

## CHAPTER

### 1

# ESSENTIAL MINORITY, EXISTENTIAL THREAT

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**W**HEN WE VISITED TRUMAN CHAFIN in his law office in Williamson, West Virginia, he regaled us with stories of the colorful and obviously guilty clients he had successfully defended over the years, then insisted we pose for a picture inside the jail cell, our hands gripping the bars as though we were small-time thieves nabbed by the sheriff. The former Democratic majority leader of the state senate, Chafin shares a sprawling suite with his wife, Letitia, herself a prominent attorney in the state, inside what used to be the courthouse. The cell is now used as a kitchen.

After running unopposed for years, Chafin was voted out of office in 2014, the victim of a Republican sweep that gave the GOP control of both houses of the state legislature. It was a key

moment in West Virginia's transformation from one-party Democratic rule to one-party Republican rule,<sup>[1]</sup> but it was more than a transfer of power. The personal brand of politics that centered on the distribution of resources through the government was now just a memory.

The machine built by legendary West Virginia Democratic senator Robert Byrd is long gone, as is the importance of the county Democratic chair, a position Chafin held for many years in Mingo County. "The county chair was *the wheel* down here," he told us, the person who maintained all the critical relationships that not only provided services but kept people loyal to the Democratic Party. "Now you can't get anybody to take the job."

But the vacuum created by a withered local Democratic Party hasn't been filled by an active Republican Party. "Republicans don't have a good system, either," Letitia Chafin said, "but they don't really need one."<sup>[2]</sup>

Indeed they don't. For decades, the county was firmly Democratic, a streak that lasted through 2004, when John Kerry beat George W. Bush there by a comfortable margin. But Barack Obama's arrival brought a hard swing to the right, and in every election after, the Republican margin of victory increased. Today, no politician is more popular there than Donald Trump, and not

because during his four years in office he turned rural America into a paradise or delivered on his promise to bring back all the lost coal jobs. He didn't. But in places like Mingo County, few seem to mind.

This paradox is part of what led us to write this book and what brought us to Mingo County, one of many rural places we visited during our research. It has a fascinating political and economic history, one that decades ago earned it the nickname "Bloody Mingo." The seminal period is referred to as the Mine Wars, a series of conflicts that took place over the first two decades of the twentieth century pitting miners asking for fair treatment against coal companies who often responded to those demands with murderous violence.<sup>[3]</sup>

That history is remembered by union members and their allies as a story of heroism and oppression. But it was the New Deal that began to bring what those miners fought for in the Mine Wars, and for a brief period after Franklin Roosevelt enacted his program of labor reform, it looked as though widely shared prosperity might come to the coalfields. Roosevelt had signed laws protecting collective bargaining rights and curtailing abuses from employers.<sup>[4]</sup> The United Mine Workers negotiated contracts that not only improved pay and working conditions but also

offered health and pension benefits, and coal mining still required enormous numbers of men to go underground, which meant lots of jobs. In areas like Mingo County that had seen stifling poverty even before the Great Depression, a middle-class life was now attainable.

But things started to change in the 1950s. First, automation dramatically reduced the number of miners needed to collect the same amount of coal; with each new technological development, fewer miners were necessary.<sup>[5]</sup> As those good jobs with good benefits became less plentiful, union power began to recede. Then came Ronald Reagan and the war on collective bargaining, followed by the spread of mountaintop removal, carried out with explosives and massive machines, further reducing the number of miners needed to extract the coal as it turned large swaths of Appalachia's picturesque hills into a lunar-like landscape.

It wasn't just the economy and the topography that changed. "When the union was strong here, the voice was from the union," we were told by Raymond Chafin, a former miner who had a terrible fall in a mine decades ago, broke his pelvis, and nearly died. (He's not related to Truman Chafin; there are a lot of Chafins around there.) But today, that voice has gotten quieter and quieter. The industry created a public relations campaign called Friends of Coal to convince

people that they were all united against environmentalists and other outsiders. Fox News and other conservative media came to dominate the informational landscape. Today, the traditional alliance between the Democratic Party and the unions has become all but irrelevant because both institutions are so much weaker in West Virginia. “The Republican stronghold that you’ve got now is a *strong hold*,” Raymond Chafin said.<sup>[6]</sup>

There are fewer and fewer miners in Mingo County, as in so many places across Appalachia; according to the state of West Virginia, in 2021 there were just 296 people in the county employed by the coal industry,<sup>[7]</sup> or about 2 percent of the working-age population. Yet coal is an inescapable presence there, celebrated and venerated everywhere you look. The most notable building on the main drag in Williamson is the Coal House, a structure built out of coal. In the fall, you can participate in the Coal Dust 5K Run/Walk, where (fake) coal dust is tossed onto the runners at the finish line. Young girls can come to the firehouse for the Sweetheart of the Coalfields pageant. Mingo Central High School sits on King Coal Highway. Its sports teams are named “the Miners” and “the Lady Miners.”

One might argue that coal has been more of a curse than a blessing to Appalachia, but that is not a conversation too many people there seem eager to have. The old conflict between workers and owners no longer means much, because in every way that matters, the owners won. That brief period when coal actually offered something like widely shared prosperity was made possible by union organizing and the actions of a Democratic government in Washington, but the current governor of West Virginia, Jim Justice, is a coal baron and the wealthiest man in the state—and one who switched his party affiliation from Democratic to Republican. Politicians who make dishonest promises to restore coal to its former glory—if you can call it that—are cheered and rewarded at the polls. Few people have ever done so with more lurid dishonesty than Donald Trump, and the voters in coal country ate it up; he didn't just win there, he won by astonishing margins. In 2016, Trump got 83 percent of the vote in Mingo County.<sup>[8]</sup> Four years later, they gave him 85 percent of their votes.

Although there are rural places that don't face the same grinding struggles that Mingo County does, it shares this devotion to the GOP with almost every other majority-White rural county in the country. If you look at where Trump got his most overwhelming support, the places are

invariably rural and White. Rural Whites are the linchpin of Republican power at both the state and national level, yet in so many of the places where they live, there is a political void. Democrats can't compete there anymore, and Republicans can take lopsided victories for granted.

So, what do rural Whites get in return for all they bestow on the GOP? Almost nothing. The benefits they receive are nearly all emotional, not material. They're flattered and praised, and then they get whatever satisfaction can be had from watching their party win office and their enemies despair. Consider the opioid crisis, which took a devastating toll on Mingo Countians. Though some politicians try to pin the blame for America's addiction crisis on Mexican immigrants, look at the long list of companies that have now agreed to pay more than a billion dollars in settlements to West Virginia for this crisis. They include drugmakers like Purdue Pharma; the three major distributors McKesson, Cardinal, and AmeriSourceBergen; and frontline retailers including Food Lion, CVS, Walgreens, and Walmart.

Mingo County is suffering from a rash of economic, social, and health-related woes. As a small state, West Virginia is overrepresented in both the U.S. Senate and the Electoral College. With its large blue-collar, White population and

deep mining traditions, West Virginia is the kind of “flyover” state routinely praised and glorified by the media as a repository of true “heartland” values. Unfortunately, politicians in the state—Democrats before, Republicans now—exploit West Virginians’ worries that their way of life and their values are being replaced by those of citizens from more vibrant, racially diverse, and cosmopolitan cities and states.

The combined effect of these trends undoubtedly causes citizens from places like Mingo County to feel passed over, desperate, even angry despite winning elections. As they spread across the small towns and counties of the United States, these fears and resentments are undermining rural White Americans’ democratic commitments to the world’s oldest constitutional republic.



## THE FOUR COMPOUNDING FACTORS

Since the rise of Donald Trump, few groups of citizens have received more fawning attention from hand-wringing journalists and pundits than rural Americans, especially disgruntled rural White voters. Over the same period, political observers began openly fretting over the fate and even the survival of American democracy. Somehow, almost nobody has noticed that these two phenomena are connected.

And they *are* connected. As we argue, the serious problems now plaguing rural White Americans are causing too many of them to lose faith in the American project, to the point where some are abandoning or even threatening the vital norms, traditions, and institutions that undergird the world's oldest constitutional democracy. Four compounding factors are causing a crisis in democratic support among rural Whites that, in turn, is undermining American democracy in potentially catastrophic ways.

### **White despair**

The first is that rural Whites—often, but not always, with cause—are increasingly dissatisfied

with their lives and livelihoods. Population stagnation, economic decline, and healthcare problems have devastated thousands of the United States' small towns, cities, and counties. Poverty, unemployment, homelessness, crime, business closures, governmental failures, drug addiction and deaths, and a general despair are all rising across the so-called American heartland. So, too, are feelings of anger, helplessness, and desperation. As their desperation rises—and despite hundreds of state and federal programs specifically targeted to help rural communities—rural Whites have begun to question their commitments to an American political system many of them see as no longer sufficiently attuned to their needs.

### **Outsize political power**

Unlike other demographic subgroups, however, rural Whites wield inflated power in U.S. politics. This power is the second compounding factor because it grants rural Whites unusual leverage to bend politics and politicians to their will. Since the rise of Jacksonian democracy nearly two centuries ago, rural Whites have enjoyed what we call “essential minority” status because they have been able to extract concessions from state governments and especially the national

government that no other group of citizens their size possibly could. By that we mean that both major parties too often have needed to please, or at least pacify, rural Whites if they entertained any hope of building and sustaining their governing agendas.

Indeed, thanks to a combination of slavery and the systematic suppression of Black male voters even after the Civil War ended and the Fifteenth Amendment was ratified, rural Whites retained immense power throughout the nineteenth century. Even after the United States ceased to be a majority-rural nation by the 1920 Census, rural Whites continued to comprise a formidable plurality that enjoyed malapportionment-inflated power for the remainder of the twentieth century. The U.S. Senate has long assigned greater voting power to rural states and rural voters within states. To a lesser degree, so, too, has the Electoral College process for selecting U.S. presidents. Meanwhile, to this day, gerrymandered districts often confer upon rural Whites voting power within state legislatures and the U.S. House of Representatives which their sheer numbers would not otherwise grant them. Only in recent decades has rural White electoral power begun to wane and only because the share of rural Whites is steadily shrinking. In a country that is roughly 20 percent rural—with about one-fourth of that

20 percent being non-White—rural Whites now constitute about 15 percent of the total U.S. population. Rural Whites exert power beyond their numbers, and surely could improve their communities were they to use this power judiciously.

### **Veneration of White culture and values**

The third compounding factor is the incessant veneration of rural White culture and values as somehow superior to those of almost every other group of Americans. Small-town people are reflexively praised and revered by politicians and pundits alike. These “heartland” folks living in the “flyover” states and counties are repeatedly lionized as the “real Americans,” yet also pitied as people who are unfairly disrespected, mocked, or condescended to despite their supposedly representing all that is noble and good about the United States. Unfortunately, the mythic status conferred upon rural citizens—and rural Whites especially—provides them a wider berth to engage in democratically transgressive behaviors that violate some of the core tenets of any pluralist, free, fair, and functioning political-electoral system.

### **Media triggering of Whites**

Finally, the fourth factor derives from the repeated ways in which rural leaders, Republican politicians, and their conservative media allies trigger the worst instincts and most deep-seated fears of rural White Americans. Daily on cable news and hourly on talk radio stations, rural White citizens are warned that they are under siege. They are constantly told that horrible people who live in and govern our cities—racial and religious minorities, feminists, homosexuals, White liberals, and Democrats in general—threaten the survival of the traditionalist, White, Christian values venerated by so many who reside in the rural White heartland. Politicians ranging from Donald Trump to J. D. Vance to Marjorie Taylor Greene love to blame nearly every problem—local, state, or national—on scary people living in faraway cities whose lives and values, we’re told, are destroying a nation built by small-town, god-fearing, flag-waving citizens.

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TAKEN TOGETHER, THESE FOUR factors compound in ways that increasingly cause rural White Americans to question their commitment to the American project. Rural White citizens who are suffering

economically and facing major health crises may justifiably despair of the situation they and their communities face. Armed with outsize electoral and mythic powers, they can, in theory, call local, state, and national politicians to heel. Unfortunately, too often rural Whites are pacified by culture war trinkets sold cheaply to them by the very politicians they elected and who ought to be addressing in more substantive ways the economic and health-related maladies crippling so many small, sparsely populated towns and counties—thereby perpetuating the cycle of despair. Rural Whites’ willingness to trade away a substantive agenda of local improvement in favor of nursing cultural grievances is puzzling.

Sadly, rural non-Whites face worse economic and health challenges than rural Whites—not that many pundits or politicians care or even bother to notice. Indeed, with the exception of opioid addiction and gun suicides, the problems rural Whites confront pale by comparison to those of the one-quarter of rural Americans who are non-White. But the sufferings of Blacks, Latinos, and especially Native Americans who live in rural areas go largely unmentioned and unaddressed because these groups are not part of the “essential minority.”

Angered by their very real problems, seething from slights both real and perceived, and all the

while wielding their outsize political power, rural Whites, manipulated by the selfish motives of skilled authoritarians like Trump and a growing legion of copycats, now pose a rising threat to the state and fate of American democracy. Indeed, precisely because of their exalted power and status, when rural White citizens begin to question the validity or utility of democratic norms and traditions, the constitutional pillars of American democracy begin to buckle. From doubting the legitimacy of elections to spouting conspiratorial beliefs about vaccines and secret pedophile rings, from justifying the January 6 domestic terrorist attacks to holding xenophobic attitudes toward citizens who may look, speak, or pray differently from them, the undemocratic and sometimes violent impulses emanating from the rural White corners of the United States threaten to undermine and perhaps end America's democratic experiment.

## **A FOURFOLD THREAT**

When we make claims about the threats posed by disgruntled, empowered, triggered rural White citizens, we do not do so casually. Nor do we offer such claims by mere assertion or without substantiation: In fact, over the course of this book, we cite a multitude of publicly available polls and studies to support our dire warnings about the rising anti-democratic impulses emanating from rural White America.

These threats, these impulses, take four related and interconnected forms.

### **Racism, xenophobia, anti-urban disdain, and anti-immigrant sentiment**

First, rural Whites are the demographic group least likely to accept notions of pluralism and inclusion in a United States currently experiencing rapid demographic change. Rural Whites are uniquely hostile toward racial and religious minorities, recent immigrants, and urban residents generally.

Rural Whites express heightened fears about the growing cultural influence of immigrants, minorities, feminists, LGBTQ+ Americans, and



people who live in cities. Compared with urban and suburban dwellers, a far lower share of rural Americans believes greater diversity has made the United States stronger,<sup>[9]</sup> and a far higher share describes immigrants as a “burden on our country.”<sup>[10]</sup> Only four in ten rural White Republicans say they value diversity in their communities—the lowest share of any subgroup.<sup>[11]</sup> Rural Americans are less likely to believe systemic racism and White privilege exist in the United States.<sup>[12]</sup> Rural White men in particular harbor strong “place-based” resentments toward Americans who live in other parts of the country.<sup>[13]</sup> Rural citizens are more likely than those who live in cities and suburbs to claim that Americans who live in other parts of the country do not understand the problems their communities face or share their values.<sup>[14]</sup>

### **Acceptance of conspiracies as facts**

Second, rural Whites are the most conspiratorial cohort in the nation, and their refusal to accept basic facts or scientific knowledge prevents the nation from having rational, informed discourse on a variety of issues. Rural Whites exhibit the highest support for election denialism, anti-science Covid-19 and vaccine resistance, Obama

birtherism conspiracies, and unhinged QAnon claims.

Specifically, rural Whites are most likely to believe the 2020 election was stolen from Donald Trump.<sup>[15]</sup> They are more skeptical of science generally and of the safety and lifesaving power of vaccines like the ones for Covid-19. They are most likely to agree with QAnon claims that the government is controlled by nefarious “deep state” agents, some of whom kidnap and molest children.<sup>[16]</sup> And rural citizens were most likely to believe that Barack Obama was not born in the United States and was therefore an illegitimate president.<sup>[17]</sup>

### **Undemocratic and anti-democratic beliefs**

Third, polls and studies confirm that rural Whites express the lowest levels of support for long-standing and essential democratic principles. They are least likely to endorse the twin constitutional principles of separated powers and checks and balances between the branches of government; are least supportive of basic voting rights and ballot access; and routinely reject established governing principles like state-level authority and national supremacy.

Unfortunately, rural Americans are less likely to support a free press, more likely to embrace

authoritarian figures and unchecked presidential power,<sup>[18]</sup> and more supportive of aggressive policing and anti-immigrant policies.<sup>[19]</sup> They express greater support for White nationalist and White Christian nationalist movements.<sup>[20]</sup> Rogue sheriffs elected in rural counties increasingly believe they can and should operate outside the bounds of state or national law.<sup>[21]</sup>

### **Justification of violence**

Finally, no group of Americans boasts a higher degree of support for, or justification of, violence as an appropriate means of public expression and decision making. From their defense of the domestic terrorists who attacked the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021, to their calls for Trump to be restored to the White House by undemocratic means, rural Whites are more likely to excuse and even applaud the use of political violence.

Indeed, too often, rural citizens' anti-democratic sentiments shade into violent reflexes. Rural residents are more likely to favor violence over democratic deliberation to solve political disputes<sup>[22]</sup> and were most likely to call for Donald Trump to be reinstated as president after January 2021—by force, if necessary.<sup>[23]</sup> According to one poll, rural Whites are most likely to say that “true American patriots may have to resort to

violence in order to save our country.”<sup>[24]</sup> Rural Whites are also quicker to excuse or justify the January 6 domestic terrorist attack on the U.S. Capitol.<sup>[25]</sup>

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TAKEN SEPARATELY, EACH OF these threats is serious. But together, they pose an even bigger danger because they are often interconnected and mutually reinforcing. Attitudes or behaviors of one type often lead to, or bleed into, others.

Consider, for example, a person who harbors fears, whether realized or latent, toward immigrants. That’s an expression of the first threat. Surely that person is more susceptible to false, conspiratorial claims that immigrants cast illegal votes. From there, that person may begin to question the legitimacy of elections, back undemocratic efforts to restrict ballot access, and perhaps hector election board officials. At that point, it becomes much easier for that person to endorse efforts to threaten, intimidate, or even harm those officials.

None of these threats exists in isolation. And not unlike the four compounding factors, each of the four threats holds the potential to magnify some or all of the others. This catalytic connection is perhaps the most perilous effect, for as scholars

of democracy warn, once democratic antipathies are set into motion and begin to gain momentum, they can reach a point where they are impossible to reverse.

Moreover, these four impulses have caused millions of rural Whites to embrace radical and revanchist ideas, including but not limited to White nationalist and Christian nationalist solutions that, at worst, could lead to violence (and, in some instances, already have). The fourfold threat rural Whites pose to American democracy is serious and growing.

## THE STATE AND FATE OF U.S. DEMOCRACY

Yes, rural America is struggling. Population decline, economic stagnation, and crippling health problems threaten the lives and livelihoods of people from the nation's small towns and sparsely populated counties. Large numbers of young people are leaving the rural hometowns where they were raised in search of new opportunities. This is the crisis happening in rural America, and the responsibility to fix it belongs to every citizen, regardless of race or place. Unfortunately, the crisis happening *in* rural White America is exacerbating the crisis emanating *from* it. Illiberal ideas and tendencies are not confined to rural areas, and of course millions of rural citizens revere the United States' democratic institutions and traditions. But the threats today to U.S. democracy have a distinctly rural tint. Exacerbated by the economic and healthcare problems wreaking havoc across the heartland, rural resentment has become a civic and constitutional powder keg. Thanks to their twinned powers—their mathematically inflated electoral power and the mythology-based political deference they enjoy—rural White citizens are equipped to undermine our constitutional democracy, or at

least wreak serious havoc on long-standing and widely accepted democratic norms and traditions.

It helps nobody, rural or otherwise, that Republican politicians—including but not limited to those who represent rural counties, districts, and states—routinely stoke rural White resentments to serve their own selfish agendas. In pursuit of votes, campaign contributions, media attention, and re-election, these politicians willfully exacerbate rural resentments. The sad fact is that their manipulative and destructive behaviors work, exempting rural politicians from developing and implementing policies to cure what ails rural communities. Politically, it's much easier and far more effective for these politicians to use culture war triggers to frighten and anger their rural electorate into supporting them than it would be to actually earn their votes and trust by improving their constituents' everyday lives.

Rarely mentioned after the 2020 presidential election is that, in defeat, Donald Trump lost ground with almost every demographic subgroup since his 2016 election victory except rural Whites, among whom his support grew during the intervening four years. Trump's rural-based, authoritarian challenge to the constitutional order is nothing less than an existential threat to the state and fate of American democracy.

Yet, until now—and despite ample public evidence documenting how rural White citizens' rising antipathy threatens American governance and our pluralist society—few if any political observers have dared to identify or warn the nation about the impending danger posed by the “essential” rural White minority. If the survival of the American political system matters, the collective silence of these politicians and pundits—their near-universal reluctance if not refusal to identify this existential threat by name—can no longer be abided.