and expressed a mistrust of government at town meetings and political events. In an interview, a business owner and former construction worker explained his belief that the government had grown too large, particularly since September 11: "Too many regulations since then. Too many people work for the town. Too many people work for the state. Too many people work for the federal [government]." At a 2006 town meeting, several residents challenged an increase in the starting salary of a police officer from \$11 to \$14 an hour, and accused the chief of police of corruption. These and other critiques of local government are indicative of an ideological commitment to small government.

A state ballot initiative to limit taxation and spending through a Taxpayer Bill of Rights (TABOR) brought taxes, government spending, and the role of “the people” to the forefront of public conversation in the year preceding the 2007 town meeting. As part of a national strategy to limit spending and taxation, conservative advocacy and policy organizations (such as Americans for Tax Reform and FreedomWorks) and their state-level counterparts (in Maine, the Maine Heritage Policy Center) promoted this initiative to limit increases in state and local spending except when corresponding to population growth and inflation. Maine was one of the few states with enough signatures to get TABOR on the ballot (Cervone 2006). Pro- and anti-TABOR mobilization efforts, including television advertisements, signs, and a well-attended debate at the high school auditorium in Skowhegan, warned residents of the dangers of “status quo” spending or the risks of an under-funded government. Voters rejected TABOR by a slim margin in 2006 and again in 2009.

TABOR had been proposed despite an existing limitation on local spending. In 2005, the Maine legislature passed a bill to limit municipal budgets, which could increase only by a formula tied to growth in local property and statewide personal income levels. Townspeople would have to approve an override of this limit. At the 2007 town meeting, elected officials were going to ask residents to approve a municipal budget of \$8 million, more than \$1 million over the levy limit. A group of residents believed this to be another indication that the new town manager (James Cole), the budget committee, and the selectmen were overspending and mismanaging tax dollars. The town manager and his supporters argued that the override was necessary because the former town manager had kept taxes and spending low by neglecting necessary projects. A Cole supporter believed townspeople disregarded any consequences the town’s low taxes may have had:

They don’t want to realize [that the sewer pipes are made of] clay and [they are] disappearing. And DEP is mandating fix it or get fined. They’re not holding her [the former town manager] accountable. They’re just remembering she never, you know, made the taxes go up.

Nine days before the town meeting, a group of disgruntled residents began circulating a petition asking that the selectmen oust the town manager. They charged him with excessive government spending, secretive decision-making, and a leadership style that angered and divided town employees. Critics also claimed that he spoke to the townspeople with an elitist and condescending tone.

Economic development organizations, business associations, and community groups had been planning for Skowhegan’s future for decades. In the months prior to this meeting, the new town manager and a new downtown development organization accelerated these efforts. Early in his tenure the

22 ETHNOLOGY

town manager sought opinions and called community meetings to discuss a postindustrial vision for the town. At about the same time, a group of community activists joined Main Street, a national program for preserving downtowns through committees of volunteers. A woman in her early thirties from southern Maine became the director of “Main Street Skowhegan.” She and the new town manager galvanized residents around new ideas for the town and advocated “investing” in its future. Revitalization leaders were primarily middle-class professionals, small-business owners, former back-to-the-landers, and artists, several of whom were recent residents. Optimistic about the future of central Maine, they were excited about a Florida family that agreed to buy the old middle school (for one dollar) and turn it into a hotel. They believed that the group advocating for a water park for kayakers and rafters would get the millions of dollars needed for the river course, attracting outdoor enthusiasts who pass through Skowhegan on their way to go white-water rafting. They envisioned a developer buying the mill on the river (where small wood products were made until 2006) and converting it into condos that would entice wealthy people to move to the town. New residents would shop downtown and dine at new restaurants and cafes. The local artists, in years to come, would have a place in town to sell and display their work. There would be a farmers market that had more than the two or three stands that appeared for a couple of hours on Saturdays. “Shop local” and “eat local” campaigns converged with economic developers’ plans to market Skowhegan’s creative and nature-based “quality of place.” This development scheme was the familiar promise to transform a former manufacturing neighborhood or town into a comfortable community with coffee shops, boutiques, upscale restaurants, and an arts scene.

Another group of residents, skeptical of these optimists and their vision, objected to the development plans in community meetings, conversations, and newspaper commentaries. They had little hope that these projects would work or did not want tax dollars risked on the possibility that they might. They discussed development efforts as an outsider-motivated plan to change “their” town. Several business owners played a prominent role in this opposition but others took different sides depending on the particular revitalization project. Some teachers, mill workers, and low-wage laborers also did not trust the postindustrial plan. Despite this diversity, residents increasingly characterized the divide as an elitist clique of outsiders versus the ordinary townspeople.

Conflicts ensued over proposals to build a second bridge across the river, to change downtown traffic flow, and over Main Street’s efforts to plant trees and change streetlights downtown. With each debate, conservative populist imagery, language, and arguments became more prominent. In reference to a

proposed change in the flow of traffic downtown, a business owner argued that the wishes of “the people” should drive decisions:

I think that the selectmen need to remember that they were elected by the people and they need to listen to the people who elected them. And if the people do not want this traffic change, then they damn well better not make it! And it doesn't really matter what [the town department heads] think.

Several of those speaking out against proposed changes began to accuse the local government of wasteful spending and called for “less government.” Business owners with longstanding grievances with town officials—for too frequently buying goods and services out of town or for not taking local business interests into account—and residents skeptical of revitalization spending directed their attention to municipal budgets. By the 2007 town meeting, those concerned with overspending and taxation had an organized group of political supporters. To describe these town-meeting politics requires explaining the cultural and political formation of a central trope: the ordinary hardworking folk.

THE NATIONAL CONSTRUCTION OF “ORDINARY FOLKS”

Populism is a theoretically imprecise concept connected to a variety of movements, parties, and politics, from the late nineteenth-century U.S. agrarian social movement and political party to Latin American redistributive economic policy. Much of the literature on populism, in fact, centers on questions of its meaning and usefulness as an analytic category (Canovan 1981; Knight 1998; Laclau 2005a; Weyland 2001). The common view that the Tea Party is a populist movement led several scholars and journalists to argue that only movements that address inequalities with policy should be labeled populist; all others capitalize on rhetorical appeals to the people but counter the efforts of the “original populism,” the nineteenth-century U.S. Populist Party (Postel 2010). Yet this depiction of populism minimizes the variety of movements and politics that have emerged under its name around the world.

Populism may be defined broadly as political discourses, movements, and identifications that capitalize on a sense of the people in opposition to an elite and/or marginalized other. This self/other approach calls attention to a concept central to contemporary U.S. politics, that of the ordinary American. In dichotomizing the government (or elites, or the undeserving poor) and the people, conservative populism has condensed a diversity of class-based interests into one political constituency: ordinary Americans, taxpayers, or the people.

24 ETHNOLOGY

Populisms arise particularly in moments of social and economic crisis, when the distance between the people and politicians widens and citizens feel their government is not meeting their needs (Panizza 2005). Significantly, globalization and the growing gap between the rich and the poor have recently threatened community democracy and access to powers of political change (Holland et al. 2007; Williamson et al. 2002) and strained working-class solidarity (Gill 2009). Populist politics are not unique for naming the people as their constituency—most politicians claim to speak on behalf of the people—but for the degree to which they call upon the people versus the others (Panizza 2005). Populist rhetoric creates these self/other categories by homogenizing diverse sectors of citizens. As Laclau (2005b) explains, “The ‘people,’ as operating in populist discourses, is never a primary datum but a construct—populist discourse does not simply *express* some kind of original popular identity; it actually *constitutes* the latter” (Laclau 2005b:48, emphasis in original). In the nineteenth century, the Populist Party rallied “the plain people” (Goodwyn 1978:3) by addressing concerns about debt and rising cost with proposed policy, including the reorganization of the banking system and government ownership of railroad and telephone companies (Goodwyn 1978). Voters, though, still had to see themselves as part of “the people” benefiting from these changes if they were to support the party, a political challenge at a time of post-civil war regional tensions and divisions between black and white farmers, urban factory workers and small farmers, and Protestants and Catholics (Goodwyn 1978; Kazin 1998).

The “ordinary average American” has been a popular conservative political trope since the 1960s. When campaigning for president in 1964, Barry Goldwater launched a style of conservative politics targeting mainstream suburban white Americans with grassroots mobilization (McGirr 2001). Although an unsuccessful bid for the presidency, his candidacy marks the beginning of conservative populist politics and an era of Republican political power. Politicians created a broad-based, cross-class electorate of “ordinary folks” by capitalizing on existing alliances of gender, race, religion, and nationality while minimizing differences between working and middle classes. Barry Goldwater and later George Wallace used white backlash against the Civil Rights Movement and fears of racial integration to develop a sense of “the people” that excluded blacks but relied on a diverse class alliance of whites (Rieder 1989). Conservative politicians “re-created themselves as the authentic representatives of average white Americans,” while defining average against immigrants, people of color, the “undeserving poor,” and welfare recipients (Kazin 1998:246). Thus, they were able to garner support of the white working and middle classes under a shared identity. Politicians’ appeals to “Middle America,” a term that became popular in the

1960s, both drew upon an existing sense of who was ordinary (and who was not) and helped to define this sense (Kazin 1998:253).

Populisms form in existing gendered, racial, and national systems, which are used to construct the oversimplified categories of “the people” versus “the other.” White male English-speaking native-born citizens, for example, can most easily lay claim to being ordinary Americans without being designated political “special interests” (unless they represent a union). Richard Nixon worked to capture the southern and white ethnic vote with an account of his humble biography and with an appeal to the “silent majority”: workers, taxpayers, and average Americans who did not identify with the politics of the New Left. While the populism of Goldwater and Wallace was often more radical than ordinary, Ronald Reagan effectively mainstreamed similar conservative politics by demonizing feminists, (black) welfare recipients, affirmative action, and other “special interests” on the one hand, and elite bureaucrats, on the other, in order to appeal to the “average taxpayer.” Democrats and the political left also contributed to the creation of conservative populisms and the merging of white middle and working classes. Under President Bill Clinton, Democrats reached out to white working-class voters not through class-based politics (which would risk alienating upper- and middle-class voters) but through race-coded politics that preserved the idea of a classless (but white) middle America. Democrats used welfare reform, “three strikes” criminal justice, and discussions of NAFTA as a preventive tool for Mexican immigration in attempts to regain Reagan Democrats by appealing to white workers while avoiding civil rights and labor constituencies (Roediger 2002).

Political efforts to unite white middle and working classes helped to define the “ordinary American.” The conservative movement tied the concept to a series of beliefs, including valuing hard work and struggle, individualism, and anti-intellectualism. While education was an explicit strategy of the Populist Party, recent conservative populists have drawn from a tradition of distrust of intellectuals, lawyers, and others deemed a part of a “liberal elite.” An intellectual should not be trusted, according to this perspective, because he or she “takes more words than are necessary to tell more than he knows” (a definition attributed to President Eisenhower) and tricks people away from the truth with words and irrelevant knowledge (Hofstadter 1962). Anti-intellectualism also is a response to mainstream devaluing of manual labor and the skills and knowledge that result from work in shoe factories and paper mills versus what is learned in universities. The working-class embrace of anti-intellectualism is a “class reaction to the unequal way different kinds of knowledge are validated in society” (Dunk 2003:151).

Racialized rhetoric of the “undeserving poor” demonizes welfare recipients and blames the poor for their own poverty (Gordon 1994; Katz 1989), contributing to an association of dependency with blackness, and work with whiteness. The myth of the white (male) worker, like that of the welfare queen, has national significance. Images of tough white blue-collar men have been used in politics to win over white votes, as “Joe the plumber” was in the 2008 presidential elections. In what Morgen (2011) calls “taxpayer identity politics,” the conservative movement has recently appealed to ordinary hard workers as taxpayers threatened by wasteful spending and the “special interests” of labor, welfare, and government workers (Morgen 2011). Movement leaders portray taxpayers as victims, losing their hard-earned money to government. This anti-tax and small-government politics should be understood in relation to the historical perception of the state as a guarantor of civil rights and social programs for people of color versus an intrusion on the freedom of white men (Lowndes 2011; Shulman 2010).

After the 1960s, conservative movement leaders organized and funded think tanks, foundations, and civic organizations to convince people that free-market competition strengthens the economy, creates jobs, and is a fundamental belief of traditional Americans (McPherson 2008; Moreton 2008; Phillips-Fein 2009). Business leaders established economics programs at college campuses in the hope that they would introduce students to the benefits of individualism and free-market competition (Moreton 2008). Though the major television news networks (ABC, NBC, CBS) have at times reported on findings from conservative foundations, the growing role of cable news, talk radio, and internet blogs provided new means for conservative think-tank research to reach the public (McPherson 2008).

Market-oriented planning increasingly influenced local and national governing. Politicians discussed social policy in terms of the fiscal vocabulary of budget deficits, spending constraints, and worker training rather than security, social safety-nets, and public responsibility (Prince 2001). Claiming fiscal crisis and calling for “shared sacrifice,” particularly in the form of decreased government services, became a regular means of balancing municipal budgets (Brash 2003). Neoliberals stressed the importance of supporting elite job creators and using a business model to manage government and nonprofit organizations (Clarke 2004). Though the populist conception of the ordinary American excluded the elite, conservative discourses framed the people as dependent upon the wealthy for jobs and a healthy economy.

The emphasis on free-market competition and small government made its way to Skowhegan through media outlets, political campaigns, and advocacy organizations. More than once, the facilitator of a community development meeting cited *Forbes* magazine as evidence of over-taxation and the poor

business climate in Maine or handed out copies of a Thomas Friedman article, warning that Skowhegan and its youth must prepare to compete with India and China. The 2006 TABOR ballot initiative made the influence of national and state-level politics explicit, as Maine conservative organizations, with support from national advocacy groups, promoted this tax and spending limit to voters in Skowhegan.

THE TOWN MEETING

As symbols of participatory democracy and the right to influence government, town meetings lend themselves to populist expression. Despite being praised as a democratic ideal, attendance is usually limited to a fraction of the population, and the poorest and the wealthiest in a community are less likely to attend and participate (Bryan 1995). Most Maine municipalities used to rely on town meetings for governance, but the tradition has been waning with population growth. Skowhegan town officials and employees considered eliminating the town meeting, arguing that too much power was being given to “the person who speaks the loudest” and that, even with an attendance of several hundred, only 4 percent of the population was deciding on the budget. Still, many active residents in Skowhegan took their civic responsibilities seriously and cherished a belief in their right to be heard. A dedicated few spent hours preparing for the meetings.

Talk about the budget override brought 300 people to the 2007 meeting, making it one of the biggest in years. Having attended previous town meetings in Skowhegan, I knew the vocal townspeople well. These included a lawyer who talked at length, usually mentioning having attended town meetings in Skowhegan since he was a child. There was the school board member who occasionally offered an alarmist warning that the police may one day knock on our door to tell us that our son or daughter had been killed (if the town did not increase the police officer wage or if a bolt came off an old plow). And there was Richard Harvey.

Known as one of the wealthiest men in town, Richard Harvey played a prominent role in the meetings. He grew up in Skowhegan, as did his father, and owned several construction equipment businesses. Much of his money was said to be in real estate, and people joked that he owned half the town. Harvey had supported downtown revitalization efforts, loaning space or equipment for events, for example, but was not active in the new efforts. At town meetings he usually sat toward the back of the room with his two sons (who work for the family business) and his wife. He wore a baseball cap, jeans, and a loose-fitting T-shirt. While others walked down the aisle to the microphone, Harvey would remain in his seat to make his comments,

speaking in a loud, gruff voice with a central Maine accent. He and a few other small businessmen, rumored to be part of a weekly poker group, consistently questioned town officials and fought to decrease town spending and keep taxes low. At the 2006 town meeting, several townspeople accused officials of inflating the budget. After the meeting, I overheard three or four men congratulating each other, with handshakes and back slaps, on successfully cutting \$334,160 from the budget. Over \$200,000 of this cut came from removing the funds for a property revaluation project, a move proposed by Richard Harvey and supported by a self-described “slum lord.”

The first article of a town meeting was always to elect a moderator. In 2007, rumors that a group of disgruntled townspeople were going to nominate one of their own, rather than the man who had moderated town meetings for many years, prompted a lawyer to jump out of his seat and nominate the usual moderator before others had a chance. The townspeople began going through the budget, article by article, discussing, questioning, and then deciding whether to accept proposed budgets for the police and fire departments, general operations, and social services. Early in the meeting, the town manager attempted to explain the elevated budget. He listed all of the expenses that had increased for the town since the last year (health insurance, electricity, and gas) and explained that the deteriorating sewer system needed to be fixed. After a 20-minute debate, the townspeople decided to go through the budget before voting on the contentious override. A social worker then proposed an amendment that would decrease general government funds (proposed at \$1.3 million) by more than \$150,000. An older man with a strong Maine accent walked to the microphone in support:

How many senior citizens do you see before you who are living on fixed incomes? We have the same issues, the same problem. We have dental work. We have increases in food. We have increases in gas. And there's only one bulk of money in the entire room and that is the people! It is not banks, it is not municipalities, it is not government, it is people. And I'm telling you, my pocket is empty!

The hall erupted in clapping and cheering. A similar argument was consistently made throughout the evening. Townspeople compared the town budget to their family budgets and insisted, “just because you want to spend the money, doesn't mean that the money is there to spend.” When the Road Commissioner, for example, requested money for a new truck because one of his had more than 150,000 miles on it, a resident countered that her car had more than 150,000 miles and she had to make do because she could not afford another one. Critics urged officials to “get creative” and find a way to cut expenses—in order to keep taxes low, but also for the sake of fiscal responsibility. One voter warned that Sappi would leave if the budget kept

increasing while several others implied that the town should no longer depend on Sappi income. A woman with white hair explained that spending and town projects were going to create future problems: “If we go on the way we have been going, we’re going to be hugely in debt.” She urged voters to “think very carefully about anything they approve in the budget.”

The conviction that “we can’t have the people that work for us [town employees] living better than we live” was particularly evident in the objections to town employees’ health insurance. Many townspeople were outraged that some part-time elected officials received health insurance and that police and fire department workers received family coverage at 50 percent (which town officials explained could not be changed because they were under union contract).

Voters debated for 20 minutes about whether or not to increase the police department secretary from a part-time to a full-time position, a budget item that the chief of police said stemmed from townspeople objecting to not being able to reach anyone in the office. Paying for health care for this \$20,000 a year position was another point of contention. A middle-aged woman voiced what seemed to be behind many complaints about high health insurance costs: “there’s so many people getting health insurance [in the budget] but the townspeople don’t have it because nobody can afford it, because we’re paying for them [town employees].”

Not everyone at the meeting agreed that austerity and spending cuts would serve the town. Some argued that in “very difficult times,” responsible governing meant investing in the town infrastructure. One voter bluntly warned those advocating for spending cuts that when the value of their homes declined, they would have only themselves to blame. As the evening wore on, the voters passed articles without significantly reducing the amount suggested in the budget. Then, a lawyer made a motion to amend an article, asking voters to increase the budget amount suggested by officials. The clash between those who wanted to work with the town government and invest in a new vision for Skowhegan, and those who distrusted the government and its proposed spending came to a head. Richard Harvey began by raising his voice from the back of the room:

There is a limit to what we can pay in this town. You’re going to drive the senior citizens out. Nobody’s going to want to come to such a high tax place... You’ve got to cut the budget. We can’t afford to keep going up, up. All the towns around us are staying within the LD level. Why can’t we? We’re a million over. ... There is a limit. People, you’re going to have to buy a forklift here, in a year, to put your tax bill on to get it in the mailbox.

30 ETHNOLOGY

The room erupted with laughter, clapping, and cheering. Ted, a family doctor from the Midwest who had been practicing in Skowhegan for almost ten years, walked down the aisle and spoke calmly into the microphone:

I think that we all have to pay the piper. The reality is that the bills need to be paid. A police car needs to be paid [for]. Not everybody can afford it but there is money in this town. There's a lot of people owning property.... And if we come together and pay it, there will be a lot less people hurt than if we don't provide these services. And the people that will be hurt the most are the people that have the least money, because the rich people can pay for what they need. Make that clear, rich people can pay for what they need.... And we're certainly not going to be able to increase our job base with a poorly maintained town. 'Cause I know that no doctor will come to town and see it falling to pieces and say, "Oh great! I want to come here and work." Nurses say the same thing. Police officers say the same thing. Town officials say the same thing. And people who buy construction equipment say the same thing.

There were some nervous giggles at this rare attack on Richard Harvey and a few loud claps from supporters. There was then yelling in the back of the room about how Ted must be paying off the moderator for allowing him to give this speech.

It was after midnight when the town voted against the override. Most of the amounts requested per article were approved so that at the end of the night, the budget was still almost \$1 million over the levy limit, yet voters did not approve this final amount. They would have to reconvene and begin the process again. In the two weeks between the meetings, the Budget Committee met and developed a budget that would not require any override. This budget would decrease funding to the library (most likely forcing it to close) and several social service agencies, and eliminate several positions in each department. Department heads warned that this would mean ending youth programs at the recreation center, fewer roads would be repaired, and people would lose their jobs. More than 400 people came to the next meeting, many to assure that these services did not get cut. Before the meeting started, Val Anderson, the former town manager, was in the lobby handing out a suggested budget that would require an override of \$600,000 rather than \$1 million.

This meeting proceeded with much of the same arguments and emotions as the last: "We're all underpaid and overworked. We're all understaffed. What we're trying to do is cut some money," and "This town can't afford [this budget]. Young people with families can't afford to feed their children. We have to cut out the frills." But this time, Val Anderson and a lawyer proposed amendments to each article that followed the budget handed out before the meeting. For each item, Richard Harvey did not object and he, his family, and friends all silently raised their hands in favor of the amount. Toward the end of the meeting, a resident stood up and protested that deals had been made in private. The lawyer proposing the compromise explained these were not deals

but compromises to try to help the town and get the budget through. Before midnight, almost all of these previously agreed on amounts had been passed and the town approved the \$600,000 override. The powerful voices and clearly articulated positions of those against the override and government spending influenced the meeting debates and led to the compromise budget.

CONSERVATIVE POPULISM AND ECONOMIC CRISIS

The first decade of the twenty-first century in the United States was one of economic insecurity (Collins et al. 2008; Gusterson and Besteman 2010; Maskovsky and Susser 2009). Jobs were increasingly part-time and unstable, wages were declining, and family members worked more hours to keep up with rising costs of food, health care, and education. Deregulation of financial markets and privatization had been further redistributing wealth upwards (Duménil and Lévy 2004; Harvey 2005). Wars in Iraq and Afghanistan depleted domestic budgets and strained military personnel and their families (Lutz 2001, 2009). Devolution and economic decline also meant that state and municipal authorities were increasingly pressured to cope with insufficient budgets (Holland et al. 2007).

In central Maine, economic decline, decreased state funding for services, business tax credits, and a growing criminal justice system strained resources and raised community tensions. Economic development focused on tourism and enhancing “quality of place” without directly addressing the needs of most workers. The possibility (and perhaps inevitability) that Sappi would close, and the precipitous loss of jobs and tax income that would follow, remained in the background of political discussion. In the words of a retired shoe factory worker, “I don’t know what will ever happen to us if Sappi goes out.” Since his election in 2002, Governor John Baldacci had consistently responded to state budget shortages by proposing cuts to health and social services (Quinn 2004). These reductions affected central Mainers’ access to services and jeopardized social-service jobs.

A series of incidents in late 2006 stirred public conversation in Skowhegan about drugs, violence, and a sense of community. An armed robbery at a local restaurant, vandalism at a road equipment business, and a small acid-bomb explosion at Wal-Mart led to a four-hour community forum on youth and crime. Three hundred people attended the forum and 150 signed up to be part of an on-going task force. The shift in forest ownership from paper companies to investment firms gained public attention when an investment branch of Plum Creek Timber Company planned to develop a vacation community around Maine’s largest lake (Hagan et al. 2005). Central Mainers who camp, hunt, and fish in northern Maine began to worry about

32 ETHNOLOGY

losing access to land. And vehement community debates on public spending surrounded the plan to build a jail for \$30 million just outside of town (replacing the late nineteenth-century jail in downtown Skowhegan).

Though community tensions nurtured anti-government populism, many Skowhegan residents had grievances based on an often-justified perception of a lack of transparency in local government. Town employees usually released annual budgets a few days before the meeting so the townspeople had little or no time to read the more than 50 pages of budget and supporting information. In 2006, voters could not compare budget figures to the previous year because the town had altered its fiscal year (from ending December 31st to ending June 30th) and the accounting department was using new software. Understanding town management also required an extensive time commitment. Selectmen's and other public meetings were often difficult to follow. I rarely saw a meeting agenda, and moderators usually spoke with assumed knowledge about the topic being discussed. Town officials also often gave long and complicated answers to explain away grievances.

Residents at the 2007 town meeting were angry. They were angry at the town manager, the budget committee, and the selectmen for overspending and mismanaging tax dollars. They were angry with those who were willing to keep the budget high in order to invest in the town. Though critics directed their anger at government officials and revitalization leaders, their objections reveal that many people were struggling. To make the argument that the town was spending too much on employee health insurance, they spoke of how few townspeople could afford health care. To argue that too much money was being spent on salaries, they spoke of how little they earned. To argue that taxes should not increase, they spoke of how they could not afford a larger bill and were struggling just to get by. The town "needs to take a hit," the populists argued, because "the people" had taken a hit. They were angry that they were denied affordable health care, were underpaid, and could not afford "luxuries" or taxes. They were angry that the town government and town leaders did not seem to understand their difficulties.

The elitism associated with revitalization efforts is both inherent in market-centered development planning and stemmed from the class and status of Skowhegan's leadership. According to consumption-based development theories, postindustrial planning requires building a community that suits elites' spending habits and thus their cultural, recreational, and architectural preferences. Thus, middle-class revitalization leaders in Skowhegan seldom discussed how they could create well-paying jobs for local workers or what would happen to former factory employees. Rather, they talked about what would draw wealthy residents, shoppers, and tourists, theorizing that by

developing a creative class, the noncreatives would somehow rise with the betterment of the town (Florida 2002; Peck 2005).

Some residents felt left out of this new vision and excluded from the planning process. Though revitalization leaders included a few working-class people and residents whose families had lived in the area for generations, critics still referred to those working to develop the town as “people from away,” or “the doctors’ wives.” A single mother who supported some of the Main Street efforts nevertheless felt financially excluded from fundraising events and socially excluded from its group of leaders:

It’s like high school all over again. It’s this whole clique from away that do these things. And they’re exclusive.... I think there [are] people who don’t want to participate because they’re not in the clique. And that shouldn’t be what it’s about. It shouldn’t be about who’s friends with who. It should be about wanting to help the town.

Those working for a postindustrial plan thus gained a reputation among critics as an elite clique more concerned with developing the town in their image than creating jobs. In answering a survey question about whether the community supported its struggling residents, an anonymous respondent wrote, “Yea, right. All the ‘community’ cares about is feathering their own nests and drawing tourists to ‘shop downtown Skowhegan.’” When an article in the paper announced that the county accepted the local community organizer and her business partner as buyers of the old jail, pages of commentary followed, most of which doubted the plan’s success, often arguing that it only appealed to “hippies” or a small segment of the population.

Sarah, a middle-aged woman and recent resident, volunteered on revitalization projects. Having personal connections with poor and working-class people in town, she was particularly concerned about this apparent disconnect between the vision of community development leaders and the needs of people in the community:

I don’t hear a lot about all the stuff we’re talking about [people in the town who are struggling]. It’s our population base. How are they all going to benefit? And I don’t think that’s Main Street Skowhegan’s “focus,” which is fine. But ... the community should benefit. I mean I think the people here, if they’re living at a \$15,000 level, a quality of life at poverty, would we expect in three years that [the] same people will have moved up to the next notch? I don’t think that’s a focus of anybody right now.

Few of the planners seemed to share Sarah’s concern. They deemed detractors pessimists, “uncomfortable with change” and responsible for keeping the community down. One described the townspeople as less advanced than urbanites: “When people have lived for generations in a similar way, isolated from these larger impacts [of globalization], then it’s harder to make the

34 ETHNOLOGY

shift.” The problem, according to town leaders, is that the naysayers are living in the past, unable to come to terms with economic shifts, and unable to face the truth: “manufacturing is not coming back.”

In seeking to make Skowhegan a viable community, able to compete with others for industry, tourists, and wealthy residents, economic development leaders fueled resistance to growth politics. That the optimists’ vision was seen as a plan proposed by an elite clique helped to characterize those outside the clique as ordinary townspeople and the victims of sterile development projects and wasteful spending. Anti-government sentiment gained strength when Richard Harvey and other business leaders, drawing from national conservative populism, appealed to the townspeople as struggling and hard-working at a time when revitalization efforts were failing to address the concerns of the working class and blue-collar middle class.

THE ORDINARY ENTREPRENEUR

Economic insecurity in the region and corresponding revitalization plans spurred a growing opposition to government spending evident in the contentious meeting. While revitalization leaders looked for cultural explanations as to why some resisted change, Richard Harvey, a group of small business owners, and their supporters told residents they knew they were struggling. Harvey indicated that he was most concerned not about his own taxes but about the town and its financially insecure senior citizens. While town officials and other leaders tried to convince residents of the importance of investing in the town and of spending on infrastructure, equipment updates, and police department staff, those who spoke up against spending pointed to voters’ financial insecurities and the added strain of taxes.

The influence that Harvey, his family, and his business-owner friends had on the town and its voters was evident in the support Harvey received when he spoke, and the dearth of those who spoke out against him. The former town manager and lawyer who proposed the compromise budget recognized this power when they met with Harvey before the second town meeting to get their compromise budget passed, anticipating that objections from Harvey’s faction threatened its support. Whether out of loyalty or fear, many residents avoided criticizing him publicly. In my interviews, he was often not referred to by name but with vague terms such as “a certain business owner in town.” Had Harvey been perceived as an elitist who could not identify with “the people,” he would have been less influential.

Some townspeople resented those favoring a higher budget for the town. They believed revitalization leaders would not struggle if taxes increased. That is, those who promoted spending and investing presumably could afford

it. Yet few people seemed to resent Richard Harvey's wealth. He was instead identified as a "real Mainer" and one of the ordinary hardworking folks. Harvey's clothes, accent, choice of words, and links with working and blue-collar middle-class people minimized the economic disparity between him and most townspeople. He used jokes and everyday language to make his point and, though he might debate back and forth with a town employee on specifics, he did not give lengthy speeches. He made his concerns appear to be with "the people" and senior citizens.

The myth of the industrious white worker discussed above connects whiteness with the idea that anyone who works hard enough can "make it." Despite class differences between Harvey and most townspeople, he could thus be seen as another worker who had "made it." In the excerpt below, a self-described working-class voter recognizes Harvey's wealth, but focuses on what they have in common:

I'm just a working-class voter trying to put food on my kids' table. However I do share one thing with Richard Harvey. I also think the spending in this town is out of control.... When cost[s] go up, you cut what you can without hurting your business. I'm sure costs are up for Mr. Harvey, too; maybe that's why he sees this town can cut some of the crap in the budget. I'm sure he has had to cut back a little himself in these times.

Harvey earned respect from many townspeople who saw him as a good guy who "does a lot for this town." He publicly donated equipment and money to high-school athletics, the Skowhegan Fair, and town parades and events. He also gained power through his business, offering favors such as delayed payments to friends who buy his product. Harvey was not fabricating his connections with the townspeople. He grew up in Skowhegan, went to the local public schools, and maintained ties to people in various social strata.

Residents believed Harvey to be wealthy in a town of little wealth and a man who looked out for his own interests. But they also valued him as an entrepreneur and as a local representation of economic success. By speaking of interest rates and municipal investments during meetings, Harvey reminded townspeople that he was a savvy businessman who knew how to balance a budget. Yet he avoided talk of the property he owned or of anything that would accentuate his class status. Rarely did he mention how he would gain or lose from local political decisions. Because Harvey looked and talked like other working- and middle-class residents, because he lived and socialized with people in Skowhegan, his knowledge of private enterprise garnered respect rather than distrust. He fit two conservative tropes: the ordinary hardworking man and the wealthy business owner in need of financial and political support for his role in maintaining the economy. Ted, the physician from the Midwest, though well known and respected, could not hide the

divide between himself and working-class people. Ted's style of speaking with academic language and tone, as if trying to teach the townspeople something, could be read as patronizing or a sign of perceived social superiority.

Several anthropologists interpret conservative populism as the struggling working class demanding respect from elite government and intellectual leaders (Darling 2009; Doukas 2003; Kalb 2009). At public meeting debates in upstate New York, "angry citizens laid claim to something that looked very much like a separate class identity" (Doukas 2003:21) and saw themselves as "average Americans," "the little guy," or "the people," in opposition to those "who think they're better than us" (Doukas 2003:3). The conservative populists in Skowhegan recognized inequality in that they criticized elite town officials and middle- and upper-class revitalization leaders, but they offered little critique of business leaders or the role of capitalism.

Those with the strongest voices challenging the selectmen and the local government at the town meeting were not those with the lowest incomes. Populism often attracts middle-class dissenters who believe they are being squeezed between big business or big government and those perceived to be taking their jobs or tax money; e.g., immigrants, African Americans, or poor people. Just as Tea Party supporters have had higher income and education levels than the average population (Zernike and Thee-Brenan 2010), so also did conservative populists in Skowhegan. As one elected official told me, "the people that complain to me are usually the people who have money and really don't have to worry about not having money." Beyond a story of economically or politically oppressed people gaining power, then, this is also about business leaders and the blue-collar middle class maintaining power. Richard Harvey was fighting from a privileged position in the community to keep his taxes low.

CONCLUSION

The transition to a postindustrial economy created an atmosphere of uncertainty in central Maine. While talk of job loss and low wages infiltrated daily conversations, public debate centered on reducing spending and keeping taxes low. Middle- and working-class Skowhegan residents joined the 2007 plea for the "bare bones" budget, with fewer services, outdated equipment, a smaller staff, and minimal health insurance. For many low-wage workers and former mill-workers, a vision of Skowhegan's future based on nature tourism, downtown development, agriculture, and creative industries offered only the possibility that general economic growth would eventually reach them. Revitalization leaders, frustrated with negative responses to what they saw as

rational efforts to create a successful town, asked residents to be optimistic and to accept that their community was going to change. The divide between the group of mostly middle-class town leaders creating a plan for post-industrial Skowhegan and those middle- and working-class townspeople skeptical of their efforts, fostered the burgeoning support for small government politics. By the town meeting, business leaders were able to, as one informant put it, “mobilize discontent,” urging “taxpayers” and “ordinary townspeople” to oppose municipal spending.

National and international growth of neoliberal governing influenced small government politics in Skowhegan. Those requesting sharp budget cuts were putting into practice the 30-year global push toward minimizing government services and decreasing government’s power to create individual and national economic security. The town meeting argument that government officials and employees should accept lower salaries, less health insurance, and outdated equipment reveals changing expectations of government; i.e., that it should be brought down to the economic level of the town and its people, rather than funded to help raise them. Conservative politics have also combined an ideological commitment to privatization and market-based competition with populist rhetoric that appeals to voters as honest hard-working folks. Populist rhetoric equated the struggles of the successful business owner with that of retail or mill workers, homogenizing diverse class interests into one generic category, the taxpayer or the ordinary American. This political trope minimized class differences and instead focused on whiteness and the importance of hard work. Richard Harvey could thus be perceived as a wealthy knowledgeable entrepreneur as well as an ordinary hardworking Mainer. He and other business leaders gained approval from townspeople by identifying with those struggling to make ends meet in the new economy. Local government and revitalization planners did little to acknowledge this struggle.

In the wake of the 2008 recession, the Tea Party movement quickly garnered media attention and political legitimacy, mobilizing for candidates in the 2010 elections and helping to assure that those who had been elected remained committed to small-government initiatives. The same organizations that had promoted anti-tax and small-government politics through state ballot initiatives, including Maine’s TABOR, also contributed to post-recession grassroots organizing. The debates in Skowhegan over revitalization and municipal spending did not involve the same degree of mobilization as the Tea Party movements. Nor did the events in Skowhegan anticipate the racism, anti-immigration sentiment, opposition to Barack Obama, or emphasis on the Constitution seen in post-recession small-government political action. Still, in both cases, economic insecurity strengthened the ideological commitment to

reducing spending, keeping taxes low, and minimizing the role of government. Given the national history of speaking to and organizing white working and middle classes as average hardworking Americans it is not surprising that, when economic crisis threatens their remaining stability, it is through an identity and claim to being “ordinary folks” that resistance is organized. This story of small-town reaction to economic decline reveals how leaders can use this populist identity to connect with residents in the name of small-government politics. Conservative populism is most powerful, though, when policy or planning does not directly address the challenges of joblessness, declining wages, and rising costs of living.

NOTE

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40 ETHNOLOGY

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