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Representative Democracy in Rural America: Race, Gender, and Class through a Localism Lens

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I. INTRODUCTION

Political history is often made during presidential election cycles. For example, in 1861 President Abraham Lincoln not only became the sixteenth president of the United States, but he was also thrust into a nation-changing social and political maelstrom centered on slavery, secession, and preservation of the Union that would etch him into history. Since that time, both major political parties blatantly hoist Lincoln as an exemplar of what their presidential candidates can become.[4]

In 1960, John F. Kennedy not only became one of the youngest presidents in U.S. history, he was also the first nonprotestant, the great-grandson of Irish Catholic immigrants.[5] As with Lincoln, national turmoil, including issues of race and the civil rights movement, surrounded and largely defined his short presidency.[6] Similarly, Democrat Walter Mondale made history in 1984 when he picked Geraldine Ferraro for his vice presidential running mate—the first woman on a major party ticket—bringing gender issues to the fore of American politics. A flurry of partisan and gender pride followed a wave of media coverage; however, as the campaign wore on, more people focused on Ferraro's failure to disclose her husband's tax records than the candidates.[7] In the end, the Mondale-Ferraro ticket lost the election, with Ronald Reagan taking 49 of 50 states, with about 56 percent of women voting for Reagan, which was up 10 percent from 1980.[8]

The 2008 presidential election was another for the history books, once again bringing issues of race, gender, and class to the fore of American politics. The Democratic Party's nomination of Illinois Senator Barack Obama as the first African American to represent a major party in a presidential election; the long, hard nomination battle he had with Hillary Clinton—the first woman to come close to securing a presidential nomination from a major party; and Arizona Senator John McCain's selection of Alaska Governor Sarah Palin as the Republican Party's first female vice presidential candidate all made the 2008 election particularly memorable. While the Palin pick, like the Ferraro pick, was surrounded by issues of gender, Palin's moose hunting, rural American appeal to the "average Joe" and "hockey moms," as well as her persistent campaign moves to portray Obama as an out-of-touch elitist did more to highlight class and regional divides than her presence on the ticket did to bridge the gender gap.

With the Obama nomination, the Hillary Clinton near miss, the Palin pick, and questions surrounding McCain's age, the 2008 presidential election had everyone politically unnerved and scrambling to define voting pockets across gender, class, and race lines while also paying attention to issues such as rural versus city, and Washington insiders and elites versus Washington outsiders and relative unknowns. Because the Democratic nominating contest went down to the wire, and because the subsequent Obama campaign juggernaut pulled out all the stops in its determined effort to turn previous red states blue, for the first time in decades all fifty states played a meaningful role in the presidential election.[9] Differences among voters in the East, West, Midwest, and South volleyed across media as the major issues unfolded. Ironically, what disappeared under the radar of real political discussion were key issues such as the troubled economy, particularly the crisis on Wall Street, the war in Iraq, the mortgage industry debacle, healthcare, education, and the cultural wars surrounding abortion, gay marriage, guns, and religion. Instead, the media largely focused on what

appeared to be personal narratives or the lack thereof, the known versus so-called unknown candidates, experience versus no experience, and who was the maverick, reformer, or leader of change. What was also lost in the larger discussion was the way in which issues, such as race, gender, and class played out in the 2008 campaign in specific regions like the rural Mountain West, which, while more consequential than in past elections, were still largely overlooked.

In this exploratory essay, we posit this primary research question: How did rural America filter race, gender, and class in the historical 2008 presidential election? In answering this question we focus on the Mountain West, a predominantly rural area, largely ignored in the greater American discourse and even in discussions centered on rural politics. We assert that while race, gender, and class always matter, how they matter in the rural Mountain West depends on the phenomenon of localism. When we refer to localism in this context, we mean a bias in favor of that which is local and familiar. It is a bias in favor of a person, or against a person, based on who a person is, who a person knows, who knows a person, where a person is from, and how long the person has lived there. It is our contention that a strong bias in favor of the local, or "localism," influenced the effect race, gender, and class had on the 2008 election results in the rural Mountain West.[10]

Accordingly, in this essay we hope to introduce the reader to the phenomenon of localism and present preliminary prescriptive insights regarding issues of race, gender, and class with respect to politics in the rural Mountain West. After a brief overview of how the idea of the local became important, we look at the issue of race in the rural Mountain West and how the theory of localism helps explain the impact race had in that region in the 2008 election. Next, we assess how issues of race in this area are inextricably linked to issues of class, a connection which is further elucidated when viewed through the prism of localism. In the third and final section, we explore how localism appears to largely negate gender

influences on political outcomes in the rural Mountain West. We then conclude with a call for further exploration of these issues with respect to this often ignored region of the country.

II. WHY THE LOCAL BECAME IMPORTANT

As stated, the 2008 presidential race was one for the history books for a number of reasons. Most obvious, of course, was the election of the nation's first African American president who beat out the strongest woman candidate to run for president, as well as the Republican ticket whose victory would have ensured that America had its first female vice president.

However, these were only some of the many reasons the election was historical. Another was the significance of, and widespread participation by, usually ignored areas of the country, particularly in the Democratic presidential primary. The hard fought primary contest between Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama forced the process for the Democratic nomination to extend into all fifty states.[11] Thus, for the first time in recent history, the votes cast in primaries and caucuses in every state, and even in places like Puerto Rico and American Samoa, became important in determining who would ultimately become president of the U.S. Additionally, states such as Colorado, Montana, New Mexico, Virginia, North Carolina, Indiana, and Nevada, which for many years had fallen safely in the column of one party, were suddenly up for grabs. As a result, the people in those states, and in those towns with less population than some city blocks, suddenly became important parts of the American electorate. The newfound importance of these states became highlighted as the effect of the Clinton and Obama campaign strategies played out in the Democratic primary contest. The success of the Obama fifty-state strategy, both in the primary and general election, demonstrated that, at least in this election year, a person could not become president by focusing solely on the most populated states and the most populous areas within each state.[12] The game changed, and the entire country became a more important part of the

process; a process in which, during most previous elections, sparsely populated areas had been largely ignored or discounted.

III. Localism and Race

The race and gender of the candidates, along with Obama's fifty-state strategy, brought into stark relief some of the long-standing, yet often ignored, divisions and differences throughout the country. Certainly racial differences came to the fore but so did regional, class, and other demographic differences. For purposes of this part of the discussion, the most significant differences are those centering on race in rural settings; this is an issue that is often either overlooked or involves a superficial discussion rife with unquestioned stereotypes. The goal of this portion of the essay is to bring attention to the complex way in which issues of race play out in a rural setting. This is, by no means, meant to be a comprehensive discussion or even a survey of such issues. Rather, our intent is to highlight at least one way in which the complexity of race played out in rural areas in the 2008 presidential election and to offer some preliminary suggestions regarding what this may mean as we try to understand one another and become a more unified country going forward.

This discussion of race in rural America focuses on the Mountain West states such as Colorado, Wyoming, Montana, Utah, Idaho, and New Mexico, rather than on the southern and eastern states with large rural populations. We have chosen to focus on this region, in part, because we feel what little work has been done on race and rural politics has largely centered on the rural parts of the eastern and southern states and has largely ignored the rural states of the Mountain West.[13]

It is important to recognize and highlight this bias from the outset because it brings to the fore the fact that, while often lumped together, there are vast differences between the various rural parts of the U.S. For example, the basic racial history of the Mountain West differs significantly from rural areas in the South and the East. Whereas many rural areas in the South and

the East were at the heart of the bitter fight regarding slavery, several of the Western rural states did not even enter the Union until after the Civil War.[14] This, of course, does not mean that race was not, or is not, an issue in the Mountain West; it certainly was, and is. It just means that the racial history has played out differently. Particularly, while there has always been an African American presence in the Mountain West, it has always been significantly small when compared to other rural areas of the U.S.; instead, Native American and Hispanic American groups have been larger in these regions versus other areas.[15] Consequently, while the dominant story of race in the rural South and East has largely centered on a black-white dichotomy, the story of race in the Mountain West has been more multifaceted with Native and Hispanic Americans playing larger roles. Although the number of nonwhite groups has grown in recent years, particularly in states like Nevada, Colorado, and New Mexico, the fact is that all of these states are still very predominantly white.[16] Yet, Barack Obama won the primary in every single one of these states and won Nevada, New Mexico, and Colorado in the general election with Montana being too close to call until the very end. There are obviously lots of variables and reasons for this, but we posit that localism was at least one important factor.

Throughout this presidential campaign, there was significant talk about the degree to which Obama's race might affect his ability to be elected. Up until election day, there was much speculation that Obama's race might cost him as much as six percentage points despite what the polls may have indicated.[17] Given this, various pundits speculated as to why the polls were not likely to reflect what could possibly be the ultimate outcome. Amidst this speculation, one theory that gained significant traction was the idea that many of those polled were not providing pollsters with their true beliefs (whether consciously or not) and were instead using "proxies" for race. For example, rather than saying that one would not vote for an African American, one might instead say he or she was undecided or had reservations about Obama or would not vote for Obama for a host of other

reasons, such as his being inexperienced or elitist.[18] While a person polled might give such reasons, many speculated that in reality such reasons were really proxies for race, acceptable ways not to vote for Obama, when stating explicitly that it was because of his race was generally unacceptable to one's self or to others.[19]

Whether that six-point margin was a factor in the outcome of the election, one cannot say for sure. However, it is clear that whatever remaining racial prejudice there may be in this country, and whatever racial prejudice may have affected the votes of some, it certainly did not cost Obama the presidency. Obama won by the largest popular vote margin in over a decade and posted an even bigger electoral college victory.[20] But does this mean race was not a factor? Or put differently, does this mean that in states like Wyoming and Utah, where Obama lost by a fairly large margin, race played a bigger role than in the rest of the country?[21] Unfortunately, we may never know for sure, as information about why people voted the way they did in a state like Wyoming is virtually nonexistent. However, we would like to posit that, to a certain extent, race did, in fact, play a role, but not perhaps in the way that one might expect: any role that race may have played is impacted by the phenomenon of localism. We assert further that looking at the way in which race possibly played a role in the rural Mountain West may offer some tentative insights into why there appeared to be little to no "Bradley effect" across the country generally.[22]

Localism has historically impacted political outcomes in the Mountain West region. For the past several decades, states like Wyoming, Montana, Colorado, Utah, and Idaho have been predominantly Republican states.[23] Yet consistently over the years, these states have elected Democrats to statewide office, particularly to the office of governor.[24] For example, Wyoming currently has a Democratic governor, Dave Freudenthal, who was first elected in 2003. He was elected despite the state's strong Republican leanings and despite the fact that he ran against a candidate who had strong support from Vice President Dick Cheney.[25] How did Freudenthal win?

Anecdotal evidence suggests that, regardless of party affiliation, people knew Governor Freudenthal, as well as his opponent, and liked Freudenthal better as a person.[26] In a state with a population of roughly 500,000, where everyone knows everyone else, or knows someone who does; where one is just as likely to see the governor and speak with him at a University of Wyoming football tailgate party as one's next door neighbor, "knowing" someone, or having someone you know vouch for a person can go a long way. In fact, it can often be a deciding factor in rural or frontier states such as Wyoming.

So what does that mean with respect to issues of race and the impact race may have on rural politics? As stated, the vast majority of the population in a good number of the Mountain West states is white. In a political locality, who you know and who knows you can often be a major factor in who wins a given race. In a national race, where almost no one in these small communities will ever be able to meet and get to know the candidates, we posit that race indeed is a factor, masquerading under the guise of familiarity. In other words, the more a candidate appears like those with whom a likely voter is familiar, the more likely that candidate is to receive that voter's vote, regardless of the candidate's stance on the issues. Put simply, the less an unknown candidate resembles the rural demographic, particularly racially, the harder it will be for that candidate to win those votes. Evidence to support this idea can be found by looking at Obama's victories in the Mountain West states in the primaries.[27] Unlike the Clinton campaign, Obama had significant presence in these states, establishing local campaign offices throughout each state that recruited and organized a bevy of local volunteers who campaigned in their communities and neighborhoods for weeks in advance of the primaries and caucuses. Additionally, Obama made multiple personal stops in unlikely states like Wyoming,[28] thus giving more people the chance to get to "know" him.

This thesis is further evidenced by the fact that Obama lost by such a large margin in Wyoming in the general election. Unlike during the

primaries, the Obama campaign had very little presence in Wyoming during the general election, although much more of a presence than any Democratic candidate in recent memory. Additionally, most efforts by Wyoming residents on behalf of the Obama campaign during the general election were directed at the neighboring states of Montana and Colorado, where the possibility of a general election victory was much greater than in Wyoming. We have found additional evidence to support this thesis through participant-observation experience in the campaign process from February 2008 until November 2008. During this time period, one of the authors campaigned extensively for the Obama campaign in Wyoming during the primary and in Colorado for the general election. In nearly all instances, whenever an effort was made to convince a reluctant Obama voter, discussions of his policy positions failed to be persuasive, regardless of what issues may have been important to a particular voter. However, whenever the author/political volunteer explained she had Obama as a professor in law school and could vouch for him as a person, the whole tenor of the conversation would often change. This line of argument was only effective if they knew the author/political volunteer was from Wyoming originally and lived down the street from them. In those instances, being a local often trumped the author/political volunteer's race (African American). Being able to personally vouch for Obama also helped overcome reservations folks may have had about his race.

Why might this have significance? While Obama may have won, and the election of a black president is significant, the 2008 election still showed that we are a nation divided in many ways.[29] It has also shown that what leads to and perpetuates such divisions is a set of complex variables that differs by location. Our ability to recognize and understand that complex set of variables is essential if we are to continue to bridge the gaps that divide us. We posit here that at least one of those variables in the Mountain West region is localism.

The rural areas of this country, particularly those in the Mountain West, are often ignored not only politically but academically as well—at least with respect to race and similar issues. In the few instances where such issues are addressed in a rural setting, all rural areas tend to be lumped together even though there may be vast differences in history and culture between the tobacco fields of the Carolinas and Virginia and the ranches of Wyoming and Montana. As a result, theories that might explain phenomena in one locale may not be applicable to another. At least in parts of the Mountain West, anecdotal evidence tends to show that localism can, and often does, trump race. This, of course, does not mean that race is not an issue, but it does mean that any strategy to improve race relations in those rural areas of the country should, in part, encompass a plan for addressing the localism phenomenon. For the localism phenomenon appears to mitigate, or alter, the influence race may have on a given election in the rural Mountain West. However, the picture is incomplete if one does not also consider the interconnectedness of race and class in this region of the country. As the next section will show, there is a class component to localism, which is informed by notions of race. It is to these issues of race and class to which we now turn.

IV. THE CLASS PHENOMENON AND LOCALISM

Developments in the 2008 campaign not only brought issues of race to the fore, they put issues of class front and center. In this section, we analyze how issues of class, informed by notions of race, combined with localism to affect election outcomes in the rural Mountain West.

The vice-presidential selection of Sarah Palin, governor of the great state of Alaska, former beauty queen, hockey mom, self-proclaimed maverick, and avid killer of moose, suggests that the McCain ticket was ramping up its outreach to Joe Six Pack, a.k.a., the rural, white working class. An early strategy, after announcing the selection of Palin, was to widely publicize a photo of her and her moose. According to *The Times*,

> Palin's taste for moose hunting is a central plank of her political personality. It is almost obligatory, when writing about the Alaska governor and Republican vice-presidential candidate, to refer to her as the "gun-toting, moose-hunting mother-of-five."[30] Palin is the first candidate in history who tracks, kills, guts, skins, cooks, and then eats big game. Palin's reputation as a moose hunter is central to her appeal as a frontierswoman, an appeal that transformed the presidential race. A photograph of Palin sitting in the bloodstained snow, gun in hand, alongside the carcass of a large animal killed by her own fair hand, has been published in virtually every newspaper in the world; it is an image that makes Republicans, hunters, and gun owners very happy.[31]

In addition to Republicans, hunters, and gun owners, *The Times* could also add the rural, white working class to its list. "Certain Republicans become weak-kneed at Palin's huntswoman qualities. Senator Fred Thompson declared, Palin is 'the only nominee in the history of either party who knows how to properly field-dress a moose...with the possible exception of Teddy Roosevelt.'"[32] Before Palin ever attempted to discuss an issue of substance, her appeal to the rural, white working class had hit its mark. Beyond the moose, it was an appeal to the anti-liberal, anti-elite, anti-intellectual segment of the working class. It was an appeal to those in the working class that appreciated Palin's down-home language with her words like "dog gone it," "heck," and "darn." This folksy persona countered any notion of an elite politician. The language of toughness found in the imagery of pit bulls further enhanced her class credentials. No wimpy intellectual here. In fact, on every traditional front, Palin has the makings of a working-class persona specifically designed to maintain the Republican appeal to a swath of red voters. Clearly, the label of liberal, elitist, or intellectual sends a strong message to the working class. It is the tag the Republicans tried to place on Obama throughout the campaign, despite the fact that of all the presidential candidates, Obama came from the least privileged background having been raised by his working-class mother and grandparents.[33] This discursive strategy was so powerful that the only

presidential nominee with "community organizer" on his resume was seen as an elitist by this particular segment of the working class.

The evidence from different quarters suggests that the working class is largely hooked and reeled in with the simple discourse that shaped its class character in the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries, a discourse that romanticizes the frontier, rugged individualism and self-reliance, abhors political liberals, belittles intellectuals, and cherishes a narrow definition of Christian values. In the twentieth century, this simple discourse is captured in the rhetoric of the "culture wars." As Thomas Frank has noted, one of the greatest contradictions in American society is the unlikely marriage between conservatism and ordinary working people. As he explains, the conservative backlash that fueled the "Reagan Revolution" called for a return to "traditional values," but in fact yielded "incalculable, historic harm to working-class people."[34]

These values are largely captured in the "straight talk" and persona of Sarah Palin. As one pundit notes about her moose-hunting prowess,

> for Sarah Palin, moose hunting is a matter of politics, not subsistence. Her taste for moose stew sends a direct message to voters, even to those suburbanites who would never consider killing any animal, let alone a moose. It is an image that harks back to a pioneering past, a time when America was still young and empty, abundant in nature and opportunity.[35]

These values are a key component of the localism of the Mountain West, for there are few regions in the country that have succeeded in maintaining this image like the Mountain West region. Wyoming, in particular, with its wide open spaces, economic base rooted in extractive industries, ranching, and agriculture, bucking bronco as the state symbol, right-to-work status, and predominately white population fuels the overly romanticized glimpse back to the pioneering past. Drawing on the rural, white working-class voter, Sarah Palin drew substantial support in this region. In Wyoming, for example, the Republican McCain/Palin ticket won easily. In politics colored

by localism, this outcome is not unusual despite the national landslide that decisively elected Democrat Barack Obama. In the absence of any real familiarity with any of the candidates, Wyoming's rural, white working class has a strong bond with all things hunting.

But beyond the frontier, there is another reality; selecting Palin was a tactic to also use traditional class discourse as a race strategy. The Palin style "straight talk" signals another deeply rooted message about race and whiteness to the working class, namely that inherent in the freedoms of killing large animals and maintaining right-to-work policies is the defense of white interests. Thus, class and race in this country have been inextricably linked since their early origins. The practice of localism, which heavily influences political outcomes in the rural Mountain West, draws on the practices that have defined race within a given region. In places like Wyoming that lack significant racial populations to resist historical practice, earlier race-class alliances, such as the white working class operating in opposition to all other nonwhite groups, predominate.

To understand how the alliance between Republicans and the white working class was made in the twentieth century, we must look back to the formative years of this country when the working class created itself in opposition to the "blackness" of African slaves and the "redness" of Indians and embraced particular notions of itself as free, white labor. According to W.E.B. Du Bois, the notion of white translated into a psychological wage for white workers.[36] According to David Roediger in *The Wages of Whiteness*, "status and privileges conferred by race could be used to make up for alienating and exploitative class relationships, North and South. White workers could, and did, define and accept their class positions by fashioning identities as 'not slaves' and as 'not blacks.'"[37] This distinction between black and white infused class meanings and has given white workers a particular ethos that set them apart from black workers and ultimately set the stage for the class relations in the U.S. that underlie the notion of American exceptionalism: basically, the white working class,

early on, traded their class solidarity for the status of whiteness. This ill-conceived strategy dominated intra-class and race relations up until the point that it no longer mattered—the 1970s and 1980s when organized labor represented a shadow of its former self.

This takes us to the problem of American exceptionalism. American exceptionalism signifies the failure of the U.S. to develop a national social welfare state similar to that of the Western European democracies. In other words, it relates to the failure of the U.S. to develop national policies aligned with the fundamental interests of American workers. But more to the point at hand, we use American exceptionalism to capture the strange alliance between the working-class and Republican policies that have undermined national social welfare policies.

The U.S., in contrast to its European counterparts, embraced an extreme, liberal, laissez-faire agenda rife with the discourse of individualism, private property, and antistatist, antitax rhetoric. Unlike the working classes of Western Europe who saw their interests in opposition to the aristocracy and newly rich, the U.S. working class, with a few exceptions, has parroted the slogans of unbridled capitalism, self-help, small state, and individual achievement. Moreover, historically these slogans of the white working class have often been framed in opposition to blacks, Chinese, Indians, and Mexicans. As Jill Quadagno explains, racism is a major causal factor in determining American exceptionalism. Specifically, she states, "working-class politics have been weakened by racial divisions, both in the workplace and in the community. . . . These racial barriers to class solidarity originated in private practices but became embedded in the state when welfare programs were enacted."[38]

In fact, the weakness of the working class in the U.S. compared to the strength of their Western European counterpart, explains the failure of the U.S. to develop a national social welfare policy. Racism explains the weakness of the working class. This weakness goes back to the historic trade—whiteness in exchange for class solidarity. Intrinsic to the

development of a socialist democracy stands a viable, self-conscious, working class. In this country, the working class only rarely transformed itself from a class in itself to a class for itself. For the most part, it has acted against itself, often supporting economic policies and laws not in its best interest. The results of this failure loom large today: greater inequality, wars, economic decline, decreasing quality of life, less access to social welfare, less healthcare, and less education for working people. In the context of this article, in the rural Mountain West, this failure can also mean a preference for candidates who are perceived to fit local norms even if such candidates and their policies and agendas are, in actuality, not in line with the perception. For example, George W. Bush's simple style of speech, coupled with his perceived rancher lifestyle, caused many in the Mountain West to see him as in line with the common rural worker, rather than the elite business establishment, of which he is a part. Nearly all of America lacks a class consciousness; but just look at an electoral map of the country, and rural America shines a bright red. From Reagan to Bush, it was that red swath of country that made it all possible.

The same working-class discourse that was tinged with racist overtones in the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries, a means of talking about working-class values, still attracts the same segment today. More than an attachment to the frontier and moose hunting, the racism of the working class has led to its weakness, to its self-destructive capacity. Today, with the exception of those who say they would not vote for Obama because he is black, the working class no longer thinks of its white status and ways to maintain it. However, much of the working class's support for the party that has destroyed it stems from the working class's attraction to the party's position on racialized issues like affirmative action, immigration, the death penalty, the war on drugs, welfare, bussing, and school integration. All of these issues pose a threat to a notion of traditional frontier values. For example, these issues challenge the notion of self-help, rugged individualism, minimal state intervention, and an unstated or

unacknowledged notion of racial purity in the case of immigration. Thus, while we posit that a candidate in the Mountain West who is perceived to be more local likely has a greater chance of winning despite the candidate's race, the concept of what constitutes the local is informed by a notion of class which embodies racial constructs.

As previously stated, while Obama may have won a large nationwide victory, the opposite was true in several Mountain West states. In fact, in many such states the vote was overwhelmingly for the McCain/Palin ticket, a result which we believe can be explained in part by the phenomenon of localism. While President Obama may come from a working-class background, that background is largely cosmopolitan and urban: given his father's immigrant status, the time Obama lived overseas as a child, and the fact that he spent most of his adult life in the cities of New York and Chicago. Such a background, working-class or not, is not perceived to be in line with traditional frontier values. Thus, he, like many national political candidates regardless of race, is too different or too "unlocal" to garner the votes of many in this region of the country. The May 5, 2008, issue of *Newsweek* looked at the issue of Obama's "Bubba gap; his perceived inability to connect with the working class."[39] We suggest that narrowing this gap in states like Wyoming and other areas of the Mountain West may be as simple as ceasing to ignore the people in these areas and finding ways to portray candidates in a way that better connects them to local mores.

V. GENDER AND LOCALISM: DOES GENDER MATTER?

Hillary Clinton's nearly successful presidential candidacy and John McCain's selection of Sarah Palin as his vice presidential running mate certainly brought gender issues to the fore of the 2008 election and kept them there throughout the election cycle. As discussed, the phenomenon of localism helps explain the way in which race and class played out in the rural Mountain West in the 2008 presidential election. Localism also provides a prism for examining issues of gender in the same region in this

election. Particularly, it helps explain why gender did not appear to be a particularly salient issue.

In her first major nationwide speech, Sarah Palin alluded to the fact that part of her selection was likely an attempt to try to get some of the millions of women who voted for Hillary Clinton in the primary to change allegiance and vote the Republican ticket.[40] This ploy does not appear to have been successful. Of the majority of women who voted, 56 percent, voted for Obama,[41] and Obama garnered 83 percent of the vote from Clinton Democrats.[42] This is not particularly surprising when one considers that Obama and Clinton are much closer with respect to the issues than Palin and Clinton will likely ever be.

Be that as it may, an overwhelming majority of women in several Mountain West states voted the McCain/Palin ticket. This is likely due to several factors, including Palin's gender. However, we posit here that the strong support the Republican ticket garnered in several rural Mountain West states, particularly from women, is better explained by localism and not Palin's gender. As a way to illustrate this point, we focus on the March 2008 Democratic Caucus in Wyoming and information gathered there through participant-observation methodology. We also take into consideration discussions on political blogs featured on the website of a local newspaper, the *Casper Star Tribune*, located in northern Wyoming, and the Wyoming Democratic Party website. The anecdotal documentation from attendees of the Democratic Caucus in Laramie, Wyoming, located in Albany County, which is home of the University of Wyoming, cannot be generalized;[43] however, it provides insight into the dialogue and perspectives of Democrats attending the Caucus.

To provide some perspective, Wyoming is the least populated state in the nation, with a population of only about 500,000.[44] Its nickname is the Equality State—it was the first to allow women to vote, to serve on juries, and to hold public office.[45] It also elected the first female governor in the U.S. in 1924,[46] and its sole Congressional representative has been a woman

since the mid-1990s.[47] Wyoming has not voted for a Democratic presidential candidate in over forty years.[48]

During the March 8, 2008 Democratic Caucus in Albany County, Wyoming, conversations among Democrats ran the gamut from articulating support for Barack Obama or Hillary Clinton during the primary season to the need for change in Washington. Conversations observed during the caucus showed that for some, gender was definitely a defining issue. For example, two women—one Latina the other African American—shared friendly banter and opposing political support during discussions in a registration line for the caucus. The African American emphatically stated her support for Obama and viewed him as creating momentum for change in the country. The Latina voter acknowledged Obama's merits, but clearly stated her vote in the Democratic Caucus would be for Hillary Clinton. The Latina female voter went on to state she was in a "house divided" because her spouse, a Latino male, would be voting for Obama. The Chair of the Albany County Democrats opened the convention after the required protocols were set, and discussion in the room continued about the candidates, issues, and gender-related topics. While two middle-aged white women discussed the proceedings, one shared that she "wanted to see a woman in office (president) and that Barack has time because of his age, but Hillary doesn't and is older and it should be her turn now."[49] When the call was made to listen to the nominations, two women—African American and Latina—made nomination speeches for Barack Obama, and two women—both white—made nomination speeches for Hillary Clinton. The person who made the seconding speech for Hillary Clinton focused on what it meant to her as a young woman to have a woman like Clinton running for president.

When all the votes were tallied at the Albany County Caucus, of the total 1,311 ballots, 969 ballots (74 percent) were cast for Obama, 328 ballots (25 percent) for Clinton, 11 ballots (1 percent) were uncommitted, and 3 ballots were spoiled.[50] While the authors' observations at the Albany County

Caucus indicate that gender may have influenced at least some votes for or against Clinton because of her gender, we think the results are better explained by localism. As stated, localism in rural areas supports the postulate that people connect to what they perceive as personal and familiar. Obama established a field office early in Albany County and visited the community in February, prior to the March Caucus. Clinton never developed the same local presence and did not visit Albany County before the March Caucus; she chose instead to send her husband, former President Bill Clinton, as a representative for her campaign. Accordingly, the Albany County Caucus attendees had much more time to "get to know" and become familiar with Obama prior to the campaign as compared to Clinton.

In contrast to the time leading up to the caucus, the Obama campaign spent virtually no time in Wyoming during the general election, with Wyoming Democratic campaign efforts directed to the neighboring states of Colorado and Montana. While the McCain/Palin campaign did not spend a significant amount of time in Wyoming either, they did send important surrogates such as Cindy McCain[51] and Vice President Cheney. Through these surrogates, the McCain/Palin campaign was able to establish a more significant local presence and better connect with the voters. For example, Vice President Cheney appeared in Wyoming just days before the election.[52] During his rally, Cheney spoke in support of the entire Republican ticket. At the time of Cheney's speech, Cynthia Lummis, a Republican, and Gary Trauner, a Democrat, were shown in polls to be in a statistical tie for Wyoming's sole House of Representative seat.[53] Trauner, a Jackson, Wyoming, resident since only 1990 and a native of New York, has always faced an uphill battle in his political career in Wyoming, in part, because he is not from the state. Cheney played on this in supporting Lummis in his speech with statements like "[Lummis] is perfectly in tune with the people of Wyoming."[54] There was no one of similar stature from the Obama campaign or the Democratic Party to make a similar appeal. This was significant because the vast majority of Wyoming voters are

registered Republican and therefore, were not able to participate in the March 2008 Democratic Caucus.[55] As a result, they were not contacted during the Obama campaign's primary election efforts. Thus, for many general election Wyoming voters, Obama remained a relative unknown.

National polling following the election indicates that voters were more likely to vote for candidates who were contacted by a particular campaign.[56] We think this is especially true in rural Mountain West states such as Wyoming where who you know and who knows you seem to be important components of political outcomes. Perhaps attendees of the last-minute Cheney rally just three days before the election illustrate this point best. In reference to the impact Cheney had on rally attendees, no reference was made to issues or policy. Instead there were comments such as, "I think the best way to (describe) [Cheney's] perception here in Wyoming is we call him Dick"; "He's a first name; he's one of us. He's our man"; or, "Being from Wyoming all this time, I never heard anything bad about the guy."[57] Thus, Cheney was able to vouch for the Republican ticket in much the same way that one of the authors, being from Wyoming, was able to vouch for Obama during the Democratic primary.

Additionally, while Palin may not have been from Wyoming, her rural upbringing, folksy demeanor, and penchant for hunting certainly resonated with people in that state and other rural Mountain West states. Put simply, to many in Wyoming and similar states, she looked a lot more like "one of us" than any other candidate in the race. In fact, in a poll taken in Wyoming in October 2008, Palin's favorable name recognition was higher than John McCain's.[58] This is not overly surprising when one considers that John McCain overwhelmingly lost the Republican primary in every rural Mountain West state, with the exceptions of Idaho and New Mexico whose primaries were held so late in the election cycle—May 27, 2008, and June 3, 2008—that McCain and Ron Paul were the only candidates left on the ballot.[59] While many of those states would have likely gone Republican anyway, it would appear that localism in the form of Palin helped solidify

McCain's victory, and Palin's gender, like Clinton's, does not appear to have been a particularly salient factor.

VI. CONCLUSION

The unique nature of the 2008 presidential election brought issues of race, gender, and class into the fore of American politics and discourse in ways they had not been for many years. The unique nature of the situation also made sparsely populated rural states more important. These states are often overlooked, if not outright ignored, in a national election system where political power is inextricably linked to population size. The newfound importance of these sparsely populated states provided a rare opportunity to assess issues of race, gender, and class in a presidential election. It also helped bring to the fore the way in which localism might mitigate or affect the influence of race, gender, and class on election outcomes in the Mountain West.

In the national discussions on race, gender, and class attendant to the 2008 election, there was a tendency to assume that the way those issues played out in populated areas of the U.S., or in rural places in the southern and eastern U.S., were the same across the country. What we hoped to draw attention to in this essay is the fact that such sweeping generalizations and assumptions are not necessarily accurate. While race, class, and gender certainly play a part in rural Mountain West politics, the part they play may be vastly different in that region versus other parts of the country, even other rural areas. It is our hypothesis that the way those issues play out, at least as was evident in the 2008 presidential election, can best be explained by the theory of localism, a bias in favor of that which is local and familiar; that is, the phenomenon whereby political decisions are largely made on the basis of who you are, who you know, who knows you, where you are from, and how long you have been there. While this piece is far from comprehensive, we hope that it will spark a dialogue on these important issues in an often ignored and rarely theorized region of the country. While

the 2008 presidential election was not close, it still evidenced a starkly divided nation. We believe that in looking more closely at places such as the rural Mountain West, which seem to be a significant part of that divide, we may be able to gain insights into how to bridge that gap. This essay is our attempt to help spark such a dialogue.

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[4] DORIS KEARNS GOODWIN, TEAM OF RIVALS: THE POLITICAL GENIUS OF ABRAHAM LINCOLN 585–86, 748–49 (2006).

[5] MICHAEL O'BRIEN, JOHN F. KENNEDY: A BIOGRAPHY 1–12 (2005).

[6] MARK K. UPDEGROVE, BAPTISM BY FIRE: EIGHT PRESIDENTS WHO TOOK OFFICE IN TIMES OF CRISIS 185–214 (2009); MICHAEL O'BRIEN, RETHINKING K 150–65 (2009).

[7] Julia Baird, *From Seneca Falls to… Sarah Palin?*, NEWSWEEK, Sept. 22, 2008, at 31, *available at* http://www.newsweek.com/id/158893.

[8] *Id.*

[9] *How the Race Was Won*, THE DENVER POST, Aug. 25, 2008, at 12P–13P [hereinafter *How the Race Was Won*]; Karen Tumulty, *The Mistakes She Made*, TIME, May 19, 2008, at 24–5; *How Obama Won*, TIME, Nov. 17, 2008, at 42–3.

[10] Our use of the term "localism" here is perhaps best understood as something akin to racism or classism when such words are used to denote a preference for a particular race or class. Thus, we use the term "localism" to denote a preference for those of a particular locality. This is in contrast to a more common use of the term localism in political discourse referring to local political control or power as opposed to a more centralized form of political control or power. *See, e.g.*, Richard Briffault, *Our Localism: Part I—The Structure of Local Government Law*, 90 COLUM. L. REV. 1, 1 (1990) (using localism in reference to an advocacy for more local power); Daniel B. Rodriguez, *Localism and Lawmaking*, 32 RUTGERS L. J. 627, 627 (2001) (describing localism as embodying "the idea that local governance ought to be protected to a greater or lesser degree from control by central governments . . . ."); Thomas J. Sugrue, *All Politics is Local: The Persistence of Localism in Twentieth-Century America, in* THE DEMOCRATIC EXPERIMENT: NEW DIRECTIONS IN AMERICAN POLITICAL HISTORY 301–26 (Meg Jacobs, William J. Novak, & Julian E. Zelizer, eds., 2003) (discussing throughout the interplay between localism envisioned as local control, power, autonomy, and centralization).

[11] *How the Race Was Won*, *supra* note 9.

[12] Tumulty, *supra* note 9.

[13] We also chose to focus on this region because all three authors live in the area and one author grew up in the area, has lived in the region for the last seven years, and campaigned and participated in the 2008 election in the region.

[14] For example, Colorado became the thirty-eighth state on August 1, 1876; Montana became the forty-first state on November 8, 1889; Idaho became the forty-third state on July 3, 1890; Wyoming became the forty-fourth state on July 10, 1890; and Utah became the forty-fifth state on January 4, 1896. *See* Ben's Guide to U.S. Government for Kids, Quick Facts: Colorado (April 28, 2009), http://bensguide.gpo.gov/3-5/state/colorado.html; Harry W. Fritz and Katherine Hansen, *A Brief History of Montana* (2000) http://www.montanahistoricalsociety.org/education/studentguide/HistoryOf Montana.asp (providing an excerpt from the WORLD BOOK ENCYCLOPEDIA (2000)); IDAHO GOVERNOR'S WEBSITE, *State of Idaho 1890–1899*, *in* CHRONOLOGICAL HISTORY OF IDAHO, http://gov.idaho.gov/fyi/history/history_1890-99.html (last visited Oct. 13, 2009); Welcome to the State of Wyoming, *Chronology-Some Events in Wyoming History* (2009), http://www.wyoming.gov/chronology.aspx; Utah History To Go, *History Facts* (2009), http://historytogo.utah.gov/facts/index.html.

[15] For example, the U.S. Census Bureau, 2005–2007 American Community Survey shows that African Americans make up 0.7 percent of the population of Wyoming, while American Indians and Latinos make up 2.2 percent and 7.2 percent respectively. Similarly, that same survey for Colorado shows African Americans as only 3.8 percent of the Colorado population with Latinos at 19.6 percent. Likewise, African Americans make up only 0.7 percent of the population of Montana, whereas American Indians are 6.2 percent of the population, and Latinos are 2.5 percent. U.S. Census Bureau, 2005–2007 American Community Survey, http://www.census.gov/ (last visited Oct. 13, 2009) (search "population finder by state").

[16] Whites make up 74.6 percent of the Nevada population, 68.7 percent of the New Mexico population, and 83 percent of the Colorado population. As high as these numbers may seem, they are still lower than other Mountain West states like Utah and Idaho, where whites are 89.5 percent and 92.1 percent of the populations of those states, respectively. *See*, U.S. Census Bureau, 2005–2007 American Community Survey, *available at* http://www.census.gov/.

[17] *Race Could Play Big Role in Election, Poll Suggests*, CNN.com, Sept. 22, 2008, http://www.cnn.com/2008/POLITICS/09/22/race.politics/index.html.

[18] *See, e.g.,* Dick Meyer, *Obama, Race and Undecided voters*, NPR, Sept. 18, 2008, *available at* http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=94733622 (speculating, as many commentators did, that issues like inexperience may actually be proxies for voting against Obama because of his race).

[19] *Id.*

[20] Election Center 2008, http://www.cnn.com/ELECTION/2008/ (last visited Oct. 13, 2009).

[21] Obama garnered only 33 percent of the vote in Wyoming and 34 percent of the vote in Utah. Election Center 2008, http://www.cnn.com/ELECTION/2008/ (last visited Oct. 13, 2009).

[22] "Bradley effect" refers to the phenomenon whereby white voters falsely tell pollsters that they will vote for a black candidate but ultimately do not. The name was coined after

Los Angeles Mayor Tom Bradley lost his bid for California governor after leading in the polls. NPR, *Should Obama Fear the "Bradley Effect?"*, May 18, 2008, *available at* http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=95430213.

[23] Prior to the 2008 election, with the exception of Colorado, and Montana in 1992 when they went Democratic, none of these states had voted for a Democratic presidential candidate since 1964. *See* 270toWin.com, http://www.270towin.com/states/ (last visited Oct. 13, 2009).

[24] For example, Wyoming, Montana and Colorado all currently have Democratic governors. Governors' Political Affiliations & Terms of Office, 2008 (March 2008) http://www.nga.org/Files/pdf/GOVLIST2008.pdf.

[25] Paul Krza, *Wyoming at a Crossroads*, HIGH COUNTRY NEWS, Feb. 17, 2003, *available at* http://www.hcn.org/issues/244/13726.

[26] Wyoming Democratic Party, FAQ, http://www.wyomingdemocrats.com/ht/d/Faqs/pid/273363 (last visited Oct. 13, 2009); Tom Morton, *Eli Pushes, Dave Polls*, CASPER STAR-TRIB., Nov. 1, 2002, http://trib.com/news/article_61470c0e-eb1b-527d-8f13-2cb8fe6dc5cb.html (explaining how Freudenthal rose in the polls in the closing days before the 2002 Wyoming gubenetorial election and that 17 percent of likely voters for Freudenthal identified themselves as "anti-Bebout."); *Eli Bebout's Integrity Yardstick is Too Short*, WYO. TRIB-EAGLE, Oct. 20, 2002, at A9 (opinion section of the Cheyenne, Wyoming paper in which Wyoming residents explain why they would not vote for Eli Bebout, Dave Freudenthal's opponent in the 2002 election).

[27] With the exception of New Mexico (which was a virtual tie) and Nevada, Obama handily won all the Mountain West states in the 2008 democratic primary. Primary Season Election Results, http://politics.nytimes.com/election-guide/2008/results/votes/ (last visited Oct. 13, 2009).

[28] WyomingNews.com, *Barack Obama, Bill Clinton to Visit Laramie*, Mar. 5, 2008, http://www.wyomingnews.com/articles/2008/03/05/news/14local_03-05-08.txt.

[29] Despite Obama's overwhelming victory, 46 percent of voters still did not vote for him. Further, exit polls from the 2008 general election show significant divisions among voters by race, gender, economic class, and age. President National Exit Poll, http://www.cnn.com/ELECTION/2008/results/polls/#USP00p1 (last visited Oct. 13, 2009).

[30] Ben Macintyre, *Moose-Hunting Sarah Palin Style*, TIMES ONLINE, Oct. 1, 2008, http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/environment/article4855262.ece.

[31] *Id.*

[32] *Id.*

[33] BARACK OBAMA, DREAMS FROM MY FATHER: A STORY OF RACE AND INHERITANCE (2004).

[34] THOMAS FRANK, WHAT'S THE MATTER WITH KANSAS? HOW CONSERVATIVES WON THE HEART OF AMERICA 6–7 (2004).

[35] Macintyre, *supra* note 30.

[36] W.E.B. DU BOIS, BLACK RECONSTRUCTION IN THE UNITED STATES, 1860–1880 (1977).

[37] DAVID ROEDIGER, THE WAGES OF WHITENESS: RACE AND THE MAKING OF THE AMERICAN WORKING CLASS 13 (1992).

[38] JILL QUADAGNO, THE COLOR OF WELFARE: HOW RACISM UNDERMINED THE WAR ON POVERTY 7 (1994).
[39] Evan Thomas, Holly Bailey & Richard Wolffe, *Obama and "Otherness"*, NEWSWEEK, May 5, 2008, at 28–33.
[40] Baird, *supra* note 7, at 35.
[41] However, the McCain/Palin ticket did garner a majority of white women voters at 53 percent. Election Center 2008, http://www.cnn.com/ELECTION/2008/ (last visited Oct. 13, 2009).
[42] *Id.*
[43] This anecdotal information was gathered by the essay's authors through participant observation during the March 2008 Democratic Caucus in Laramie, Wyoming. The Wyoming Republican Caucus was held much earlier in the election cycle on January 5, 2008. At that time, there was no indication that Clinton and Obama would be in an epic political fight as the primaries wore on or any reason to think McCain would be the eventual Republican nominee or that he would make a historical move like selecting Palin. Thus, the authors did not gather similar information from the Republican Caucus as there seemed to be no need to do so. Additionally, because of the timing, discussions during that caucus probably would not have revolved around issues of race and gender anyway.
[44] Wyoming's eGovernment Site, http://wyoming.gov/general.aspx (last visited Oct. 13, 2009).
[45] Wyoming Polling Statistics for 2008 and Electoral History, http://www.270towin.com/states/Wyoming (last visited Oct. 13, 2009).
[46] *Id.*
[47] Office of the Clerk, U.S. House of Representatives, http://clerk.house.gov/art_history/house_history/index.html (search member lists for each session of Congress beginning in 1995).
[48] Wyoming Electoral History, *supra* note 45.
[49] G. Lawson-Borders, Participant-Observation Notes (March 8, 2008) (on file with the author).
[50] *Id.*
[51] *GOP: Palin Won't Visit Wyoming Next Week*, CASPER STAR TRIB., Sep. 17, 2008, *available at* http://trib.com/homepage_lead/article_a1c199ff-f9ab-5740-bda3-e4730047b790.html.
[52] Matt Joyce, *VP Cheney Rallies Republicans in Laramie*, CASPER STAR TRIB., Nov. 1, 2008, *available at* http://www.trib.com/news/state-and-regional/article_89f4b16b-e191-51cc-8134-954133de2640.html.
[53] *Id.*
[54] *Id.*
[55] Despite substantial growth in the number of registered Democrats prior to the Wyoming Caucus, two days before the caucus, Wyoming Secretary of State voter rolls showed 136,000 registered Republican voters as compared to 59,000 registered Democrats. *Tiny and Very Republican, Wyoming is a Democratic Player at Last*, WYOMING TRIB. EAGLE, Mar. 6, 2008, *available at* http://www.wyomingnews.com/articles/2008/03/06/local_news_updates/17local_03-06-08.txt.

[56] CNN.com, Election Center 2008, http://www.cnn.com/ELECTION/2008/results/polls/ (last visited Oct. 13, 2009).
[57] Joyce, *supra* note 52.
[58] Tom Morton, *Wyo. Voters Love GOP Ticket*, CASPER STAR TRIB., Oct. 20, 2008, *available at* http://trib.com/homepage_lead/article_2d5368d5-f5d0-5877-b453-a661672b18ac.html.
[59] Primaries and Caucuses, http://www.cnn.com/ELECTION/2008/primaries/ (last visited Oct. 13, 2009).