The Civic State Under Threat: How Social, Political, and Media Changes Eroded Wisconsin's Civic Culture

Paper Presented at the International Communication Association Meetings, San Diego, CA. May 27, 2017

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Global Populism

May 2017: The Chief of Staff of the President of the United States has just suggested that the First Amendment may need to be repealed. Politicians in London and Brussels grapple with a British popular mandate to remove that country from the European Union. In France, Marine Le Pen nearly achieved the presidency, perhaps scoring a major political victory nonetheless. The President of the Philippines who openly murders his own people in extrajudicial killings has just been invited to the White House.

By now, few people need reminders that we are living through a surge of populist authoritarianism across the world, including in places where it was all but unanticipated even a year or two ago.

It seems inescapable that macro-level political and socio-economic trends underlie instances of populism's rise that are taking place in varied contexts across the West and elsewhere. And yet each instance of populism has its own peculiar origins, patterns and manifestations.

This is especially visible in our home state of Wisconsin, where conservative populism has been ascendant for some years prior to 2016: Scott Walker's election in 2010 on rhetoric was largely built on an underlying sense of resentment among rural and suburban voters that urban and public-sector elites exercised disproportionate and unfair control over state resources, at the expense of hardworking Wisconsinites (Cramer, 2016a). The reaction on the left to some of Walker's very first policies allowed Walker to hone his message on the way to surviving a recall election (2012) and decisively winning re-election in 2014. It has further been argued that Donald Trump co-opted many of Walker's populist themes, undermining the latter's candidacy for the Republican presidential nomination (Cramer, 2016b).

Our experience with this case, inflected as it is by the peculiarities of Wisconsin history, social context and politics, while at the same time reflective of global trends, leads us to propose that as we begin attempting to understand the relationship between populism, authoritarianism, and ethno-nationalism, one of our first tasks is to understand what is unique about each populism, in its national, and even-subnational context. The populism of Brexit certainly differs from the modernized and sanitized neo-Fascism of Le Pen in France or the Alternative für Deutschland. Turkey's (contestably) repudiation of democracy differs from Duterte's murder squads. And, perhaps, for those of us in the U.S. some elements of American exceptionalism remain. Trump is unique in our nation's history and the reasons for his victory are still being unraveled.

We are seeking to understand how Donald Trump won in Wisconsin, but in the spirit of a project to understand deeper aspects of political culture that provide the context for populist support and the early signs of a Republican politics that moved beyond the conventional conservative victory and subsequent policy agenda. To do this, we are reconstructing the political communication ecology of the entire state. In this paper, we hope to give you a more distinct sense of what this means, but in broad outline, we are demonstrating the multiple, iterative linkages between the rise of a populist-conservative Republican Party and a fundamental shift in the statewide communication ecology and the role of social media in shaping these new relationships.

To briefly preview the key elements that we will discuss:

First, the Republican victory in 2010 was part of the first wave of a shift to a state-level strategy by the national GOP and para-party (openly ideological think tanks, foundations, and associated organized interests expressly aiding a party) conservative organizations and funders: by capturing the states in a census year, and thereby controlling redistricting, the GOP could not only win control of many states but, through redistricting, consolidate its advantages in the U.S. House.

Second, Walker's victory combined elements of the nascent Tea Party with traditional Republican conservatism and para-party organization. The Koch brothers' Americans for Prosperity poured money into his campaign, established a para-party organization, and fueled a revolt of what Warren (1976) has called Middle American Radicalism. (Judis 2017).

Third, the revolt used carefully crafted and targeted populist themes, targeting state workers, university professors, teachers, and, urban minorities as "takers" who were, therefore, outside of the mainstream of "the people," anticipating key themes of both Romney's 2012 and Trump's 2016 campaign. This built on the prior resentment of rural Wisconsinites, documented by Cramer (2016a), but also mobilized and targeted it in new ways.

Fourth, the Republican Party used its position to undermine political and democratic pluralism among elected officials in the state, seeking to permanently cripple the Democratic Party and reduce it to a disorganized, weak opposition depending more on moral anger than political power.

Fifth, all of this occurred in a state whose communication system had shifted radically since 2000, creating an environment (or media ecology) that, we hypothesize, helped lay the foundation for these broader political shifts. For instance, the once dominant *Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel*, a voice for moderate liberalism, saw its statewide circulation and influence shrink, replaced by the rise of talk radio. Wisconsin was, perhaps, unique in having a conservative talk radio host, Charlie Sykes, effectively take over the most listened-to statewide radio network, WTMJ radio (owned by the Journal Sentinel at that time). Sykes was closely tied to Walker and his statewide reach shifted the communicative terms of politics fundamentally to the right.

Finally, we will briefly show how new social media, here Twitter, reflected the bifurcation of politics in the state. But we will move beyond the now well known presentation of larger clusters of conservative and progressive opinion, to point out

some structural asymmetries that we believe are of potentially lasting and broader significance. Especially, we show distinct differences in the constitutions of liberal and conservative spheres of communication on Twitter in Wisconsin: by 2012, conservative elites and activists were deeply embedded with media figures from talk radio, to the extent that those figures are to be found at the heart of the conservative online network, and the mainstream press quite removed. By contrast, liberals refer frequently to mainstream media figures, a one-way relationship that is not reciprocated.

Analytical-Methodological Justification

As we have noted above, in a time of macro-level shifts within global regions, nations, and sub-national regions, studying whole units for the purpose of analysis and comparison is more important than ever. However, studying whole units *as units* is analytically and methodologically difficult. While we have excellent studies of the national populist shift through aggregate data trends, for example the work of Inglehart and Norris (2016, 2017 forthcoming), studying the interrelations among the constitutive subsystems, the political and communication ecologies of entire nations is exceedingly difficult. Indeed, we know of no study that moves outside the traditions of general comparative politics that has done so. Thus, limiting our research domain to a state – a large, holistic, but bounded unit – enables us to look at the whole set of relationships within a larger system.

Further, the state of Wisconsin offers an ideal context for this type of exploration. Before 2016, the state had not voted for a Republican for president since 1984. But the vote for Trump paralleled other parts of the nation (MI, PA, OH), and was associated with the larger loss of confidence in the Democratic Party by large sectors of the white working class, particularly those in rural areas, exurbs, and small cities. In particular, rural Wisconsin – which voted at a nearly 2-to-1 rate in favor of Barack Obama in 2008 –

went 2-to-1 for Trump in 2016.

Wisconsin is a laboratory for understanding this shift. It has a long Democratic and progressive tradition, although it has frequently shifted between moderately liberal and center-right governance regimes. It has been governed by conservatives for most years since 1988, but still has voted for Democratic Senators (through 2012) and presidents (until 2016). Of course, it is not perfectly representative of the nation: no state is. But it can teach us much about the direction of those parts of the nation that still have a substantial, non-urban, white working class, which, in turn, remains the swing block in these swing states, and thus will shape the political direction of the U.S. for the at least the next five-ten years.

In what follows, we begin tracing the history of Wisconsin's political-media ecology using several methods: we begin by considering contemporary literature on populism and its rise. Next, we discuss national historical trends toward political contestation at the state level, an approach that has been pioneered by the Republican party and for which Wisconsin was explicitly seen as a laboratory. Deepening that analysis, we draw on in-depth interviews with key players in Wisconsin's political and media systems to elaborate the historical transitions that have occurred. Bringing us closer to the present, we analyze two sources of data on the opinion dynamics in Wisconsin during the spring of 2012, as the state was preparing for the recall election of Scott Walker: statewide public opinion polling, which gives an indication of the public opinion results of Wisconsin's media environment, and social media data from Twitter that can offer a sense of the connectivity between elements of Wisconsin's media ecology.

In short, we are attempting to describe, analyze and model the movement of political discourse across an entire state over what will be close to 20 years, which will tell us, we think, much about our current state of political affairs, how we got here, and more importantly, where we might go.

Theories of Populist Rise

Our starting point is to ask whether the shift in Wisconsin fits the more general pattern of what has been described as populism. Populism itself is a contested concept, applied to social movements of all sorts, from Trump to Sanders, from Le Pen to Hugo Chavez. One of the most astute students of populism, Jan-Werner Müller argues that we lack a theory of populism and offers three criteria for populist movements. First, they must be critical of elites; second, populists are always *anti-pluralist*; third, populism is always a form of *identity politics* (Muller, 2016, p. 4).

Cas Mudde (2012, 2017) expands Müller's analysis by showing that a central feature of populism is that populist appeals pit the virtuous people against an evil elite/government. This is echoed by Oliver and Rahn (2016) who argue that at the core, populism is a form of political rhetoric pitting parasitic elites against the virtuous people, seeking to restore the people to their proper place, and apprehensive of any claims to privilege or expertise (p. 190). They argue that populism emerges because of a "representation gap" when existing parties do not respond to the electorate (194). Over the past 40 years, those individuals with more populist issue preferences have tended to be supporters, albeit comparatively weaker than those with liberal issue preferences, of Democratic candidates for president (Carmines, Ensley & Wagner, 2014). In 2016, populists were much stronger supporters of Donald Trump, driven, in part, by populists strong preferences for highly nationalist policies (Carmines, Ensley & Wagner, 2016).

We have begun to explore the intersection of cultural and economic forces in Wisconsin. When whites in rural Wisconsin talk about their sense that they "deserve more" and that they are "not getting their fair share", and that undeserving others are getting way more than they should, this is often a combination of racism (stereotypes of who works hard and who are welfare recipients), and economic anxiety. think Trump tapped into both racial and economic anxiety. However, one key factor is ability of a

specific part or movement to frame and direct this anxiety. Our evidence to date points to the Republican Party of Wisconsin as an active actor.

The Centrality of States and the New Right

The political potency of the distrust, alienation and frustration felt by many citizens is illustrated by Donald Trump's unexpected victory in Wisconsin, which advanced themes of resentment and dispossession honed earlier by Governor Scott Walker. In addition to being the home of the Speaker of the House and the incoming White House Chief of Staff, our state has been ground zero for political change and experimentation since before the 2010 election. And in the past six years, Wisconsin politics have been a microcosm of divisions around the nation (Wells et al *When We Stop* (2016).

Let's briefly consider why the states are so important. In the first place, states set the legal framework for much of U.S. property law; they determine the scope of regulation of corporations, the environment, and natural resources; for criminal justice and incarceration; for policy and spending on health and social welfare, and education. State courts can frame legal doctrine that trickles upward, particularly in these areas.

Second, the states offer much greater opportunity for political control, particularly mid-sized and smaller states, where outside money can be much more effective because of the smaller size of media markets and costs of elections. The federal structure of government gives small states outsized power in both houses of congress and the electoral college. Research by Hertel-Fernandez has demonstrated that liberal efforts at state policy intervention are a pale shadow of their conservative counterparts like ALEC and the Bradley-funded State Policy Network, as well as the Koch-funded Americans For Prosperity (Hertel-Fernandez 2016).

Finally, there is a built-in bias towards rural, exurban, and suburban districts in state legislative districting which results in a conservative skew. Recent work on "unintentional gerrymandering" by Chen and Rodden (2013) finds that because of concentration of democratic voters in urban districts "pro-Republican bias can be quite pronounced, even in the absence of intentional gerrymandering" (p. 265), an average of 5% in the twenty states they studied. Of course, when this is combined with intentional gerrymandering and efforts to suppress minority voting, as we have seen in Wisconsin and North Carolina (overturned by the U.S. Supreme Court) the conservative skew is even more severe.

Of course, the ideology of states' rights as a bulwark of resistance against federal change predates the Civil War and has been the major form of resistance to civil rights since Reconstruction. But a network of super-wealthy, ultra-conservative and libertarian donors and organizations began to turn its organizational attention to the states as laboratories for social experiment in radical corporate and environmental deregulation, ending or stripping social welfare programs, privatizing schools, and decertifying unions as early as the 1960s.

Wisconsin has a history of mixed government. Governor Tommy Thompson was elected on a conservative platform centered on "welfare reform" in 1986, but he faced Democratic and mixed legislatures during his four terms in office. He was succeeded in 2002 by Democrat Jim Doyle, and as late as 2008 the governorship and both legislative houses were under Democratic control.

However, beginning in the early 2000s, a national coalition of conservative and libertarian Republican organizations was formed, with the express goal of gaining power at the state level.

There are three groups central to the ultra-conservative success in the states. The first is centered around Charles and David Koch. Taken together their fortune exceeds

80 billion dollars. Their central organization is Americans for Prosperity, which is fueled by the Koch brothers own wealth and their "Freedom Partners" seminars. Politicians jostle to audition for this audience of current and future funders including Wisconsin's Paul Ryan and Scott Walker. Skocpol and Hertel-Fernandez estimate that 76% of all of the budgets of right wing organizations created since 2002 are controlled by the Koch network; and 4/5s of new money raised by extra-party funders flows through Koch affiliated consortia. Washington Post journalist Philip Bump has dubbed AFP America's "third-largest political party."

Americans for Prosperity is designed to parallel and overlap with the Republican Party. State Directors are paid by AFP and by 2015 were present in 34 states encompassing four fifths of the U.S. population. All but 8 states were targeted for expansion in 2016. AFP directors raise local money, coordinate grassroots groups, and pressure legislatures and public officials. In some states, like Wisconsin and N. Carolina, they are closely intertwined with local ultra-wealthy networks.

The second leg of the state policy apparatus is the American Legislative Exchange Council, or ALEC began in 1970 as a 501 (c)3 educational organization, but has often been accused of functioning as a lobbying group. ALEC has produced thousands of new bills of which hundreds have become state laws. ALEC has about 300 businesses and trade networks as paid affiliates, but also around 2000 state legislators who attend conferences where they are briefed on model bills, which they bring home, introduce, and often pass, while actively working to disguise their origins. ALEC has been actively supported by the Kochs and Koch network.

Yet a third element of the state policy apparatus is the State Policy Network, a coalition of conservative state-based think tanks founded in 1992, by a South Carolina anti-union magnate, Thomas Roe. The State Policy Networks produce coordinated policy papers with state branding, but in fact many of the ideas are centrally coordinated and disseminated. By 2011, the SPN's budget was $83 million dollars. In

2012 there were 64 separate SPN think tanks, at least one in every state coordinating with AFP, the Cato Foundation, and the Heritage Foundation, all of which receive Koch funding. In 2009 the state policy network added an "investigative news service," partnered with the Franklin Center for Government and Public Integrity with "news bureaus" in 40 states. Franklin's founder, Jason Stverak told a conservative conference that the organization planned to fill the vacuum in state level media across the U.S. The SPN received major funding from the Milwaukee-Based Bradley Foundation.

The Bradley Foundation has more than 600 million in assets. The foundation has disbursed almost 365 million dollars, a third of a billion, since 2001, more than the other two major conservative funders Koch and Scaife combined (although this excludes both PAC contributions and, of course, dark money). Bradley has been the leading backer of privatizing schools through vouchers and charters, spending more than $16 million and was a major funder of so-called welfare reform; both of these signature efforts took hold in the 1990s, under Gov. Tommy Thompson. It has been a major promoter of efforts to cutback and even kill public unions, of "right to work" and the deregulation of campaign finance laws.

Bradley has funded three ultra-conservative websites in Wisconsin, including the MacIver Institute which editorialized for the end of public unions in Wisconsin just two weeks before Gov. Scott Walker proposed Act 10. MacIver and the Koch Americans for Prosperity Foundation spent 1 million dollars on TV ads supporting Walker's budget proposals. Another Bradley-supported site was "Teacher's Union Exposed." MacIver is a member of the State Policy Network.

Bradley helped found the Wisconsin Policy Research Institute, which hired radio talker Charlie Sykes as the editor of its magazine, Wisconsin Interest. We will return to Sykes' role below.

While serving as President of Bradley, Wisconsin lawyer Michael Grebe chaired Governor Walker's 2010 campaign, chaired his transition team, and chaired the 2011

fight against his recall, sending out a fundraising letter asking supporters to help Walker combat "the Democrats and Big Government Union Bosses" as they spend millions to "spread lies about Governor Walker's record of positive change." As a former Chairman and CEO of Milwaukee based law firm Foley and Lardner, he was well positioned as a fundraiser. Grebe claims that his work was done in public, with nothing secretive about it.

Finally, we need to mention the Wisconsin Club for Growth a national organization founded to promote a "free market," free-trade anti regulation agenda, also with state affiliates, an active presence in Wisconsin politics.

Act 10

It's important to remember that Governor Walker never mentioned Act 10, his plan for dismantling public unions, during the 2010 campaign. Although ALEC advanced model legislation for eliminating unions, and Mary Bottari of the Center for Media and Democracy argues that ALEC influenced Walker, who was a member of the group, there is no clear evidence that it was pushed by ALEC. Powerful Republican lawmaker Robin Vos was a state co-chair for ALEC (currently Speaker of the House) but he called ACT 10 "happenstance" because of the complete Republican takeover of state government (Stein and Marley, p. 39). Long-time reporters we interviewed told us that their reporting and the reporting of others suggested to them that ACT 10 was part of Governor Walker's plan for the state from "go." The reporters also echoed what a former Democratic Party state lawmaker told us in a separate interview: that the goal was not just to end public collective bargaining in Wisconsin, but to "cripple the Democratic Party."

But in the framework we are discussing, that of powerful network of wealth-defending oligarchs, foundations, and funded publicists, the precise source of

the idea is less relevant. Americans for Prosperity had been actively pushing to curtail or destroy public unions in Indiana, Ohio, and Pennsylvania, as well as Wisconsin. The Koch PAC gave $43,000 to Walker directly, and $1 million to the Republican Governors Association which ran ads for Walker. AFP organized rallies and spent 100s of thousands of dollars on ads. Bradley had given AFP $600,000 and the MacIver Institute and AFP spent more than 1 million to defend Walker's policies.

That Act 10 was an unpopular policy was clearly understood by Walker himself, as evidenced in two now famous candid conversations. The first was with Janesville billionaire Diane Hendricks who asked whether Wisconsin could be turned into a red state through right to work legislation, and Walker replied that first he would get rid of public unions and then pursue a "divide and conquer" strategy. The second was his candid phone conversation with a prankster whom he believed was David Koch in which he told "Koch" about a post Super Bowl party in which "we *talked about what we were gonna do, how we were gonna do it…it was kind of the last hurrah before we dropped the bomb."* (cite Stein and Marley).

To fully understand the climate of politics in Wisconsin, we need to turn to the Republican strategy and its implementation. Although Governor Thompson was a national conservative hero for his welfare and school voucher initiatives, he actively worked with Democrats, supported the University of Wisconsin, and was a major proponent of expanded railroad networks, a "big-government Republican" (Fowler, p. 200). Again, Democrats controlled both houses of the legislature as late as 2009. How did a relatively balanced state tip its politics to complete Republican dominance in just over a year's time?

Although we cannot fully present the evidence here [to be expanded in article] Walker and his allies in the legislature shifted from a central premise of modern democratic politics–that there is a loyal opposition to be contended with, sometimes through compromise–to the idea that the Democratic Party in Wisconsin could be

effectively crippled. Once this was done, the institutional framework of government could be completely rebuilt towards policies that favored the wealthy, private schools, and against the environmental regulation disfavored by builders, real estate, factory farming, mining, and other extractive interests. Walker understood that while unions were the source of Democratic strength, they were also its Achilles' heel. Because the party depended so completely on WEAC, the Wisconsin teachers' union and AFSCME, government employees for both funding and grassroots electoral campaigning, if these two unions could be crippled, then the entire Democratic Party would be rendered a political shell. That is why, packaged as "common sense reforms" Act 10 was so central to the Republican strategy. The rollback of voting rights, government transparency, and remaining political finance restrictions all flow from this decision, as does the subsequent gerrymandering that consolidated this power.

However, our central questions remain: how did the climate of public opinion that made Act 10 possible shift so suddenly? And what were its effects on political communication among citizens?

The Baseline of Public Opinion

The Marquette Law School Poll, a sample of Wisconsin registered voters and eligible voters, serves as the source of our data. The sample was stratified within media markets to ensure proportionate representation of all areas of the state. Respondents were interviewed by live interviewers and contacted via a combination of landline and cell phone using random digit dialing (RDD). Method details can be found at https://law.marquette.edu/poll/results-data/. Our current focus is on the four waves of the poll during the lead up to the recall election, spanning late April to early June. Pooled-sample, OLS regression analysis was conducted, controlling for survey wave and basic demographics.

Among conservative Republicans, the deeper polarization of political judgments,

whether favorable toward conservative targets or unfavorable toward liberal figures, arises from talk with family and friends, whereas conversation with co-workers reduces polarized attitudes. The conventional news sources, such as newspapers and TV, and online sources, including Internet news and social media, have relatively little influence, suggesting an avoidance of mainstream news. In contrast, among moderate Republicans, newspaper reading and social media use had a countervailing effect that tempered the reinforcement of partisan predispositions. Specifically, use of these media for local news was negatively related with moderate Republicans' evaluations of Governor Walker and the Tea Party and positively related to their evaluations of unions.

A similar pattern, though ideologically opposite, appeared among Democrats. For liberal Democrats, talk with family and friends amplified polarized attitudes toward public unions and the Tea Party. However, among moderate Democrats, newspaper use was associated with heightened support for the public unions and Internet news use was linked with reduced support for the Tea Party. Again, this suggests moderate Republicans and Democrats are seeing opposing viewpoints through news media and are swayed by them (see Mutz, 2001), whereas more entrenched conservatives and liberals either avoid such media or are influenced by other sources that these survey measures did not consider, such as talk radio or national cable news.

Findings

Table 1: Binary logistic regression of the favorability ratings and likelihood of voting by **Republicans**

	Moderate Republicans					Conservative Republicans				
Outcomes	Walker	Barrett	Public Unions	Tea Party	Vote Walker	Walker	Barrett	Public Unions	Tea Party	Vote Walker
Newspaper	**-0.20***	0.12	**0.16†**	**-0.14***	-0.15	-0.04	**0.13***	-0.01	-0.01	-0.10
TV News	**0.16***	**-0.17***	-0.12	-0.02	**0.19***	-0.06	-0.04	0.03	**-0.10***	-0.08
Internet News	0.02	0.02	-0.05	0.18*	-0.02	-0.02	-0.04	-0.02	0.00	0.04
Social News	**-0.14†**	0.06	**0.21****	**-0.12†**	**-0.24****	0.01	0.07	0.02	-0.03	-0.08
Talk: Family/Friends	0.22	**0.43***	-0.19	**0.34***	0.10	0.17	-0.16	-0.10	**0.19†**	**0.28†**
Talk: Coworkers	-0.04	-0.21	0.10	-0.07	0.05	**-0.25***	**0.17†**	**0.18***	0.08	**-0.26***
Pseudo R^2	0.22	0.23	0.25	0.26	0.28	0.14	0.15	0.11	0.10	0.14
N	258	229	227	185	242	869	779	803	705	855

† p < 0.1 * p < .05, ** p < .01

Table 2: Binary logistic regression of the favorability ratings and likelihood of voting by **Democrats**

	Moderate Democrats					Liberal Democrats				
Outcomes	Walker	Barrett	Public Unions	Tea Party	Vote Walker	Walker	Barrett	Public Unions	Tea Party	Vote Walker
Newspaper	-0.01	0.03	**0.13***	-0.10	-0.04	0.04	-0.06	-0.03	-0.15	0.11
TV News	0.04	-0.01	-0.08	0.12	-0.01	0.02	0.01	-0.07	0.10	0.14
Internet News	-0.03	0.07	0.03	**-0.16†**	-0.06	-0.05	0.01	0.01	-0.22	-0.07
Social News	0.02	-0.01	0.04	0.09	-0.06	-0.15	0.01	0.13	0.04	-0.01
Talk: Family/Friends	-0.17	0.18	**0.20†**	-0.23	-0.04	-0.09	-0.14	**0.37***	**-0.43***	-0.19
Talk: Coworkers	-0.07	0.03	-0.03	0.22	-0.17	0.01	**0.36****	-0.07	0.17	-0.20
Pseudo R^2	0.20	0.17	0.17	0.26	0.20	0.17	0.11	0.14	0.31	0.23
N	487	416	417	404	461	495	448	456	462	486

† p < 0.1 * p < .05, ** p < .01

Wisconsin's Changing Political Communication Ecology

This opinion environment was forged in a rapidly changing political communication ecology, with two large scale factors contributing the mid-1990s. First, Wisconsin newspapers, which had long played an anchoring role in public discourse, continued their secular decline, as in the U.S. more generally. Second, Wisconsin (again reflecting the nation) saw a large rise in the amount of daily conservative talk radio. Both, however, took on specific patterns in Wisconsin.

Throughout much of the 20th Century, Wisconsin had four major newspapers covering statewide politics: the liberal *Journal* and the conservative *Sentinel* in Milwaukee, and the conservative *State Journal* and progressive-liberal *Capital Times* in Madison. All had very strong statehouse reporters and bureaus. The *Journal* and

Sentinel merged in 1998; and the *Capital Times* saw a secular decline in circulation. There were also strong local papers in all of its mid-sized cities: Green Bay, Racine, Kenosha, Wausau, Appleton, Oshkosh and La Crosse and Waukesha (a growing city-county and Republican stronghold). These papers (excepting the Madison two) were taken over by Gannett starting 2000 and culminating in its acquisition of the *Journal-Sentinel* and 14 others in 2016. The net effect was a radical reduction in reporting on the state in general, and a corollary decline in reporting on state issues in local papers. Further, the *Journal* had long had a strong statewide circulation and moderately liberal influence in state politics. With the decline of *Journal* statewide circulation from approximately 300,000 in 2000 to 200,000 in 2010, both its scope and influence declined, removing a moderating influence on state politics as a whole.

Simultaneously, right-wing talk radio began its climb in Wisconsin, powered initially by Rush Limbaugh and other national conservative stars. Today, about 70 hours of right-wing talk radio are broadcast *daily* throughout the state. Of course, this a cumulative number which [average here?] is about X hours a day per media market leading to a saturation of conservative talk across the state.

Beyond this national talk saturation, Wisconsin had its own, powerful conservative talk radio presence, Charlie Sykes. In 1993, Sykes began a daily talk show on WTMJ radio (then owned by the *Journal-Sentinel*), taking advantage of the lifting of the Fairness Act by the FCC in 1986 (check). WTMJ is a statewide powerhouse, broadcasting major sports teams and news and Sykes ascendance assured that he would reach every corner of the state. Sykes rapidly become the voice of conservatism, but he was closely integrated into the Republican Party. Sykes could make (or break) any Republican politician, and he was prominent in labelling many as RINOs–Republican in Name Only.

A long-time political activist who worked for Democratic and Republican governors in Wisconsin told us that Sykes' power – both in terms of helping to shape

the messages Wisconsin conservatives preferred and with respect to attacking Republicans who were not following the party line – was not to be underestimated in Wisconsin. A former Democratic Party lawmaker in Wisconsin we interviewed described Sykes' power via a story about a moderate Republican in south eastern Wisconsin's interactions with Sykes' program. After Sykes railed against the lawmaker for weeks, the Democrat claimed that the Republican lawmaker stopped engaging in bipartisan behavior – both in terms of her roll call votes and with respect to her willingness to work with colleagues on the other side of the aisle. After Sykes went after the lawmaker, "she stopped working with us," the former Democratic Party state legislator said.

Sykes retired in 2016, in part because of his disagreement with Trump and the movement he led. But during the period leading up to and after Act 10, Sykes was in almost daily conversation with Walker. When we asked a veteran of Wisconsin statehouse reporting whether Sykes and Walker coordinated with each other about issues the governor wanted to build conservative support for in the electorate, the reporter said, "Absolutely." Moreover, that journalist and another long-time statehouse scribe noted that Governor Walker sought Sykes' counsel on they best way to frame particular issues. Once talking points were settled on, Sykes effectively propagated them statewide.

RW talk has become the dominant environment for Republican politics. Wisconsin is unique in having a statewide talker, who is both so dominant and directly linked to the Republican Party and the para-party apparatus. As we see below, Sykes is also a critical bridge to and within the conservative Twitter network. Beyond his role as mass-media propagator, Sykes serves as a central connector among people doing strategizing at elite level, and the public.

Twitter analyses

By 2012, Twitter had become established as a key component of political

organizing: it was heralded for its role in protest movements in 2011, not least in Wisconsin itself, during the protests over Act 10 (Veenstra, Iyer, Hossain & Park, 2014). Our aim in looking at uses of Twitter here is to be able to assess connections among actors in Wisconsin's political-media ecology. Our claim is not, of course, that Twitter networks are a comprehensive image of the complexity of a media ecology, but rather that they offer a further layer of evidence that we can use to understand that ecology.

Method

Our analyses of Twitter data are conducted on data drawn from a collection of Twitter data housed at the University of Wisconsin-Madison School of Journalism & Mass Communication. The Twitter Gardenhose is a 10% sample of Twitter messages worldwide, according to Twitter's API (Twitter, 2012). To define our sample from the 10% collection, we employed a snowball sampling method to identify important Twitter handles active during four 28-day periods in the first half of 2012: one in January, one in February, one spanning March and April, and one spanning May and June. Because we were most interested in the activities and interactions among elite political and media figures in the state of Wisconsin, we began with a hand-curated set of 305 handles of figures important to Wisconsin's media ecology. This set was developed based on identifying important individuals and categories in the 2012 Wisconsin recall election. Categories included candidates being recalled, their campaign accounts, and their opponents, other Democratic and Republican party leaders, local and county organizations of both parties, advocacy groups (such as the Tea Party and union organizations), large and small newspapers, television and radio news accounts, individual reporters, columnists and pundits, and prominent political bloggers. The sample was balanced between Republican and Democrat, pro-Walker and anti-Walker accounts.

Next, to identify important accounts that had not been included in our original set, we identified all accounts that were mentioned or retweeted at least 16 times by

handles in our sample during our sampling frame. Adding those handles to our sample yielded a sample of 623, of which 389 were identifiably associated with Wisconsin. We used those 389 handles to run one further snowball, and included in our final sample any handles that mentioned, or were mentioned by, or retweeted, or were retweeted by, a handle in our Wisconsin-specific sample. As a result, our final sample is Wisconsin-centric, but includes national-level and other Twitter users who at one point interacted with one of our core handles.

Twitter Results

We used the network analysis software Gephi to visualize and analyze the resulting network, which consisted of 13,885 nodes (each of which represents one Twitter handle) and 23,802 edges (each of which represents a retweet relationship between two Twitter handles, i.e., the retweeting of one by the other). A visualization of the network using Gephi's Force Atlas 2 algorithm (Figure 1) reveals three clear clusters of handles: a large liberal/anti-Walker cluster (constituting 51% of all nodes and 63% of edges in our data), a slightly smaller conservative/pro-Walker cluster (29% of nodes and 24% of edges), and a much smaller cluster of media accounts (10% of nodes and 7% of edges).

To understand and compare the sub-structure of the liberal and conservative clusters, we separately partitioned each, using Gephi's modularity algorithm. Using a modularity resolution of 3, we separately partitioned the liberal cluster into four sub-clusters (Figure 2); with the same resolution, the conservative cluster was also partitioned into four sub-clusters (Figure 3).

Figure 1: Full network partitioned into three clusters: Liberal/anti-Walker (green), media (yellow) and conservative/pro-Walker (magenta).

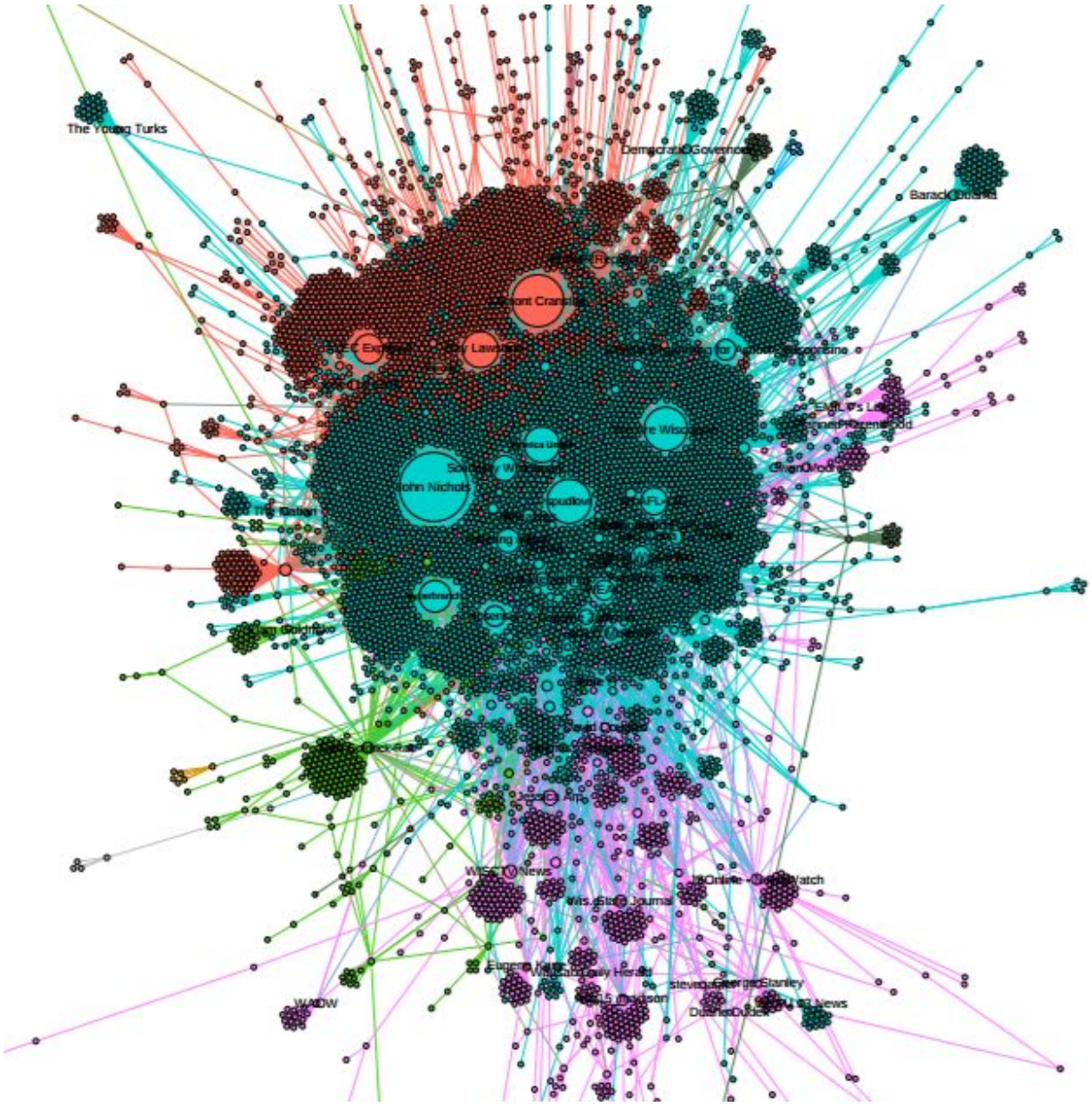

Figure 2: The liberal cluster, partitioned into sub-clusters: the core (teal) is joined by several active citizens and anti-ALEC activists (salmon), academics (green), and mainstream news media (purple).

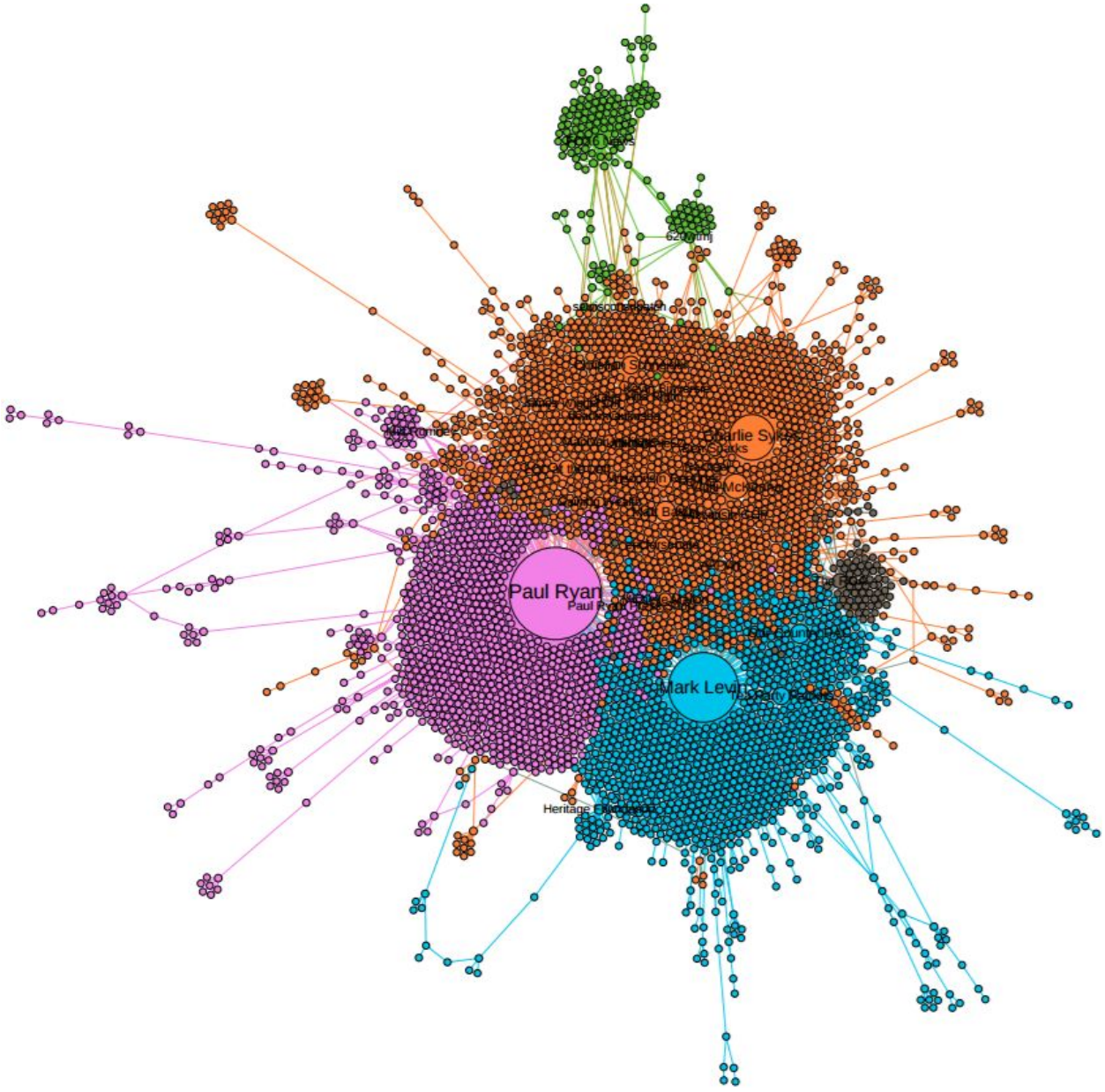

Figure 3: The conservative cluster, partitioned into subclusters: the core (orange) is joined by a cluster centered around Paul Ryan (purple), a cluster centered around Mark Levin (blue) and a small cluster of Milwaukee area media (green).

In both the liberal and conservative clusters, the largest sub-cluster is a core of individuals heavily involved in discussing the recall election on the two sides. In the liberal case, this consisted of important Democrat-affiliated handles (the Democratic party, several state Democratic leaders, and Graeme Zielinski, the Democratic Party spokesman), major labor organizations (WI AFL-CIO, the Wisconsin Education Association Council), other groups involved in the recall of Scott Walker, and active citizens and liberal bloggers.

The main conservative cluster parallels this structure of party elites and interest groups, with the notable addition of talk radio: two of the most prominent handles in the main conservative cluster are Charlie Sykes and Vicki McKenna, both talk radio hosts. Notably, the closest large cluster to Charlie Sykes in this visualization is Ben Sparks, at the time the communications director for the Republican Party.

The other sub-clusters identified are also revealing. In the liberal case, the second-largest sub-cluster is a set of active citizens and anti-ALEC organizations, while the third-largest is where we find almost all of the overall network's mainstream news organizations and reporters: the two largest newspapers in the state (the Wisconsin State Journal and Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel), regional papers (Wausau Daily Herald), newspaper columnists (Duane Dudek), prominent television reporters (Jessica Arp, David Douglas). Notably, these outlets are situated between the liberal and conservative clusters, indicating interactive behavior with handles in both, but are actually part of the larger liberal cluster, indicating greater affiliation with liberal handles. Further analysis reveals that this was a product of heavy retweeting of mainstream news handles by liberal handles, not the reverse (97% of connections between these clusters were liberal handles retweeting media ones). A fourth liberal sub-cluster appears to consist of academics at the University of Wisconsin-Madison,

most notably Sara Goldrick-Rabb.

In the conservative case, the second-largest sub-cluster belongs to fans of Mark Levin, who overwhelmingly dominates that sub-cluster; similarly, the third-largest is all about Paul Ryan. The smallest sub-cluster on the conservative side consists of a handful of media outlets that is comparable to, though much smaller than, the set of media clusters adjoining the liberal cluster.

The asymmetry in the relationships of activist and media figures on the left and the right, therefore, is quite obvious: on the conservative side, talk radio figures are literally central to the core organization of the pro-Walker discussion networks: Charlie Sykes and Vicki McKenna are some of the most-mentioned handles in that network. On the other hand, the central liberal sub-cluster contains almost no prominent media/communication figures. However, it is joined by a separate sub-cluster of mainstream press, who sit on the liberal cluster's periphery and play some role in mediating between the liberals and conservatives.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have attempted to lay out a broad landscape of interconnected political and communication ecologies.

First, we have demonstrated that the Republican victory in 2010 and the subsequent recall of Gov. Walker were rooted in structural changes in the Wisconsin political environment taking place over a period of years. There was a concerted shift of interest by a network of conservative funders, think-tanks, and other organized interests, who strategically targeted a number of states to be flipped from Democratic to Republican control.

Second, we have shown how once this political victory was achieved, the Republican Party pursued an explicit politics of contention, seeking to exacerbate

existing political differences between individual citizens and rural and urban areas to consolidate party control. This was further pursued in the dismantling of the opposition through Act 10.

Third, a statewide climate of public opinion both reflected and drove contentious politics (although our research has not yet precisely addressed cause and effect). We found that polarized attitudes resulted from talk with family and friends among strong supporters of both parties. But newspaper reading tempered moderate Republican partisan predispositions while among moderate Democrats, newspaper use was associated with heightened support for the public unions and Internet news use was linked with reduced support for the Tea Party.

Fourth, the ground was laid for this political shift in a changing media ecology, in which dominant statewide newspapers declined and were consolidated, and the dominant statewide radio network was effectively turned into an outlet for conservative talk radio in general. An impression of this shift was left in our Twitter data, which showed a vestigial mainstream media system referenced frequently by anti-Walker institutions and activists, but playing very little bridging function between the two parties. Instead, the Republican Twitter network had consolidated itself around its own, parallel media system focused on talk radio. Specifically, one powerful figure, Charlie Sykes bridged the Republican Party, state radio, and the amplification of messages through Twitter, suggesting that he became a central hub of conservative opinion.

In sum, this analysis of changes in Wisconsin's political culture reveals the multi-faceted nature of how populism came to be a viable and even dominant force within a polity. It shows how global forces (post-industrialization, resentment of cosmopolitanism) combined with local peculiarities to yield an unexpected political transformation. What is more, bounding our case to a comprensible unit has allowed the examination of interrelationships between constitutive elements in the

political-media ecology in a way that more macro-approaches do not allow. Further work is clearly needed to more systematically explore the interconnections among components of this analysis.

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