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# NAVIGATING POLITICAL IDENTITY IN THE BIG RED DOT: POLITICAL CONVERSATIONS AMONG RURAL OKLAHOMAN COLLEGE STUDENTS

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# NAVIGATING POLITICAL IDENTITY IN THE BIG RED DOT: POLITICAL CONVERSATIONS AMONG RURAL OKLAHOMAN COLLEGE STUDENTS

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## Dedication

To professors who inspire students.

This dissertation is dedicated to the professors who have inspired me throughout my academic career and all professors who inspire others. During my undergraduate career at Wesleyan College, my professors showed me I belonged in academia. In conducting this study, I spent a lot of time thinking about my own experience as a college student coming from a rural hometown. I recall going to college feeling underprepared and as if I needed to prove myself worthy of being there. My college professors not only gave me the chance to prove myself worthy, but they taught me an appreciation for research and further fostered my love of learning. They allowed me to flourish in a new world of opportunities. For the first time in my life, the professors at Wesleyan made me feel rewarded for my inquisitive mind. I am completing my Doctor of Philosophy in Communication today because I was inspired by my undergraduate professors at Wesleyan College (2010-2014). I have been so fortunate to have phenomenal professors in all levels of my academic career. At Wesleyan College, the University of Tennessee, and at the University of Oklahoma, I have been privileged to be mentored by the people who I view as the best of the best. I will forever be thankful for the professors who encouraged me along the way.

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Third, I would like to thank my family. My parents, Ruth and Dudley Hurst, allowed me to be the independent person that I am today. By raising me on a farm, they gave me what I can only describe as the best childhood ever. Much of this dissertation left me reflecting on conversations that I had with my parents growing up and as a young adult, especially political conversations. I am so thankful to have had those conversations, as, they have shaped me into who I am today. I am thankful for my sisters, Christine Mueller and Rebecca Hurst, who were always willing to pick up the phone and chat if I needed them while writing this dissertation. I am thankful to the family members who sent me cards and called to check in. Finally, I am thankful to all of those who I have not mentioned who have directly or indirectly influenced this dissertation. I express my sincerest gratitude for all those who helped along the way.

ABSTRACT

NAVIGATING POLITICAL IDENTITY IN THE BIG RED DOT:

POLITICAL CONVERSATIONS AMONG RURAL OKLAHOMAN COLLEGE STUDENTS

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This study examines ways in which rural Oklahoman college students navigated their various layered identities in political conversations during a year fraught with political events, including those leading up to the 2020 presidential elections, the global spread of the COVID-19 virus, and escalating racial tensions related to police brutality. Research questions were proposed utilizing a theoretical framework grounded in literature on ruralness, political socialization, political identity and identity politics, identity development, social identity, and identity negotiation. Twenty-two online interviews and three online focus groups were completed. Qualitative analysis software was used to analyze the interview transcriptions. Multiple approaches were used in the analysis, including grounded theory and discourse analysis. Findings first examine cultural influences related to political socialization and political conversations. Next, findings reveal ways in which rural Oklahoman college students navigate differences between their hometowns and college campus through political conversation. Through political conversations, I explain how some participants developed a more mindful attitude when talking politics, along with how these conversations helped students develop a newfound sense of self.

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# CHAPTER I

# INTRODUCTION

Driving west across Oklahoma on I-40, you pass signs for various Native American territories, lots of beef and horse farms, a few pastures filled with bison, beautiful Lake Eufaula, and a scattering of small towns and cities. Most of Oklahoma is rural, with land composed of grassy hills, arid plains desert, prairies meeting plains, and lush green rolling hills. While the land may be diverse, a map of how Oklahomans vote reveals the rural state would is rather unidimensional—one big red frying pan shaped dot, smack dab in the middle of the United States. Every single county had a majority of Republican votes in the 2020 presidential election. It would be very easy to paint a single story of Oklahoman political beliefs and to make assumptions about the people who live here. If you were to talk with Oklahomans, however, the tapestry would become vibrant in color. This context set the background for my study.

In this study, I was especially interested in how rural culture influenced political conversations in a heated election year among rural Oklahoman college students and how culture shaped political socialization through various political identities. Political socialization can be thought of as a learning process that occurs through various agencies, including interpersonal dialogue along with various interactions with social structures, shape or form political beliefs and behaviors (Hyman, 1959). My study is interested how those processes of political socialization, especially those informed through interpersonal conversations, might inform political identity formation. I refer to political identities as

social or group identities that inform how individuals view themselves as members of a political group on the basis of party or ideology. These identities, Blum (2013) explains, are self-defined. Closely related to political identity, is the concept of identity politics, which is also central to this dissertation. Identity politics are those social or group identities that inform political action (Brunila & Rossi, 2018). I am interested in how political identities and identity politics are navigated in political conversations, how prior political socialization informs those conversations, and the role of culture in shaping political conversations surrounding the political events of 2020. I was also interested in how this group of students used political conversations to navigate elements of social and personal identities while also navigating differences in interpersonal discourse between hometown cultural group-members and college cultural group-members. Through a series of interviews and focus groups, I was able to understand the richness of Oklahoman culture better and see how that culture influenced political conversations—along with how those conversations ultimately informed personal and social identity development.

This study was interested in political conversations and identity development as it occurs in college students. Many who go away for college are leaving home for the first time. Simply going to college expands one's bubble of knowledge and ideas about the world around them; that is, a shift in worldview occurs. For some students, college campuses act as a catalyst for learning new political knowledge and perspectives. For others, former beliefs taught by family members and hometown socialization are further crystalized (Mendelberg et al.,, 2017). In my own experience, both processes occurred. Some of my previously held political beliefs were crystalized, whereas others were

replaced with new ideas about the political and public sphere. This study stems from a reflection of my own experiences. I moved from a small Appalachian town in rural Tennessee to an all-women's college just south of Atlanta, Georgia. Many of my new peers shared a similar rural and conservative upbringing, while many others came from urban areas. I became friends with liberal and conservative women alike. Conversations with these friends and classmates during the 2012 election were certainly pivotal in my personal political socialization. This study is interested in how rural students negotiate their view of the self and others through interpersonal conversations about political issues.

Other than my own connection with rural students, having been a rural college student myself, this group is of special interest in this study for two primary reasons. First, as discussed below, rural voters can shape the outcome of national elections. Second, rural college students, I propose, have unique experiences when it comes to integrating into the college environment while negotiating what social groups they belong to. One such social group is connected to their political identity. This group provides a unique context in which to examine intersections of political socialization, political identity, and identity politics.

First, rural voters played a major role in the 2016 election of former President Trump. In a Pew Research Report, Morin (2016) explains that Trump's win in rural America centered on both men and women: "In rural parts of America, it wasn't just White men who flocked to the polls on Election Day to vote for Donald Trump. Rural White women were right there in the voting lines with them" (para 1). Likewise, in a

*Politico* article, Evich (2016) explains: “It was supposed to be the year of the Latino voter. Unfortunately for Hillary Clinton, White rural voters had an even bigger moment” (para 1). Evich contends that rural voters constitute their own unique voting bloc, with unique policy concerns. Evich (2016) explains:

> After years of declining electoral power, driven by hollowed-out towns, economic hardship and a sustained exodus, rural voters turned out in a big way this presidential cycle — and they voted overwhelmingly for Donald Trump, fueling the real estate mogul’s upset victory. The billionaire New Yorker never issued any rural policy plans, but he galvanized long-simmering anger by railing against trade deals, the Environmental Protection Agency and the "war on American farmers (para 4).

Rural voters often differ from their urban counterparts on policy concerns due to the culmination of personal experiences. Horowitz and Parker (2020) of the Pew Research Center explain that 57% of rural White residents believe that others have either a somewhat negative or very negative view of their community. They go on to explain that a net 70% of majority member residents in rural communities believe that their urban and suburban counterparts do not understand the problems faced by rural residents (Horowitz & Parker, 2020). This may lead to what Cramer (2016) coins as politics of resentment. Furthermore, threat on the basis of us versus them, such as between rural and urban folks, may lead to increasing social and political divides (Mason, 2018).

The second reason for focusing on rural college students, rather than all college students, centers on their unique cultural background and their adaptation to the academic

environment. In a recent study on rural first-generation college student retention rates and the role of parental support, McCulloh (2020) explains that socioeconomic conditions, geographic distribution, and income levels within home-town communities shape individual college success. “Struggles within some rural communities are often the result of fewer residents achieving college degrees” (McCulloh, 2020, p. 2). Many rural students have not been surrounded by people who have achieved a higher education. Rural students may be disadvantaged compared to students coming from urban and suburban middle- and upper-class families when it comes to exposure to educational experiences in primary and secondary schools. However, rural students maintain strong reliance on close-knit, small-town social networks for social capital. Rural students in McCulloh’s (2020) study “felt that their close-knit rural community relationships promoted their achievements” (p. 17). Rural students at the University of Oklahoma have to adapt to a new academic setting and may rely on both home and new college social networks for campus socialization.

In this study, I am interested in how discussions in those networks, that is conversations with individuals in hometown networks and college networks, shape political identity formation and political socialization more broadly. Furthermore, I argue that hometown and college communities constitute two unique cultural settings, which, therefore, contain differing cultural group members. I contend that rural students at the University of Oklahoma must navigate their sense of belonging to both cultural groups, much like rural students adapting to other colleges may have to adapt. The college student age group is ideal for studying political identity formation and political

socialization. As young adults undergo political socialization, they are also in a formative developmental stage. Developmental psychology literature reveals that college-age young adults (18-24) are either going through the identity versus confusion stage of development or the intimacy versus isolation stage of development (Erikson, 1959, 1964). Both stages, as will be discussed in chapter two, hinge on the individual coming to terms with their view of the self, or identity, as it relates to others, both on the group level and the intrapersonal level. I examine how these students use interpersonal political conversations to navigate political socialization and identity development. This study may provide insight into how formation of identity and political socialization may run parallel to one another for many college students, especially those students coming from rural hometowns. In 2020 and 2021, college students experienced several major political events. Political events, such as presidential elections, the debates that preface them, and the horserace coverage of elections, have been shown to act as catalysts for political socialization. Sears and Valentino (1997) propose that, "periodic political events [such as an election] catalyze preadult socialization, generating predispositions that persist into later life stages" (p. 45). Thus, political events motivate political socialization. These events give young people reason to think about and crystalize their own political beliefs. It has further been found that adult-level socialization does not occur until later early adult stages, the mid to late 20's (Jennings & Niemi, 1981). The 'first vote' is seen to mark the true crystallization of political preferences (Sears & Valentino, 1997). American voters of all ages felt that this election mattered. A report from the Pew Research Center (2020) explained that, in the months before the November election, 83% of registered

voters said that who won the presidential election ‘really matters.’ The number of registered voters who feel the next president will make a difference has dramatically risen in the last decade. In 2010, the Pew Research Center reported that only 50% of registered voters felt that who won the election mattered; in 2016, that figure rose to 74% (Pew Research Center, 2020). Imagine that your own young adult socialization occurred during a pandemic, an economic recession, and during a time of heated racial and political polarization that would end in contested election results. College students, especially those voting for the first time, learned how to define themselves politically while wading through the historical events of 2020. Furthermore, these young adults learned how to define themselves and others in a time when name calling and highlighting of group divisions on the political stage is the norm, as evidenced during the first presidential debate, held in late September, 2020. During the debates, then-candidate Joe Biden called his opponent, then-President Donald Trump, a clown and an idiot. After being interrupted on numerous occasions, the former Vice President even told the President to shut up. President Trump blamed the current pandemic on an outside threat, China; referred to Biden as ‘number two;’ and called on his ‘Proud Boy’ supporters, saying: "Proud Boys, stand back and stand by, but I'll tell you what, somebody's got to do something about antifa and the left” (BBC, 2020, n.p.). The Proud Boys, it should be noted, are self-defined as ‘western-chauvinists.’ According to the Southern Poverty Law Center (2016), The Proud Boys are a male only, far-right political group holding misogynistic, neo-fascist and white-supremacist values who have instigated political violence on numerous occasions Afterelection day, results took weeks to be finalized, leading to continued

heated debate in the public sphere. This was heightened by President Trump going to war by filing lawsuits in key swing states. In January, President Trump's supporters threatened the US Capitol after claiming a false defeat. Even into the summer months of 2021, some states are changing voting laws based on the rhetoric coming from the Trump presidency referred to as the "Big Lie" (NPR, 2021).

The setting of rural Oklahoma just after the 2020 presidential elections makes for an interesting research location. While not all rural areas are conservative, especially those with a recreation or tourism economy (see Scala et al. 2015), Oklahoma voted overwhelmingly Republican in the 2020 presidential elections. CNN's (2020) election map showed all 77 Oklahoman counties as voting majority Republican. Oklahoma's land is also primarily rural, with the population being centered around two metropolitan areas: Oklahoma City and Tulsa. Norman is located just 17 miles south of Oklahoma City and is an example of the quintessential college town. Of the city, previous Mayor Rosenthal is quoted on the city's website as saying:

> Norman is no longer a best kept secret: the word is out! Norman's strong sense of community, its high quality of life and affordability, and its appreciation for diversity, the arts and culture have earned us this ranking. This honor recognizes not only the quality leadership and vision of the University of Oklahoma, our city, our public schools, the health care system, the business and non profit sectors, but most importantly our citizens. Such recognitions do not happen by chance, but instead by working together to build community. The balance we strike as a growing city and the values we place on being a welcoming and engaged

> community will continue to serve us well in the future. (City of Norman, 2020, para 1)

This small city located in Central Oklahoma gives students coming from rural areas the opportunity to experience a sense of living in the city without the actual hustle and bustle of big city life. While the town boasts its 'diversity,' outside of its student population, it is primarily composed of White, middle- and working-class families. According to the City of Norman (2020), 81.1% of residents are White, 5.4% are Hispanic or Latino, 4.1% are Black or African American, 3.8% are American Indian or Alaskan Native, and 3.4% are Asian. The median income is reported to be $48,248/year (City of Norman, 2020). Like most counties in Oklahoma, Cleveland County (home of Norman, OK and the University of Oklahoma) voted primarily Republican, though the lead was only by a small margin: 55.7% of the county voted Republican, whereas 41.6% voted Democrat (CNN, 2020). The close race is not surprising. College towns have long been hailed as 'liberal havens.'

Norman acts as a political brackish marsh, where conservatives and liberals mix. In the neighborhood streets near the college, "Black Lives Matters" and "Biden-Harris, 2020" yard signs were posted for much of 2020. Just a few blocks down, however, signs for the Unite Norman movement, "Trump-Pence, 2020," and "Save the Babies" dotted neighborhood yards. The outcomes of the Unite Norman movement epitomize the brackish region of this college town. The movement came about in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic and amidst city changes following instances of police brutality around the country. The city sought to reallocate some police funds, which was labeled as

‘defunding the police.’ In reality, reallocation meant that the city police did not get its 3.14% increase in budget that was planned to go towards salaries; instead, that money was to be reallocated to the community (Keith & Gorman, 2020). The Unite Norman movement went door to door throughout the community, seeking signatures to recall local politicians, including the city mayor and three ward’s seats on city council. For weeks, the movement knocked on doors and held up signs with all day, side of the road petition signing events— only managing to get enough signatures to remove one city council member. According to the Unite Norman home page, the mission statement of the still ongoing movement is:

> We believe the current city council, through their words and actions, have abused their positions by: Defunding Our Police, Discouraging Job Creation, Abusing Public Trust. We will not stand by idly and allow our elected officials to legislate their own radical agendas. (Unite Norman, 2020, para 1)

They go on to list goals:

> Because members of our City Council did not represent their values while campaigning and have subsequently exhibited some of the most divisive and embarrassing behavior that Norman has ever witnessed, we will recall those holding seats in Wards 1, 3, 5, and 7 as well as the Mayor. (Unite Norman, 2020, para 2)

Along with attempting to remove public officials, the movement also sued against a mask wearing ordinance which required masks if 25 people or more were gathered (Wood, 2020). Like the attempt to remove the mayor, the masking ordinance remained.

The city of Norman acts as an important context for University of Oklahoma students as they are socialized into American political processes and continue forming their own political identities. While I am most interested in the conversations surrounding the national elections, local politics certainly shape opinions regarding national politics. College students were exposed to many of the local level political issues. Some, directly through conversations. Political signs and protests related to local issues were also around the campus community. Many of the local issues mirrored national level issues. How the city of Norman handled the events of 2020 acts as a microcosm of the national political environment.

This study is, at its core, a communication study. The context outlined above makes for an ideal setting to study interpersonal political conversations (i.e., one-on-one conversations with another person). Rather than focusing on macro level political discourse happening at the societal level in the broader public sphere, I shift my focus to the more intimate or personal level of political discussion. By doing so, I am able to gain insight into individual experiences. This study is also interested in how rural Oklahoman college students use interpersonal political conversations to shape their social identities. While focusing on the interpersonal level of communication, this study also provides insight into intergroup dynamics, mainly, dynamics between members of opposing political parties. This study examines how liberal and conservative rural Oklahoman college students experience political conversations with members of other political parties as they travel between cultural boundaries. The nature of this study is social constructivist. I pose that these conversations shape the realities of college students. Put

differently, political conversations shape how these students ultimately view themselves and others. A part of their reality is thus socially constructed through conversations with others.

**Overview of Chapters**

This study set out to gain insight into how rural Oklahoma college students experienced the political turbulence of 2020 through their political conversations. I was especially interested in the cultural boundary crossing journey that these students had to travel when talking politics in hometowns and on the college campus and how they navigated their multi-layered identities during interpersonal interactions. In the outline that follows, I provide a brief overview of each remaining chapter in this dissertation.

In the second chapter, I discuss relevant literature and key theories. First, I explore what it means to be rural and how ruralness has been examined in ways similar to this study. Second, I review literature on political socialization, then I discuss identity politics and political identity. Theories of identity are then utilized to gain deeper insight into identity politics and political identity. More specifically, I review developmental approaches to identity, social identity theory (SIT), and identity negotiation theory (INT). This study does not seek to test the aforementioned theories, which typically take on a more post-positivist approach. Rather, concepts from these theories help to form a lens from which to approach the group of interest. Furthermore, through the rich theoretical framework constructed in the literature review, I was able to form three theoretically relevant research questions.

In the third chapter, I provide an overview of methods used for data collection and data analysis. Throughout this study, I take a qualitative and interpretive approach and work to understand the perspective of the participants—rural Oklahoman college students attending the University of Oklahoma. I allow my own experience as a rural college student and my time spent in rural Oklahoma along with time spent at the University of Oklahoma to aid in all stages of data collection and analysis. I worked to remain theoretically grounded while also working to continually empathize with the participants. Online interviews and focus groups were conducted via Zoom, an online video call service. Initially, data was analyzed utilizing a grounded theory approach. After conducting member checking, a more discursive approach was taken in the analysis. The two analyses yielded rich findings that spoke to each of the proposed three research questions.

The fourth chapter describes my findings related to elements of Oklahoman culture, how that culture influenced political conversations among rural Oklahoman college students, and how that culture was a key element of political socialization for these students through informing political identity formation and the formation of other relevant social identities. In particular, this chapter examines themes that resonated across the political conversations discussed by participants, including: rural Protestantism as the basis for social conservativism, the juxtaposition of wide-open spaces and living in an echo-chamber of beliefs, the role of agriculture and hard work for the cultivation of rugged individualism, and the linking of Whiteness with rural Oklahoman culture.

The fifth chapter describes my findings on how rural Oklahoman college students use political conversations to navigate differences between their hometowns and the college campus and formulate their sense of belonging. This chapter tells the stories of two groups: conservative students who feel politically lost on campus, and liberal students who feel politically lost in their hometowns. During political conversations, both groups must negotiate which elements of their various social and political identities to divulge, and both groups must come to terms with their more overarching sense of personal identity. The process of identity negotiation during political conversations and navigating cultural differences revealed the continued changing nature of identity. Both conservative and liberal participants came to a new understanding of their self.

The sixth chapter discusses the findings. In this chapter, I first walk through each of the three initial research questions, discussing how all three research questions were answered. Next, I connect the key literature to the findings and discuss theoretical contributions of this dissertation. In particular, I discuss links between political conversations, political socialization, navigating cultural differences, political identities and identity politics, and the development of how we view the self and others. Following the discussion of theoretical implications, I discuss practical implications for college campuses and ways in which these findings reflect broader political patterns seen in the current political atmosphere of the U.S.. Next, I discuss methodological implications, specifically focusing on how the use of technology such as Zoom for conducting online interviews and AtlasTi for online data analysis may improve qualitative research. In the same vein, I discuss methodological limitations, especially those related to the use of

technology and time limitations. After the methodological implications, I consider future directions for this line of research. Finally, I provide a reflection of my own experiences conducting this research and ways in which I had to confront my own biases and past in order to empathize with participants during stages of research design, data collection, and data analysis.

The seventh chapter is the conclusion. In the conclusion, I once again review each of the chapters, and reflect on the significance of the findings. I conclude this dissertation with a call for mindfulness and empathy when talking about politics with others, especially young adults who are still forming their political beliefs. In my call, I point to evidence from this study that these conversations not only shape how these students formed their political opinions about themselves and others, but also how these conversations shaped these students' notion of belonging, self-esteem, and everyday interactions with others.

# CHAPTER II

# KEY LITERATURE AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In this chapter, I cover key literature and theories that aided in the formation of research questions about how Oklahoman college students navigate elements of their political identities as well as various social identities when participating in political conversations with others. Much of this literature was collected in the pre-data collection stage and was used to create a lens from which I could generate relevant research questions. These aided data collection, as the theoretical lens helped me write theoretically relevant interview questions. The strong theoretical approach also aided in the qualitative analysis of interview transcripts, and kept me focused during analysis. As seen in the literature review below, I take a broad theoretical approach. Rather than testing one theory, I look for ways in which a number of theories might provide insight into how rural Oklahoman college students navigated their sense of self in political conversation during what was a politically fraught period—2020 and early 2021.

First, I discuss relevant literature on what it means to be rural. Literature on what it means to be rural and how ruralness has been studied in political contexts helped me think about what cultural elements may shape political socialization and conversations among this body of participants. Next, I explore literature on political socialization. As discussed in the literature review, political discussions can be viewed as both a means of political socialization and a result of political socialization. Having a firm grasp on political socialization literature helped me understand how rural Oklahoman college

students were socialized into their understanding of their political selves and into their understanding of how they viewed others politically. Following an overview of political socialization literature, I connect political socialization with political identity and identity politics. In this section, I work to untangle the two terms—political identity and identity politics.

In the first half of this chapter, I view political identity and identity politics primarily through the lens of political socialization. In the second half of this chapter, I explore various theories related to identity and communication that can provide additional insight into identity politics and political identity. In particular, I am interested in how rural Oklahoman college students use various elements of identity politics in their political conversations to form political identities and how those conversations shape their greater view of self. In this identity perspective, I review literature on identity development, SIT, and on INT. Through the combination of literature on ruralness, political socialization, political identity and identity politics, and the identity frameworks, I propose three research questions that are meant to guide the process of data collection and data analysis. Rather than being placed throughout this chapter, the research questions are discussed at the end, and considered in light of the body of literature discussed here.

**Ruralness**

This study is especially interested in the political conversations among rural students. Formal definitions of what it means to be ‘rural’ are a bit unclear. The U.S. Census (2010) defines rural as anything that is not urban. That is, any region or territory

not in a designated urban area is rural (U.S. Census, 2010). That makes most of the U.S. rural territory—and includes large areas that would most likely be called suburban, at the edges of urban centers. Ratcliffe et al. (2016) further explain that various government agencies rely on different definitions for what it means to be rural. Though the U.S. Census defines rural as anything not urban, other agencies like the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) define rural areas by population density. The Federal Office of Rural Health Policy (FORHP) defines rural not just based on the non-metro definition of rural, but also based on additional codes, such as Rural-Urban Commuting Area (RUCA) codes, to parse out rural versus urban regions (HRSA, 2018). According to FORHP, "approximately 57 million people, about 18% of the population and 84% of the area of the USA is rural" (HRSA, 2018, para. 7). Regardless of how ruralness is measured, agencies agree that most of the United States' land is rural, but more people live within urban areas (HRSA, 2018). In this study, participants of interest must view themselves as being 'rural' or 'country.' I was not so much interested in the official definitions of rural, but rather, how the students defined themselves. Not just as rural, but also in relations to their more urban counterparts.

The rural electorate has been stereotyped by news media and academics alike. Lay (2012) describes ruralness as being painted with a broad stroke by political scientists, social scientists, and pundits, elaborating: "It does not matter if the painting depicts rural people as patriotic, God-fearing, apple-pie baking, hospitable, hardworking 'real' Americans or whether it depicts them as homophobic, racist, uneducated, unsophisticated, voting-against-their-own-interests, coverall-wearing hicks" (p. 141). It is

much easier to paint the picture of rural America with a broad brush than to explore the unique experiences of rural Americans that shape their political beliefs. Lay (2012) goes on to explain that most political science scholarship focuses on urban centers, with scholars believing the aforementioned "sloppy notions about rural people" (p. 141). There is a need for research on rural politics because, "despite of the power of rural Americans in national politics, there are very few recent publications within political science analyzing rural areas" (p. 141). In answering Lay's (2012) call to research, I too explore rural American politics. My study dives into the experiences of rural college students as they form their political identities. Essentially, I examine how rural Americans interact with national political issues in a group that is learning how to be politically or civically engaged while forming their view of self and others and navigating cultural differences between their rural hometowns and suburban college campus.

In their collection of case studies, Duncan and Coles (1999) take a sociological perspective to understand structural barriers and limited resources many rural residents must overcome. Various barriers, such as less funding for education, are conceptualized in Duncan and Coles' (1999) book as place-based issues. In my study on rural Oklahoman college students, I must consider ways in which place-based issues related to ruralness impact discursive contexts, such as when and where political conversations take place and what is talked. In particular, I consider how the social structures of rural hometowns influence political socialization, and the unique challenges and circumstances that form rural Oklahoman college student identity. The study at hand, like Duncan and Coles (2016), takes a place-based approach.

The rural place shapes political beliefs. Katherine Cramer's (2016) book examines the synthesizing concept, 'rural consciousness,' in Wisconsin, and the politics of resentment among that community. Cramer proposes that the rural/urban divide creates a feeling of resentment among rural voters. The book is based on an ethnography that was conducted in rural Wisconsin. Through focus groups, interviews, archival data, and observation, Cramer developed the synthesizing concept of rural consciousness, or what it means to be rural and be seen as rural. Cramer (2016) described rural consciousness, saying: "This is a perspective that encompasses a strong identity as a rural resident, resentment toward the cities, and a belief that rural communities are not given their fair share of resources or respect" (p. 51). Cramer's concept of rural consciousness is centered in social identity, where the rural identity is threatened by the urban counterpart, and residents feel a sense of resentment due to the perception of inequality.

The community examined in Cramer's (2016) book constituted a rural culture. Culture, as defined by Geertz (1973), is the "historically transmitted pattern of meaning embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic form by means of which men communicate, perpetuate and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life" (p. 89). This definition is key in understanding rural identity. My study views students from rural communities as coming from a rural culture, in which their "knowledge and attitudes toward life," in this case focusing on political knowledge and attitudes, along with knowledge and attitudes surrounding ingroups and outgroups, have been influenced by the historically transmitted system of meaning carried from hometowns. Hometowns act as the original cultural context, or web of experience, in

which rural children and adolescence first begin learning about political issues. Related values, traditions, and beliefs have long been passed down. Rural consciousness in Cramer's (2016) book is a product of the historically transmitted meaning of what it means to be rural.

Hometown and college social networks may shape political discourse, behavior, and worldview. Van Duyn (2018) examined a secret political organization consisting of liberal women in rural Texas, specifically rural network construction within rural communities, and how that network construction and interpersonal communication within those networks, shaped comfort level discussing 'unpopular' political opinions. Of particular importance for my study is Van Duyn's (2018) discussion regarding the role of interpersonal communication in sharing or hiding political beliefs among community members, in which political outsiders chose to divulge their dissenting opinions in secret, with like-minded others. Through interpersonal political discourse with others, I propose that students must decide which elements of their political selves to hide or share. This decision making process, I contend, takes place in each conversation. This may vary for each communication partner or interlocutor. I am specifically interested in this thought process among individuals who view their identities as being different than members of their hometown communities. Ultimately, this process may inform the more gradual shaping of how these students view themselves and others and how they might chose to represent themselves in future political conversations.

Ethnicity may also play a role in the experiences of rural students. Lay (2012) explores ethnic diversity fueled by immigration in several rural Iowa towns and the effect

of interethnic contact on political socialization among young, rural students. Gimpel et al. (2003) found that "proximity to diverse populations influenced adolescent attitudes about immigration-induced diversity" (p. 21). Seeming to follow this line of research, Lay (2012) sets off to study fast diversification in rural Idaho and the changing of political attitudes among native born, White residents, especially attitudes surrounding immigration. Prejudice, it was found, was higher towards ethnic groups that were not present in small rural towns than towards ethnic groups that were present in the towns. For example, one town with a newer Hispanic community formed around agriculture saw more prejudice towards African American populations than Hispanic populations, despite the African American population in the historical White town being much smaller than the Hispanic population. Lay (2012) also proports ethnic diversification as shaping civic outcomes over time; that is, increased diversification leads to increased support towards immigration along with increased civic engagement. In the current study, diversity, or lack of diversity, may influence the formation of civic views and later political conversations among rural Oklahoman college students.

Along with differing from their urban counterparts in terms of exposure to other ethnic communities, rural students also face unique challenges (Duncan & Coles, 1999). Many are coming from areas with less access to physical and social needs and from low-income communities. Various social structures, and structural barriers such as limited resources, may ultimately shape the process of political socialization and identity formation of this student body demographic. This study also provides insight into a sector of the rural electorate. Rather than relying on what Lay (2012) describes as "sloppy

notions" of how the rural electorate forms their political beliefs and behaviors, I seek to understand the rural student experience. Like Cramer (2016), I consider how rural culture and related social identities shape political beliefs and conversations. I also consider social networks, or who these students are talking to, like Van Duyn (2018), and consider what it feels like to be a political outsider in one's own hometown. I also explore the other side, the experience of being a political outsider on campus. Finally, like Lay (2012), I consider ways in which various hometown demographic structures, such as religious and ethnic makeup, shape the formation of political beliefs, which ultimately shape and are shaped by political conversations. In the next section of this literature review, I consider the connection between political socialization and political identity.

**Political Socialization of Political Identities and Identity Politics**

This study is rooted in how rural Oklahoman college aged students used political conversations and elements of identity politics to form their political sense of self. Key to the formation of a political identity (or identities) is how these views of self and others are formed. I posit that political socialization is key to understanding the formation of political identities. Put differently, I pose that how these students come to view themselves as a member of a political group is the result of a learning process that has happened overtime and through various mediums. Furthermore, I propose that how these students negotiate various elements of their related social identities in political conversations and in the larger forming of their political identification is also related to socialization. I am interested in how social structures in hometowns and college campus, and political conversations in both places, shape the political socialization of rural

Oklahoman college students. Moreover, I am interested in how that socialization process informs the use of various social identities in political conversations and how elements of political socialization influence the formation of political identity. After reviewing literature on political socialization, I connect this body of literature with research on political identity and identity politics.

### *Political Socialization*

I conceptualize political socialization as being key to my study in three ways. First, I am interested in how hometown culture and hometown conversations have influenced the political socialization of rural Oklahoman college students. Second, I am interested in how formally crystalized beliefs about others based on social and communal identities shape more recent political conversations. Finally, I am interested in how more recent political conversations continue the process of political socialization vis-à-vis these students' attitudes and views of their political ingroups and outgroups.

Political socialization has been defined as the "learning of social patterns corresponding to his [or her] societal positions as mediated through various agencies of society" (Hyman, 1959, p. 25). Political socialization can be thought of as a process through which various elements of society, such as organizational, religious, cultural, and media influences, shape political beliefs and behaviors. Socialization includes expressed affect towards political figures, ideologies, and events; attainment of relevant and accurate political information; and attitude crystallization (Sears & Valentino, 1998). Crystallization, or the solidifying of political beliefs, can be measured through stability of

beliefs, consistency of beliefs over time, and the power or sticking of the belief over contradictory information (Sears & Valentino, 1998).

My study focusses on college students' socialization. Previous models of political socialization have focused on political socialization that occurs in children and adolescents. In a review of the field on political socialization, McLeod (2001) explains that the traditional model was formed in the 1950s and 1960s during what was considered a golden age of political socialization research. This model maintained that the ideal 'mature' citizens were necessary for a unified political system, and that measurable agencies of socialization were sequential. First, parents teach children, then the schools teach children, and later, media exposure 'finishes' the mature citizen. At this stage of political socialization research, McLeod (2001) explains, political knowledge was gained through tacit learning from parents, teachers, and peers, while media influences remained a secondary factor.

Like the early models of political socialization from the 1950s and 1960s, Atkin and Gantz's (1978) definition of political socialization excluded young adults altogether, stating that it was, "a developmental process by which children and adolescents acquire cognitions, attitudes, and behaviors relating to their political environment" (p. 183). As conceptualized in much of the political socialization literature, socialization models have been largely influenced by developmental models of childhood development, such as Erikson's (1959) dialectical model of early childhood development (Eveland & McLeod,1998). Age of child and developmental stage, at face value, impacts socialization behaviors and outcomes. Eveland and McLeod (1998) further proposed that

socialization effects on communication are moderated by age; that is, as children reach higher levels of cognitive development, their tools for processing political information also increase. Along with focusing on political socialization among children and adolescents, early political socialization literature also focused on various modes and outcomes of such socialization. Later political socialization research took a systems approach, including examining social settings along with the interplay of media and family conversations in the adolescent socialization process (McLeod, 2001). In examining rural college students' political socialization, I must consider previous political socialization that occurred in childhood through a variety of social structures, such as hometown organizations, family factors, mass media influence, and educational factors. In particular, I am interested in the learning and socialization that occurred in these structures through interpersonal and dialogic means.

Early models, such as those discussed in McLeod's (2001) work and Atkin and Gantz's (1978) conceptualization, are helpful in considering ways in which college students come to their more mature political beliefs. Early childhood and adolescent political socialization are central to this study; however, I posit that the young-adult students in the current study have not completed their political socialization process. This process, I propose, is ongoing into early adulthood and is catalyzed by political events, such as those surrounding the 2020 elections and COVID-19 pandemic, and crystalized through political conversations with hometown family and friends and college peers. Before diving into literature on college student political socialization, it is first important to review past work on modes of political socialization, particularly those that may have

occurred in early childhood and could inform rural college students' currently held beliefs.

In the current study, I first consider ways in which the hometown familial unit shaped current political beliefs, specifically, conversations with family members during childhood and adolescence. Parental guidance and the family unit has long been seen as the primary political socialization agent for children (Hyman, 1959; Atkin & Gantz, 1978; Hively & Eveland, 2009). As Valentino and Sear's (1998) explained, one on one interpersonal discussion with parents, especially those who are politically/ideological different from each other, during an election campaign, acts as a prime occasion for adolescent socialization. Political discussion in the home also encourages a sense of being able to create change or make a difference. Several studies have concluded that the political social environment of the home shapes political dialogue and efficacy among adolescents. For example, Östman (2013) examined the relationship between political talk in the home and political public expression among Swedish teenagers. Past research reveals, political talk in the home acts as a safe space for adolescents to practice for real-world civic engagement (Östman 2013; 2014). This adolescent socialization becomes the backdrop for later socialization.

Likewise, Desmond and Donohue (1981) found that socio-economic status of the family was the best predictor of adolescents perceiving political debates as important. Furthermore, Desmond and Donohue (1981) propose that students coming from higher socioeconomic statuses carry higher degrees of political efficacy. That is, children who come from higher social and class standings believe that they, as individuals, can make a

difference in the political system (see also Gimpel et al., 2003). For those children who go to college, beliefs about political efficacy are carried with them. Mendelberg and colleagues(2017) examined affluent American college students. The social class which one was raised, they explain, shaped political beliefs and political participation during young-adult years. While social class is not directly examined in this dissertation, it certainly impacts how rural college students see themselves and others. This study is especially interested in how political beliefs formed in the home during childhood shape dialogue and beliefs in young-adult years. Contextual factors surrounding those conversations, such as social class, should not be overlooked. Social class is considered as a contextual element in this study and is examined in relation to rural Oklahoman culture, seen in Chapter four.

Similar to the family unit, school systems are important modes of early childhood education. Likewise, the socialization that happens in school systems is largely shaped by societal factors, such as regional resources (Duncan & Coles, 1999). Primary and secondary schools impact the political socialization of children and adolescents in two ways: knowledge gains from what is taught in school and socialization through conversations with peers. First, students gain political knowledge through basic history and civics education (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1991). Civics education, though perhaps not as rigorous as it much was, is meant to provide students with basic knowledge about the U.S. government. Even without a civics class, Delli Carpini and Keeter (1991) explain:

> A citizen who emerges from the schools with good reading skills, a basic knowledge of simple concepts of economics, and basic facts of U.S. history is reasonably well prepared to observe and understand much of what goes on in the political world. (pp. 596, 598).

Furthermore, schools, we hope, teach students the skills required to process political information, such as reading comprehension and critical thinking (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1991). While the gaining of political knowledge is not synonymous with political socialization, it certainly shapes political socialization outcomes (Eveland & McLeod, 1998).

The second way in which schools shape political socialization is through dialogue with other students and teachers. The interplay between school conversations and conversations with family members has been found to shape the formation of adolescent political identity (McDevitt & Ostrowski, 2009). Furthermore, communication behaviors among adolescents has been shown to predict political knowledge (Hively & Eveland, 2000). Just as early childhood socialization, interpersonal communication has been considered to be a mode of political socialization among adolescents. For example, studies conducted by Chaffee and colleagues focused on adolescent socialization as being more complex than a static top-down system. McLeod and Chaffe (1973) explain that the expectation of interpersonal conversations about political events with others was a stronger predictor of socialization than political knowledge about candidates. In another study, Chaffee et al. (1970)examined various mediums or agents of socialization, including mass media sources (newspaper and broadcast), communication with family

and friends, and learning in school through classes like civics and history. In particular, they found that interaction with media sources, and conversations that followed, led to greater gains in political knowledge than other modes of socialization.

Political knowledge is not gained only through formal education and parental lessons. Mass mediated messages are an important means from which individuals learn about political events. Furthermore, exposure to news media has been shown to encourage political conversations (Wyant et al., 2020) Research on political socialization via news media began in the 1960s. In the late 1960s, political knowledge acquired from news, specifically newspapers, was seen as playing a secondary rather than a primary role as an agent of socialization. Having conversations with others about political events—including those read or seen on the news along with civics education and other socialization agents such as the family, peers, and school, were previously shown to have a greater impact on political knowledge gains (Chaffee et al., 1970). As found in Atkin and Gantz's (1973), news viewing was not only impacted by interpersonal political discussions, but also consistently correlated with age. That is, as students got older, they were more likely to view and talk about news. As seen in this research, political socialization and learning does not only occur through passive exposure to news sources. Rather, exposure to news along the conversations that follow shape political knowledge and socialization.

Social environment and media consumption go hand in hand. For example, household news viewing behavior shapes political knowledge in children (Atkin & Gantz, 1978). Rather than examining only how parents influence political knowledge and

beliefs (i.e., Langton 1969), Atkin and Gantz's (1978) study included measures of political knowledge, interpersonal communication, political interest, information seeking behaviors, and news viewing behaviors. Not surprisingly, age was the strongest predictor of political knowledge. The study concluded that, as students got older, they accessed more news sources and carried more political conversations with parents and peers alike. Gains in political knowledge through socialization followed similar cognitive developmental steps. The researchers also concluded that interpersonal communication encouraged news viewing, and that news viewing shaped interpersonal political conversations, in that, "interpersonal communication about the news stimulates exposure to television news" (Atkin & Gantz, 1973, p. 194). Conversations about the news thus lead to more news viewing behaviors. In the current study with rural Oklahoman college students, it is expected that both previous exposure to news and more recent exposure to news will shape political conversations, both in respect to the topics students talk about, and also in respect to how frequently they talk about news sources.

Of particular importance for my study is how college students continue their political socialization after high school and as they begin their young adult lives on a college campus. Recall, political socialization is moderated by age (Eveland & McLeod, 1998). As children leave their homes and enter early adulthood—either by entering a college or university setting, or by entering the workforce, they should have more political knowledge and sets of crystalized views surrounding government and government figures. While political conversations with parents may influence political efficacy and civic engagement, college students do not simply carry the beliefs of their

parents, as is commonly believed. Political knowledge and beliefs held by college students are not simply passed down by parents in their earlier years. As Richard et al. (1978) explain, the relationship between college student beliefs and parental beliefs is only moderate. Instead of political socialization being influenced by parents alone, peer political belief and political action have been found to increase the norm of voting and general civic engagement among college students (Glynn et al., 2009) As rural college students leave their hometowns, they will be influenced by newfound social networks on their college campus, in this case, at the University of Oklahoma. Some of the students, such as the first year students, have only been exposed to the campus for several months. Fourth year students, on the other hand, will have had more exposure on the college campus. It is expected that the influence of college social networks will be somewhat nuanced based on what year students are in. Peer engagement must also be considered when examining how the students in my study talk about and engage in politics. Perception of political behavior on the larger college campus should also be considered when examining rural Oklahoman college student political socialization and political identity formation. In their quasi experiment, Glynn et al. (2009) found that perceived social norms around voting on college campuses were significant predictors of college students' intention to vote. Glynn and colleagues (2009) focused particularly on communication variables in their study, outlining "the importance of communication in the transmission and impact of social norms as it relates to the process of political socialization" (p. 49). In relation to other college students, they clarify: "we examine how perceived social norms about voting for close social groups (family and close friends)

and for other college students influence students' intention to vote" (Glynn et al., 2009, p. 49). Beliefs around voting in college students are not simply passed onto young adults through parental socialization or media viewership; rather, college students' beliefs have been formed over time and are influenced by a variety of modes, central to which is social interaction within various networks (Sapiro, 2004). As I examine how rural students come to understand their political selves and others, I should not only examine how rural students view hometown and family member political beliefs, but I should also consider how these students view the larger campus community and how these students interact with their college peers through political conversations.

Place and time are both important contextual factors when considering modes of political socialization among college students. Place refers to the place identities, such as the rural identity, merge with new identities formed on a college campus, in this case, the University of Oklahoma. As discussed in the previous section, cultural factors surrounding what it means to be rural and political conversations among rural hometown family and friends are carefully examined in this study. Time is an important contextual factor as well. I am interested in the political socialization that occurred in the time leading up to, during, and after the 2020 presidential elections. I was also interested in the ways in which prior political socialization influenced the political conversations happening within a specific time frame surrounding key political events such as the 2020 presidential election and the debates leading up to it, the politicization of COVID-19, news coverage of police violence, and the January 2021 capitol insurrection.

Political events are especially influential for adolescents and young adults alike (Sears & Valentino, 1997). Sears and Valentino (1997) suggest that during preadult and young adult socialization, crystallization is especially triggered by political events that are highly visible on news agendas, such as a presidential elections, along with other events that elicit strong attitudes and emotions. They also contend that crystallization is further solidified by individual-level interpersonal discussions regarding those events (Sears & Valentino, 1997). Likewise, Nathanson and Eveland (2019) explain that political events, such as elections, provide parents an opportunity to talk about politics and impart political beliefs to their adolescent children.

In my study, I am interested in how these events trigger political conversations among rural Oklahoman college students, and how those conversations are shaped by prior socialization and are reflective of a process of continued political socialization. In particular, I am interested in how conversations surrounding events such as presidential elections shape political attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors regarding political identities. Furthermore, I am interested in the overlap of identity politics in the formation of those beliefs. I propose that the formation of a political sense of self and view of others is a result of political socialization.

### *Political Identity and Identity Politics*

We are not born understanding our view of self and others fully. Rather, as we mature and develop, some identities become central to our self-concept, whereas others become less important, are shed or replaced. Just as with other identities, like ethnic and religious identities, a similar process of development occurs for political identity. We

may know what our parents believe and begin to form connections to political ideologies at a young age, however, how we connect with others politically is developed as we mature in early adulthood and made more salient when exposed to political events, political discourse, and civic engagement. This study operationalizes political identification as a social identity that is formed over time through social interactions. Political identity, as a social identity, refers to how we view ourselves as members of a political group on the basis of party or ideology that also has relative political outgroups. Social identity, explain Tajfel and Turner (1979) provides members with "an identification of themselves in social terms." That is, people describe themselves based on the groups they belong to, their ingroups, along with the relative groups that are viewed as not belonging to, their outgroups. Not only do political identities constitute unique social identities with relative ingroups and outgroups, but other social identities, such as religious identity or gender identity, can influence political behavior of groups through identity politics.

The role that social identities play in politics is what sets political identity apart from identity politics; however, both may play a significant role in political conversations for rural college students. Part of the significance of this study is the attempt to untangle the two terms, which, appear to be becoming more and more synonymous with one another. Blum (2013) defined political identity as being self-ascribed. That is to say that individuals choose and have say over their political identity. Again, political identity refers to how we label ourselves as members of a political party or ideology. Identity politics, on the other hand, can be theoretically and pragmatically understood "as politics

stressing collective group identities as the basis of political action" (Brunila & Rossi, 2018, p. 288). Place identity, for example ruralness, or religious identities, such as Christianity, may act as a catalyst for political action on the basis of social identity. In conceptualizing identity politics, Brunilla and Rossi (2018) explain that social identities are intersectional. Identity politics, they explain, "is understood as a form of politics stressing collective but malleable group identities as the basis of political action" (p. 287). Brunilla and Rossi (2018) provide examples of social groups that have utilized their social identities for policy change, such as, "ethnic minorities, religious groups, feminists, lesbian women and gay men, trans people, disability groups and working-class people" (p. 288). Hess (2019) describes identity politics as a 'coming-togetherness' for change. Identity politics can easily blur with the conceptualization of political identity. Various social identities, as posed by Brunilla and Rossi (2018), along with Hess (2019), may be becoming more important for how individuals label themselves than the label of a clear political identity on the basis of a political party or ideology.

Hochschild (2016) examined the relationships between political beliefs and place identity. Hochschild conducted interviews in southwest Louisiana, focusing on Christian, working and middle class, white conservatives. In focusing on identity politics of the area, Hochschild set out to unravel the "great paradox," which occurs when residents of a conservative state in poor economic health vote against policies that would be in their own political self-interest. Hochschild (2016) posits that identity politics help explain the great paradox, that rather than considering the rationale behind policies, residents may rely on long held group dynamics for civic decision making. Like Hochschild and others,

I explore ways in which identity politics shape political conversations, and ultimately, political identity formation along with the interactions of varied social identities in the form of identity politics.

As previously described, political identity can be defined as self-identifying with a political group or ideology. Self-identification with a political group, as a social identity, informs political behaviors and beliefs (Greene, 2004). Political identity may shape political involvement amongst young people. Collier et al. (2019) examined the interplay of political identities—viewing self as belonging to a political party, with various other social identities. Other related social identities that inform political behavior fall in with identity politics. Collier and colleagues found that political identities and activities associated with those activities affected the likelihood, affect, and type of conversations surrounding policies. More specifically, political identification was significantly correlated with being either for or against President Obama's 2015 announcement of America's College Promise plan, along with civility of conversations about that plan, and language towards others' political identity when talking about that policy (Collier et al., 2019).How individuals feel connection to a political party or ideology, along with how strong that felt connection is, impacts how young people engage with political issues.

Other scholars have connected political identity with civic engagement. For example, Kristensen and Solhaug (2017) conclude: "Forming a political identity seems to have consequences for their participation and for important choices regarding political 'belonging'" (p. 40). Because of the role that political identity formation plays in civic

engagement, Kristensen and Solhaug recommend that schools implement civics education focused on political identity formation among high school students. Likewise, Porter (2013) examined political identity and civic engagement among high school students. Identity politics, or other social identities that influence political choice, were found to influence both political identification and civic engagement; furthermore, strong connection to political identities was found to be related to political involvement (Porter, 2013). Again, evidence points to connection with a political identity as influencing how individuals engage with political issues.

Political identity is also deployed by Cramer (2016), who explains that the partisan divide in Wisconsin reflects what is happening in the United States, where "people use social categories to understand the political world, and they connect resentment towards particular groups to the broader stance of wanting less, not more government redistribution" (p. 7). Through ethnographic exploration, Cramer (2016) used a social identity perspective to unravel the rural/urban political divide in Wisconsin, ultimately coming to the synthesized concept of rural consciousness. Rural consciousness can be thought of as the perception that the place identity of being rural constitutes a unique group, or ingroup, which is put down and held back by an outgroup, urban-ness. Central to the social identity perspective is the creation of ingroups and outgroups; the creation of us vs. them. Cramer (2016) explains that this process is how the politics of resentment functions:

> …it works through seemingly simple divisions of us versus them, but it has power because in these divisions are a multitude of fundamental understandings: who

> has power, who has what values and which of those values are right, who gets what, and perceptions of the basic fairness of all of this (p. 87).

Thus, political identity is a social identity from which ingroups and outgroups are deployed.

It has been argued that intergroup competition on the basis of political identities can explain the "Trump phenomenon" and the increased political polarization occurring during President Trump's time in office (Mason, 2018). This increased political polarization set the public stage for unrest in the 2020 election and the events that followed, the time in which my study takes place. Mason (2018) examines this polarization in her book through the lens of political identity and the use of identity politics to divide the nation. The desire to overpower the political outgroup is more important to individuals than understanding candidates' stances on policies. Mason argues that partisan or political identities which are party-linked increase social polarization linked to "stereotyping, prejudice, and emotional volatility" (Mason, 2018, p. 4). While political identity becomes a rallying cry for defeat of the opposite party, Mason (2018) argues that social identities in the form of identity politics are also linked to social polarization.

As seen in Mason's (2018) work, identity politics and political identities are closely intertwined, are used by political candidates to win over public approval, and both influence individual civic engagement along with the ways in which the public treat each other on an interpersonal level.

Political identity and identity politics are closely linked with social identity. Based on the literature above, I argue that political identity is largely the result of political socialization. Other social identities that play into identity politics, are acquired through various means of enculturation, and also influence political behavior including political discussions as examined in this study. The current study examines ways in which rural Oklahoman college students utilize both political identities and identity politics in their everyday political conversations in their hometown communities and with college peers, how students have formed and are continually forming those identities, and how the use of political identities and identity politics in conversations might influence other elements of individual identity.

In the next section of this literature review, I further discuss the identity framework. First, I discuss ways in which identity has been defined in the social sciences. Next, I discuss identity formation through a developmental perspective. I then examine social identity theory, which was previously discussed in relation to identity politics and political identity. Finally, literature on identity negotiation theory is examined to understand how rural Oklahoma college students might use various aspects of their political identities and other social identities to navigate their overall sense of self and to cross cultures through political conversations.

**An Identity Framework to Understanding Political Identity and Identity Politics**

In this study, I take an identity approach to understand how rural college students negotiate their identities during conversations about politics during and following a heated election year. It has been proposed that individuals organize their everyday lives

and overall worldview on the basis of identity (Ryan & Deci, 2003). Identity can be thought of as one's view of the self; it is made up of complex phenomena in which the individual must work to find balance between personal self-image and social self-image (Deaux, 1993). As proposed by Erikson (1959), identity formation is a process that occurs throughout various developmental stages. As such, identity is fluid over time, as it continues to evolve based on various life experiences, developmental stages, and socialization. As explained by Weigert et al. (1986), while identity is somewhat fluid, meaning that it changes overtime, it also remains somewhat stable overtime.

Communication is central to the formation of self, or identity (Hecht, 1993). Identity has been viewed as being socially constructed through discourse with others (Hatoss, 2012). Identity is rooted in not just how we view ourselves, but also in how we think that others view us. For example, the looking-glass self, developed by Cooley (1902), states that the view of the self is formed through how we think others view us. The looking-glass self can be understood through how individuals interact with others. One's identity derives from social interactions (Kroskrity, 1999). As viewed in my study, the concept of self, that is identity, has a long history of being viewed as a product of social interaction, or put differently, as a product of communication with others.

In going through stages of development, young people must come to terms with their personal identity, or their ego self, along with their social or collective self. Identity is developed over time and can be conceptualized as layered. People do not have just one view of the self, one identity, but rather they have multiple identities that correspond to different areas of their lives. Hecht and colleagues developed the communication theory

of identity (CTI), which proposes four frames of identity: personal, relational, enacted, and communal (Hecht, 1993; Hecht et al., 2002; Jung & Hecht, 2004). The first frame of identity is the personal layer, which can be thought of as the self-concept. The second layer, the relational layer, acts as the interpersonal layer— it is the layer of the self in relation to others through social contact. The third layer is the enacted layer, which describes how we perform or act out various identities. The fourth layer is the communal layer, which covers identities that emerge out of groups. This can be thought of as the communal or social identity (Hecht et al., 2002). Central to the concept of identity is that identity is layered, complex, and developed over time. This study explores identity from several angles. I explore the role of political discussion in the overall formation of how rural Oklahoman college students view themselves and others. This study, more specifically, revolves around issues related to political identity, which can be viewed as a collective or social identity defining how individuals relate to political parties or ideologies. If, as Hecht and colleagues propose identity is layered and different layers of identity interact with each other is held, then political identification may impact other layers of identity—personal, relational, enacted, or communal. Likewise, other social identities that lead to political behaviors and attitudes, also interact with other layers of the self. The view of self is complex, layered, and formed overtime. I examine those elements that make their way into political discussion and influence discussion outcomes.

***Identity Development***

Political identity literature and early political socialization literature alike were influenced by Erikson's (1968) theory of identity development (see also Porter, 2013;

Yates & Youniss, 1988). Influenced by Campbell, Converse, Miller, and Stokes' (1960) work, *The American Voter,* Erikson (1968) went on to describe political commitment as an aspect of a young person's overall identity development (see also Kristensen & Solhaug, 2017; Yates & Youniss, 1999). Erikson (1964) defined identity as, "the ability to experience oneself as something that has continuity and sameness, and to act accordingly" (p. 42). Erikson held that identity is developed through discovery of who we are and who we are not (Worrell, 2015). Erikson's (1968) theory revolves around what is called the epigenetic principle. This is considered both a biological process *and* sociocultural developmental processes, through which an individual's "progress through each stage is in in part determined by our success, or lack of success in all the previous stages" (p. 92).

Erikson (1958; 1963; 1968) held that individuals undergo eight dialectical tensions that begin in infancy and continue into adulthood which must be resolved as they grow. These stages are: (1) trust vs. mistrust, (2) autonomy vs. shame and doubt, (3) initiative vs. guilt (4) industry vs. inferiority, (5) identity vs. confusion, (6) intimacy vs. isolation, (7) generativity vs. stagnation, and (8) integrity vs. despair. Growth occurs through overcoming the dissonance or crisis associated with each stage.

Stages of identity development have been linked with the development of a political identity. Yates and Youniss (1988) explain that, "social-historical context, instantiated in social relationships and actions, plays a pivotal role in the process and shape of political socialization and identity" (p. 495). Context and interaction with others form political identity over time through the processes of social learning, enculturation,

and political socialization. Like my current study, Yates and Youniss (1988) utilized Erikson's work on identity development in discussing the relationship between identity and socialization. As young people form their social identities, especially in the dialectical tension of identity versus confusion, they begin to form political identities.

My study focusses on college students, who are, according to Erikson's (1969) work, in the fifth and sixth stages of identity development (identity vs. confusion and intimacy vs. isolation). The fifth stage occurs roughly between the ages of 12 to 18 years old. Many first year college students are 17 and 18 years old and may still be in this stage, along with 18-year-old first-time voters. In this stage, young adults explore elements of their identity such as values and beliefs, consider their future goals, and work on shaping themselves into the adult they want to become. Successful resolution of the identity vs. confusion tension leads to the virtue of fidelity (Erikson, 1958; 1963). The next stage, intimacy vs. isolation, occurs approximately between the ages of 18 to 40 years. Most college students are in this stage, trying to form long-term relationships with others. Failure to do so may lead to feelings of isolation and depression; though, successful conflict resolution leads to the positive virtue of love (Erikson, 1958; 1963). College acts as a pivotal identity development age. Azmitia et al. (2008)elaborate, saying, "the college context offers a wide array of potential experiences that may cause emerging adults to rethink their identities and reconfigure them in new ways." (p. 11). From exposure to new beliefs through interactions with peers and professors, to completion of coursework, college students must negotiate who they are in their new roles.

***Social Identity Theory***

SIT grew out of Sherif's realistic conflict theory (RCT), explaining that limited resources lead to intergroup conflict. Famously, Sherif tested the theory through the Robbers' Cave experiments, which took place in Wilburton, Oklahoma (Sherif et al.,1961). Finding RCT too simplistic, Tajfel and Turner developed SIT, positing that conflict was not just a result of limited resources between groups, but rather, how individuals related to groups through the formation of ingroups and outgroups could explain intergroup conflict (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). As utilized in my study, SIT can help explain how individuals view themselves and others through political identities as social categories. In this study, I am interested in how social identities make their way into political conversations among rural Oklahoman college students in the form of identity politics and political identities. As discussed in the previous literature on identity politics and political identities, social identity makes for a relevant framework from which to understand how individuals view themselves and others politically. As a social psychological theory, SIT describes intergroup relations, group processes, and the development of a social self (Hogg et al., 1995).. SIT has been widely accepted as a useful framework to understand intergroup relations (Brown, 2000).

Tajfel and Turner (1979) explain that the theory "takes into account social realities as well as their reflection in social behavior through the mediation of *socially* shared systems of beliefs" (p. 36). The basic idea, as described by Hogg et al. (1995) is:

> …that a social category (e.g., nationality, political affiliation, sports team) into which one falls, and to which one feels one belongs, provides a definition of who

> one is in terms of the defining characteristics of the category- a self-definition that is part of the self-concept (p. 259).

Self-definition occurs through group/social interaction. Thus, social interaction, Tajfel and Turner (1979) explain, provides members with "an identification of themselves in social terms" (p. 40). As such, rather than defining self as singular, such as "I" or "me," through the identification of self through group and social interactions, pronouns become plural and change to incorporate "us" and "we."

Identification, including political identification, occurs both within groups, by members viewing themselves in relation to their own groups, and through comparison between groups, by members viewing themselves as better or worse than members of other groups. For example, when one views themselves in light of political identity, not only do they compare themselves to others of their own political party, but they also compare themselves to members of other political parties. Identification, in other words, occurs at both the intragroup and intergroup levels. Through the categorization of self and others, individuals establish and maintain self-esteem (Abrams & Brown, 1989) and reduce uncertainty (Brown, 2000). It has been found that comparing and categorizing others on the basis of group membership boosts self-esteem. These comparisons, explain Kulik and Ambrose (1992), largely favor the ingroup. Put differently, individuals view their ingroup in a positive light, which in turn makes them feel better about themselves.

Through social categorization, ingroups and outgroups are formed; the ingroup defines belonging and the outgroup defines the other (Brewer, 2001). Ingroup members are trusted more and thus receive more interaction and support; outgroup members are

not trusted, are treated with, and perceived based on negative attitudes and emotions (Mackie et al., 2000). Groups are thus pinned against each other; for example, Republicans might perceive Democrats (or vice versa) as outgroup members and have negative attitudes and emotions towards that group. The process that defines ingroup and outgroup categorization is known as the metacontrast principle (Tajfel, 1959). The psychological function of this principle, explains Hogg (2006), is that it "maximizes the ratio of perceived intergroup differences to intragroup differences and thus accentuates similarities within groups and differences between groups" (p. 118). Meta-contrast prototyping strengthens the bond with the relative ingroup, while, at the same time, creating a bigger gap away from relative outgroups.

Overall self-esteem increases when the contrast between an ingroup and outgroup is more salient; that is, the more contrast one feels between groups, the better they feel about themselves in light of their own group standing (Abrams & Hogg, 1988). In terms of political identification, the more the outgroup political party is portrayed in a negative light and viewed as inferior, the more the ingroup political party is seen as positive and becomes a self-esteem booster. Thus, not only does one feel better as a Republican or Democrat (for example) if the opposing party is portrayed as inferior or as the enemy, but individuals also feel an overall sense of security or increased self-esteem when these differences are highlighted. In this study on rural Oklahoman college student political conversations, the metacontrast principle becomes a central element in understanding why political identities might be pinned against each other during interpersonal interactions.

Social categorization has clear potential for negative consequences. In his early work, before SIT was formalized as a theory, Tajfel (1959) examined the social influence of groups on negative othering beliefs, such as racism. Social categorization leads to the depersonalization of others. Through this process, individuals are no longer viewed as unique individuals, but, rather, they are viewed as an embodiment of the stereotypes related to social categorization (Hogg et al., 2004). his process of depersonalizing individuals through social categorization and stereotyping can lead to prejudice. Cuhadar and Dayton (2011) explain that this prejudice is "one of the essential ingredients of intractable conflicts and an outgrowth of social identity formation" (p. 276). As previously discussed, political identity and identity politics on the basis of social identity have been blamed for the increased political divide in the United States and the growing social polarization linked with "stereotyping, prejudice, and emotional volatility" (Mason, 2018, p. 4). Individuals who identify strongly with their political party may judge members of opposing political parties based on negative stereotypes. Negative attitudes and beliefs are then formed through social categorization. They are manifested as stereotypes and prejudices which can transform into negative action and potentially even conflict.

SIT is a key element in the theoretical lens developed to understand how rural Oklahoman college students experience political conversations during a time when social identities have been used by political candidates and political interest groups for rhetorical warfare. In this study, political identity and identity politics are conceptualized through the lens of social identity. I am interested in how rural Oklahoman college

students use ingrouping and outgrouping process in their political conversations. I am also interested in how these students were socialized into their view of the self and other, and how their social identities related to politics continue to be influenced through political conversations. In the next subsection, identity negotiation theory (INT) provides additional perspective into how rural Oklahoman college students might navigate various elements of their social identities in interpersonal political conversations when crossing cultural boundaries. As discussed below, INT helps further unpack the relationships between the social self and the personal self.

### *Identity Negotiation Theory*

From a sociological perspective, identity negotiation has been described as, "interpersonal glue that bonds people to one another and their organizations" (Swan et al., 2009). Swan and colleagues (2009) define identity negotiation as "the processes whereby relationship partners reach agreements regarding who is who" (p. 82). Coming from the field of communication, Ting-Toomey's (2005) INT revolves around how individuals negotiate role, personal, and social identities in situations involving intercultural in intergroup boundary crossing journeys, in which individuals travel between cultures or groups. These journeys can occur through contact with an outside culture, through interethnic interactions, or through the prosses of assimilation and adaptation after moving to a new country or culture. In the present study, I examine the boundary crossing journey that rural college students take between their rural hometowns and college campus. I conceptualize rural hometowns as carrying a culture distinct to that of the college campus. While the campus is still in Oklahoma, traditions, values, norms,

and beliefs vary between the two settings. These journeys may not be as starkly different as international travel, though, these students must still negotiate a newfound sense of self on campus and at home. In order to be successful in college, these students must adapt to new sets of rules and values, while incorporating their previous rules and values into their belief system. Furthermore, through the new diverse setting, the rural students coming from largely ethnically and culturally homogeneous hometowns in my study must interact with other students, staff members, and faculty members, some coming from more diverse backgrounds. These students regularly have new intercultural and interpersonal interactions in which they must negotiate their various layered identities. Identity negotiation thus becomes an important lens for the current study. The two most obvious elements of INT are identity and negotiation. Ting-Toomey (2015) operationalize identity in INT, saying that it:

> …refers to an individual's multifaceted identities of cultural, ethnic, religious, social class, gender, sexual orientation, professional, family/relational role, and personal image(s)based one's self-reflection and other-categorization social construction processes. (p. 418)

Elements of identity discussed in the above literature review fall under this definition. INT is not interested in social identities alone. Rather, INT provides explanations for identity as being multifaceted, layered, and fluid. INT may also help to link Erikson's (1959) theory of identity development with social identity.

Elements of the self can come into question when interacting with others from an outside culture, as rural Oklahoman students must do on the college campus. Hotta and

Ting-Toomey (2013) explain that INT emphasizes "multiple identity salience," explaining that individuals confronting new cultures tug and pull between identity issues such as: socio-cultural identity, relational role identity, personal identity, and situational identity boundary crossing issues" (p. 551). For the students in my study, confronting the new college culture may bring up a tug and pull between their own related identity issues. Ting-Toomey (2015) elaborate: "Thus, each individual's composite identity has group membership, relational role, and individual self-reflexive implications" (p. 418). These various identities are acquired over time through socialization and enculturation, lived experiences, and interaction with others (Ting-Toomey, 2015).

Identity is socially constructed over time through cultural interactions. Prior to college, the students in my study were primarily socialized in their hometowns (this was a pre-requisite for participation in the study). Ting-Toomey (2005) explains that individuals: "acquire and develop their identities through interaction with others in their cultural group" (p. 211). How we view ourselves and others is encultured, much like other beliefs and values. Ting-Toomey (2005) further explains: "Through interaction with others on a daily basis, we acquire the meanings, values, norms, and styles of communicating" (p. 211). The participants in my study formed their original identities based on interactions with their families and hometown cultural group members. Communication with others is central to the development of identity. As participants in my study participate in interpersonal communication with their college peers, it is expected that their sense of self will continue changing.

The second key concept associated with INT is negotiation. The term negotiation, Ting-Toomey (2015) explains, "refers to the exchange of verbal and nonverbal messages between the two or more communicators in maintaining, threatening, or uplifting the various socio-cultural group-based or unique personal-based identity images of the other in situ" (p. 418). One's various, layered, identities are managed in conversations with others. It is a "transactional interaction process" (Ting-Toomey, 2005, p. 217). As we interact with others, we present our desired self-image, work to define that self-image, modify that self-image, come into conflict with our own self-image, and do the same for others' identities (Ting-Toomey, 2005). The negotiation of identities in political conversations held by rural college students is the primary focus of this dissertation. College students traveling between rural hometowns and college campus must decide which elements of themselves to present in various interpersonal conversations, especially in political conversations. I am interested in how rural Oklahoman college students negotiate various elements of their self-image in political conversations with others- both on campus and in hometowns, and what the outcomes of that negation process are, especially those outcomes related to political socialization.

Ting-Toomey's (2005) INT is an intercultural theory of communication. Culture, explains Ting-Toomey (2005), plays a role in shaping identity, as it shapes everyday behavior and the formation of values. Ting-Toomey (1999) defines culture as "a complex frame of reference that consists of patterns of traditions, beliefs, values, norms, symbols, and meanings that are shared to varying degrees by interacting members of a community" (p. 10). Culture is the overarching system of meaning that has been passed down, or

encultured and socialized over time, that shapes our values, beliefs, attitudes, and ultimately our view of selves and others, that is, one's identity. It provides, as Ting-Toomey (1999) explains, a 'frame of reference' from which to view the world. Regardless of what culture one comes from, INT assumes that: "human beings, in all cultures desire both positive group-based and positive person-based identities in any type of communicative situation" (Ting-Toomey, 2005, p. 217). That is to say, it is human nature to desire a sense of belonging with others and to desire self-confidence when communicating with others.

Negotiating dialectical tensions are of special interest for gaining insight into how rural Oklahoman college students navigate their sense of self and view of others in political conversations. Recall from Erikson's identity work, as people age, they must resolve various crises or tensions. These tensions, it is contended, come about partially as the natural biological nature of aging. As people age, cognitive ability changes, and cognitive needs surrounding their view of the self change too. These tensions are also a product of socialization. That is, the tensions that occur in various developmental stages are also brought on through interaction with various societal structures. INT also concerns itself with tensions that must be resolved. These tensions are referred to as 'boundary-crossing themes' (Ting-Toomey, 2005). Rather than being internal tensions that occur at developmental stages, these tensions occur through intercultural and interpersonal communication contact. The tensions are: (1) identity security vs. identity vulnerability; (2) identity inclusion vs. identity differentiation; (3) identity predictability

vs. identity unpredictability; (4) identity connection vs. identity autonomy; and (5) identity consistency vs. identity change.

These tensions can be understood through a dialectical approach. This dialectical approach "emphasizes the relational rather than the individual aspects and persons" (Martin & Nakayama, 1999, p. 14). The identity dialectics above do not exist in a vacuum; they are both a result of and overcome through communication with others. INT assumes that individuals strive to have balance between each tension (Hotta & Ting-Toomey, 2003). That is, "an optional range exists on the various identity negotiations spectrums" (Ting-Toomey, 2005, p. 218). The tensions above describe a combination of personal/internal identity and sociocultural/external identity tensions (Hotta & Ting-Toomey, 2003). The students in my study participate in political conversations in two cultures: rural hometowns and the college campus. They come into contact with political views other than their own, along with political views that are congruent with their own. I am particularly interested in how rural Oklahoman college students might navigate these dialectical tensions during political conversations.

Another assumption of INT is that successful identity negotiation leads to a variety of positive outcomes. Ting-Toomey (2005) describes three primary outcomes as being: (1) "the feeling of being understood;" (2) "the feeling of being respected;" and (3) the "feeling of being affirmatively valued" (p. 228). According to Ting-Toomey (2005), to feel understood does not simply mean that the relational partner agrees, but rather, that the other comprehends one's way of thinking, feeling, and/or behaving. To do so requires the relational other to carry some degree of empathy or ability to step outside of their own

experiences. To feel respected means that identity-based communicative behavior is deemed "legitimate, credible, and on equal footing with members of other groups" (Ting-Toomey, 2005, p. 229). The identity behavior is not just understood by the other party, but it is also perceived as having value by the other. Finally, the feeling of being affirmatively valued refers to "our sense of being positively endorsed and being affirmatively embraced as 'worth-while' individuals despite having different group-based identities or stigmatized identities" (Ting-Toomey, 2005, p. 229). Thus, the feeling of being affirmatively valued does not refer to the perception that the other simply tolerates one's views, that they 'agree to disagree,' but rather, the opinion is seen to matter by the other person belonging to an outside group.

The positive outcomes outlined above are not possible without competence and mindfulness, as outlined in the ninth assumption of INT: "A competent identity negotiation process emphasizes the importance of integrating the necessary intercultural identity-based knowledge, mindfulness, and interaction skills to communicate appropriately and effectively with culturally dissimilar others" (Ting-Toomey, 2005, p. 218). A degree of openness is required by both parties during the process of identity negotiation. Ting-Toomey (2017) explains that competence can be further encouraged in intergroup communication via identity attunement, in which knowledge regarding self and other is integrated, and mindfulness, in which individuals consider their own and others' backgrounds while communicating in an in-the-moment mindset without jumping to conclusions about the other group.

In this study, I apply INT to the context of political socialization through interpersonal communication with members of similar and different cultural backgrounds and political ideologies. Identity negotiation has typically been applied to inter-ethnic communicative experiences and minority experiences (e.g., Toomey and Ting-Toomey, 2013; Moriizumi, 2011) and communicative experiences of the settler and sojourner as they adapt to a new cultural setting (e.g., Hotta & Ting-Toomey, 2013). My application of INT stretches its previous use, though it remains within theoretically appropriate boundaries. Though, as an interpretivist, I certainly do not test the theory, this theory sheds light on the experience of my participants: rural Oklahoman college students. I am interested in how rural students negotiate personal and group identities on the grounds of place (ruralness) and various social identities that constitute identity politics, along with political group belonging or political identity when coming into contact with members of other groups through interpersonal political discourse with others.

**Research Questions**

The above literature helped to form a theoretical lens from which research questions could be posed. These research questions were formed through the understanding of what it means to be rural and how ruralness has been linked with political behavior and identity, literature on political socialization and how political socialization influences the use of identity politics and formation of political identity, and theoretical approaches to navigating personal and social identities. The research questions are as follows:

RQ1: How do cultural factors and elements of identity politics influence political conversations among rural Oklahoman college students?

RQ2: How do the political conversations they engage in shape rural Oklahoman college students' political identity formation?

RQ3: What are the outcomes of political identity negotiation for rural Oklahoman college students?

Proposing these questions based on a strong theoretical grounding was central in the data collection and analysis stages. In answering the above research questions, the above literature on rural culture, political socialization, and communication and identity were continually revisited. Through a qualitative, interpretive approach, my broader goal was to gain insight into how rural college students experienced navigating various elements of their social and personal identities in political conversations in two distinct cultures: rural Oklahoman hometowns and the quintessential college community. In the method chapter that follows, I detail the steps that were taken in data collection and analysis in order to answer the above research questions.

# CHAPTER III

# METHOD

I utilized an interpretive approach to answer the research questions detailed in the previous chapter. The interpretive paradigm of research has been linked with the Chicago School of social inquiry, and home of symbolic interactionists (Rogers, 1994). The Chicago School was home for Charles H. Cooley, who coined the looking glass self, a view of identity discussed earlier in this dissertation. The interpretivist school, Yanow and Schwartz-Shea (2009) explain, makes the epistemological claim that reality cannot be directly accessed; rather, humans carry distinct realities and experiences grounded in historical and cultural contexts. The experiences of my participants, students from a deeply conservative state who have left their rural homes in Oklahoma to come to a large state research university. Not only are they learning about American political institutions, but their experiences are different than the experiences of urban students, or students coming from different parts of the country. While some of these findings may transfer to other settings, the context in which my research takes place carries its own distinct reality,

Rather than approaching my field research with no preconceptions, I went into the field with a strong theoretical lens situated in political socialization literature and theories of identity. Though I did not conduct traditional ethnographic observations, this work is conceptually grounded in ethnographic inquiry, in which an in-depth examination of culture is used to understand the experiences of rural Oklahoman college students. I

aimed to gain an in-depth understanding of individuals living in and traveling between two cultures: the culture of rural Oklahoma and the new culture of a college campus, the University of Oklahoma. Of key interest is the culture of rural Oklahoma, and ways in which that culture frames political conversations had in both places.

Due to my unique insight, having been a rural college student myself, living near and working at the University of Oklahoma as a graduate student and instructor, and having spent a significant amount of time in rural Oklahoma, I am able to take an insider perspective to this research. This ability aided in using the language of the rural Oklahoman culture in interviews, along with gaining rapport with participants through shared experiences. This insight also helped me to take a subjective approach in which I could take the standpoint of the participants in conducting the analysis. As a graduate student who has traveled and lived in more urban environments, I am also an outsider. I am thus able to combine subjective experiences with outsider, more objective observations. The combined insider and outsider perspectives provided me with a unique vantage point from which to analyze rural Oklahoman culture, the various layered identities of rural Oklahoman college students, and political conversations amongst rural Oklahoman college students. I utilized qualitative interviews and analysis to gain insight into how rural Oklahoman college students use interpersonal conversations to form a political sense of the self. I also relied on my unique insider and outsider perspectives to understand the experience of rural Oklahoman college students. Finally, I reflected on my past four years spent traveling between rural Oklahoma and the University of Oklahoma community and how these experiences shaped my views of culture in both areas.

Qualitative interviews, in the form of one-on-one and focus group interviews, were the primary means of data collection. Hotta and Ting-Toomey (2013) explained their reasoning behind a qualitative-interview design in their study on international students' friendship patterns, stating interest in the "sense-making process" (p. 551). I sought to gain insight into how political socialization and identity formation are experienced through conversations with rural college students. Cramer (2016) makes an argument for qualitative inquiry, stating:

> But for the task of figuring out why people think what they do I have found no better substitute than listening to them in depth—sitting down with them in groups in the places they normally hang out and hearing how they piece the world together for themselves. (p. 20).

While COVID-19 may have prevented me from sitting down with students in a naturalistic environment, I was still able to carefully listen to their stories and experiences surrounding political conversations before, during, and just after the 2020 presidential election. Through focus groups, I had the opportunity to observe how these students constructed their political identities during interpersonal conversations.

Interviews and focus groups were conducted in the wake of major political events. At the time of the initial interviews, President-Elect Biden had not yet entered the White House and outgoing President Trump was still contesting the election results. The focus groups occurred after President Bident entered office and after the capitol insurrection that occurred January 6, 2021. COVID-19 and social distancing/masking regulations had also been politicized since the beginning of the pandemic. The governor of Oklahoma,

Kevin Stitt, did not issue mask mandates for the state until November 2020—8 months into the pandemic, instead allowing localities to make their own masking regulations. In Norman, Oklahoma, where a masking mandate was in effect in public for much of the pandemic, Unite Norman tried to sue the city for requiring masks in public. This same group petitioned to have the mayor and city council members removed from office for re-allocating a portion of police funds in the yearly budget. The COVID-19 pandemic also impacted holiday celebrations for many families. Some families decided not to host their regular gatherings, such as Thanksgiving and Christmas, though many continued with holiday plans as usual. While conducting interviews, it was necessary for me to stay up to date on these current events. While data collection was taking place, I regularly checked the news. I wanted to make sure that I understood the events that the participants were talking about. I watched the local cable news channel, which is not part of my regular media diet. I also stayed up to date on current events using NPR, BBC, and CNN each day.

**Participants and Recruitment**

Following IRB approval, mass emails were sent to students inviting them to participate in my study. Emails included a description of the study, a prescreen, and information about being compensated for participation in the research. Data collection began once students went home for Thanksgiving break and continued through the winter holiday and early in the Spring Semester, with the last of the interviews being completed in January and final focus groups being completed early February.

To be eligible to participate, students had to be at least 18 years old, full time students at the University of Oklahoma, and view themselves as coming from a rural area of Oklahoma. Rather than listing specific counties or regions in Oklahoma that are rural, and drawing students from those areas, it was more important that the participants view themselves as being 'rural.' Rural-ness was defined in all screening questions and recruitment tools. An online screening tool was used in recruitment to ensure that interviews and focus groups were conducted with students who fit all of the above criteria *and* who were somewhat politically engaged. This screening tool included questions about how long students had lived in their hometowns, descriptions of hometowns, political engagement, voting behavior in the 2020 elections, political leanings, and initial questions about political discussions. The screening tool also included a questionnaire asking about related demographic information and information pertinent to the study, such as political affiliation, hometown, sex, year in school, college major, and age (see Appendix A).

Twenty-two students participated in one-on-one interviews, though one interview was removed because the student did not fall within study criteria and provided answers that did not correspond with their prescreen responses. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 24. The prescreen had participants select age group rather than select their actual age, as such, mean ages are not available. The prescreen insured that all participants were full-time college students, including: eight first years five sophomores, three juniors, and five seniors. Fifteen of the participants were female, six were male. Fifteen of the participants were White, four of the students were Native American/American Indian,

and two self-reported 'Other' as their ethnicity. All participants reported spending most of their childhood and childhood socialization in Oklahoma, and all participants reported Oklahoman hometowns. Participants were able to type in party identification, rather than being provided with a list. Political party identification varied across participants: seven reported Democratic affiliation, six Republican, five Independent, two other affiliation, and one Libertarian. Eleven participants reported Christian affiliation, eight reported atheist or agnostic, and two preferred not to answer.

After participating in one-on-one interviews, participants were invited to participate in focus groups. Twelve of the original participants participated in focus groups; nine of the focus group participants were female, three were male. Two of the focus groups were divided by party affiliation: one focus group consisted of all Republican students, and one consisted of all Democratic students. The third focus group consisted of Independent or other-affiliated students. Among the focus group participants, five students were first years, two sophomores, three juniors, and two seniors. Seven of the participants reported Christian as their religion, four participants reported atheist or agnostic, and one preferred not to answer. Six of the focus group participants were White, four were Native American/American Indian, and two reported 'Other' for their ethnicity.

**One-On-One Interviews**

Interviews focused on (1) participants' personal experiences related to political conversations, (2) the overlap of other identities with political identity in conversations with others, and (3) specific recalling of political conversations that highlighted dialectical tensions. After participants filled out the pre-screen questionnaire, interviews

with eligible participants were scheduled. Consent forms were emailed to students, and oral consent was obtained before beginning online interviews. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, interviews took place online via Zoom. At the time of the focus groups and interviews, most students had been attending classes online since March 2020, the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in the US. Therefore, they were accustomed with Zoom, making the setting feel more naturalistic. Participants were instructed ahead of time to be in a quiet location where they could have their cameras on in order to actively participate in the conversation.

Along with pre-determined questions (see Appendix B), additional probes were used to gain additional insight into various topics. The interviews were semi-structured in nature, with a goal of remaining as conversational as possible while adhering to the interview protocol. Of the 21 interviews that were used for analysis, the first three interviews were relatively short, averaging only 21.8 minutes. After listening to and transcribing the first three interviews, notes were made on where additional probing could take place. The remaining interviews ranged from 33.3 minutes to 65.1 minutes. The total average length for one-on-one interviews was 38 minutes.

**Focus Groups**

The main goal of the focus groups was to work through how dialectical tensions regarding political identity occurred and what outcomes participants (or others in similar situations) experienced from resolution or lack of resolution of these tensions. Participants were recruited from the sample who completed one-on-one interviews to take part in online focus groups also held via Zoom. The use of focus groups was largely

mirrored after Gamson's (1992) study *Talking Politics*, on the formation of political consciousness and mobilization amongst American working-class citizens. Gamson calls for peer-group conversations as a focus group technique, saying that it: "allows us to observe the process of people constructing and negotiating shared meaning, using their natural vocabulary" (p. 17). The questions for the focus groups were designed to encourage discussion amongst members. Groups were divided based on their partisan beliefs, to help ensure that participants felt comfortable sharing amid a highly politicized environment. Though focus group participants were invited to use their own personal experiences as examples, they were asked to discuss in general terms what it meant to be a rural college student, what made for good and bad political conversations, what strategies rural college students could use to navigate conversations in hometowns and on campus, and what they personally learned or how they grew through political conversations in 2020. Each focus group lasted between 42 and 79 minutes. Focus group interview protocol was semi-structured (see Appendix B). The primary researcher was the moderator and worked to keep participants on track.

**Analysis**

The first step of the analysis included listening to the interviews and focus groups audio files, along with transcribing them. Automatic transcriptions were created through MyMedia, a University of Oklahoma website that captions media files. The primary researcher listened to the recording carefully and edited the transcriptions accordingly to ensure accuracy. A total of 520 pages of transcripts (Times New Roman, 12-point font, double spaced) were created, 94 of which came from the focus groups and 426 from the

interviews. Transcriptions were generated shortly after each interview and focus group. This allowed for flexibility and making changes as needed in the interviews. Transcript editing also acted as my first analytical insight into the rural college student experience. Qualitative analysis software was qualitative analysis softwareused to organize and analyze all transcriptions.

Focus groups were initially analyzed using a grounded theory approach, but an additional more flexible approach was added after the initial grounded theory analysis to address an issue raised during member checking. The original goal of this analysis was to develop an all-encompassing theory or theories that are grounded in the experiences of the participants (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The following stages of analysis took place: open coding, focused coding, and theoretical coding (Charmaz, 2006). Open coding included labeling each utterance. Rather than coding line by line, I unitized the data by turn taking or utterance. With theory in mind, I highlighted and coded each section of text. Next, focused coding culled down and categorized the initial open codes. Essentially, I used to open codes to make smaller categories, continually re-coding the text using theoretically grounded codes. Once new focused codes were made, the text was recoded with the new focused codes. This process was repeated throughout the analysis. Charmaz (2006) suggests utilizing memo-writing, or careful notetaking, between open coding and focused coding. These memos should include initial thoughts about what the codes mean, connections to other cases in the study, and connections to literature. Along with answering the research questions, the ultimate goal of the analysis was to develop theoretical codes. These codes are all encompassing descriptions of what

is happening in the data. They can only be developed after continually going back and forth between cases and narrowing down focused codes. All coding was conducted by the primary researcher. The end goal was to develop a final theoretical code(s) that describe(d) the experience of rural college students as they experienced and negotiated meaning through interpersonal dialogue regarding their unique carried identities.

Focus group data was analyzed first, as part of a conference paper. This initial analysis helped me think about the larger dissertation project. Following the grounded theory analysis on the focus groups, I began the same process with the interview transcripts. During this time, I also conducted a member check with two of the interview participants. In doing so, I recognized that, although I had made well-organized lists of themes relating to how rural students traveled between homogenous hometowns and the more diverse college campus, along with how students constructed their political identities, I was missing a key element. My grounded theory analysis did not fully provide an interpretive and subjective view of the ways in which the *culture* influenced political conversations. My grounded theory lists were limiting my ability to step into my participants' shoes. As such, I used the memos and codes created through the multiple levels of coding to analyze cultural elements, specifically the historic transmission of values, beliefs, and traditions. I also reviewed notes taken in ethnography courses on conducting discourse analysis. The discourse of interest, here, was both the remembered discourses that participants described, as well as the discursive action of the interviews and focus groups themselves.

The remaining data analysis process largely followed discourse analysis, as laid out by Johnstone (2018). Discourse analysis (DA) takes a social constructive view in which meaning is co-constructed. Discourse, explains Johnstone (2018), both "reflects and creates human beings' worldviews" (p. 35). The meaning between what is said and what is enacted become intertwined. Becker (1991) calls for the analysis of languaging, the process of meaning making, rather than the simple text itself. "If there is no meaning outside languaging," Becker says, "then languaging is not expressing, representing, or encoding anything, and the need of those structures vanishes" (Becker, 1991, p. 34). Another way to put it: "there is no such thing as Language, only the continual languaging, an activity of human beings in the world" (Becker, 1991, p. 34).

DA is action centered. It describes the "processes whereby the social world is constructed and maintained" (Philips & Hardy, 2002, p. 2). Maciejewska (2019) further explains this, saying: "DA considers language to be an interactional accomplishment that takes place in a given context" (p. 303). As I began analyzing transcripts from interviews and focus groups, along with general notes taken on rural Oklahoma, I focused on the discursive formation of identity and political worldview, especially as identities were created and reinforced during a time of political unrest.

Johnstone (2018) provides a six-layer discourse heuristic:

> *(1) Discourse is shaped by the world and discourse shapes the world.*
>
> *(2) Discourse is shaped by people's purposes, and discourse shapes possible purposes.*

*(3) Discourse is shaped by linguistic structure and shapes linguistic structures.*

*(4) Discourse is shaped by participants and shapes participants.*

*(5) Discourse is shaped by the past and shapes the future.*

*(6) Discourse is shaped by its media and it shapes possibilities of its medias* (p. 9).

This study was especially interested in the social construction of political identity and the ways in which various forms of social identity politics make their way into political conversations. I argue that what it means to be a rural Oklahoman shapes political worldview, and is co-constructed through discursive means; thus a focus on discourse became essential. The process of political socialization is a discursive one in which our political beliefs are shaped by those around us, by how we describe ourselves and others, through political action and discussion with likeminded others, through our pasts and personal backgrounds, and through our media diet. How we act with political others and our political engagement (or *dis*engagement), more broadly, is shaped by the discourse we participate in. I argue that the political discourse we participate in, and the political socialization that follows along with the shaping of political identities, cannot be fully understood without understanding the cultural context in which it occurs. As Weeden (2010) proposes, my work bridges ethnographic inquiry into the worlds of political science and communication studies.

**Validation Strategies**

Several validation strategies were used to ensure the quality of findings. The first validation strategy was allowing overlap between data collection and analysis. Creswell (2007) suggests persistent observation between collection and analysis through overlap between collection and analysis as a validation strategy that can be used to check for disconfirmation as the study is on-going. By creating transcripts as data collection unfolded, continually going back to the literature, and making changes to how I conducted interviews, I was able to continually check my data collection process. This validation strategy requires that the researcher is flexible. Some interview questions were changed based on preliminary analyses.

The second and third validation strategies were peer review and reporting personal bias. Peer review means that other scholars should review methods to hold the primary researcher accountable (Creswell, 2007). Since the data collection was part of a dissertation, constant communication between the researcher and dissertation chair, acted as a form of peer review. The third validation strategy utilized was reporting personal bias and being reflexive, per Tracy's (2013) guidelines for conducting high quality qualitative research. As the researcher conducting an interpretivist study, it was important for me to recognize and report my own biases. Throughout this manuscript, I was reflexive, in that I reflected on how my own experiences may have shaped the analysis. I also spent time in the introduction talking about my own biases.

The fourth validation strategy was to utilize member checking, per Creswell's (2007) recommendation. The first member check occurred during data analysis, after conducting a grounded theory analysis on the focus groups and part of the interviews.

This member check became an essential ‘ah-ha’ moment in the analysis. I realized that the current method of analysis was not fully uncovering the member experience. Following this initial member check, I returned to the data with a more flexible approach. An additional member check was conducted upon completion of the results write-up. The member checks all followed a conversational interview style, in which I verbally walked through each element of the findings. Participants also reflected on their own experience being interviewed or participating in the focus groups.

The final means of validation came from seeking out disconfirming information (Creswell, 2007), or conducting a negative case analysis. The non-white experience became a negative case analysis, specifically, the Native American experience as was presented by the four Native American participants. Two of the Native American participants grew up in rural tribal areas. Their experience within cultural power structures was not the same as the rural White experience. These participants did, however, have the similar experience of moving from a non-diverse hometown to a more diverse university setting. They also shared the experience of changing what information they shared and how they talked in the two different places: rural hometowns and the university setting. Ultimately, when analyzing rural culture, the Native American experience helped me to understand the White experience, in that it reflected what the White experience *was not.*

# CHAPTER IV

# GOD-GIVEN WIDE-OPEN SPACES AND THE GREAT ECHO CHAMBER: RURAL OKLAHOMAN CULTURE

In this study, I was especially interested in how rural culture influenced political conversations among rural Oklahoman college students. Through conducting interviews and focus groups, I was able to better understand the richness of Oklahoman culture and how that culture influenced political conversations—along with how those conversations ultimately informed personal and social identity development, the interlap and layering of various identities during political conversations, and how ruralness might influence other identities more broadly. To examine rural Oklahoman college students' political discussions, it was important to examine the culture. In this chapter, I focus on elements of the interviews that highlight rural Oklahoman culture. The culture of rural Oklahoma became an integral part of how participants developed personal and social identities. Put differently, their conceptualization of self, along with the view of "us" and "them" began their formation in hometowns. Early identity formation and political socialization occurred through hometown conversations, through relating to the beliefs of family members and friends in hometowns, and, for some, by feeling different from other members of their hometown—by feeling as if they did not belong in the ingroup.

Hometown political socialization happened in the cultural context of rural Oklahoma. Participants explained that conversations in the home about news events often sparked political learning. Several of the participants recalled Fox News playing in their

childhood houses as kids, and that this would often spark political conversations among family members. Several of the students described being taught about democratic processes, such as voting, as young children by their parents, especially during election years. One participant remembered conversations in the car about what was playing on news-talk-radio, or about candidate bumper stickers on cars. Others described pretend elections that the schools would hold during election years. What it meant to be rural Oklahoman influenced how these students were taught about the democratic process, about political figures, and about how to interact with others during election years. This chapter focusses in on the cultural context of political socialization.

Along with interviews, my own experiences in rural Oklahoma informed this analysis. During my time as a graduate student at the University of Oklahoma, I have been very fortunate to spend quite a bit of time in rural Oklahoma. I board a horse and take horseback riding lessons on the outskirts of Norman, Oklahoma. The facility is only about 15-20 minutes away from the university, but the shift from college town to rural America is stark. As I drive out to the horse barn, houses become more and more spread out and cow fields dot the red-dirt terrain. If I examine the houses on my drive, I see a mixture of trailer-homes with yards full of rusted out cars and chicken coops, along with large spacious homes with perfectly manicured yards and well-cared for horses in large well-maintained fields. Red rusted barbed wire lines the roads, keeping livestock in their place. My car becomes covered in red dust. As I exit the small city of Norman, life seems to slow down in the wide-open spaces. he slowed down life, the connection with the land,

and the feeling of freedom that comes from the open space resonated with many of my participants.

As I describe rural Oklahoman culture, I wanted to avoid telling a single story of what it means to be rural, of brushing the land with a broad brush, labeling all rural folks one way. Simply describing this state as a rural "red" state does not do its people justice and does not provide an explanation for *how* the state became a red (conservative) state. Hearkening back to Lay (2012), I also do not want to describe ruralness in a sloppy way: "It does not matter if the painting depicts rural people as patriotic, God-fearing, apple-pie baking, hospitable, hardworking 'real' Americans or whether it depicts them as homophobic, racist, uneducated, unsophisticated, voting-against-their-own-interests, coverall-wearing hicks" (p. 141). If my painting is a single story, it does not do my participants justice. It is easy to label problems related to ruralness. I recorded stories of experiencing racism and homophobia during conversations with rural family members. I listened to participants talk about not having the resources, such as Internet, needed to succeed in school, and how that made them feel inferior to their urban counterparts. I listened to other participants describe what it was like to come from generational wealth related to oil money and have lots of land with big houses. Some of my participants talked about growing up in tight knit families on huge cattle farms. Others talked about coming from tight knit but divided families who lived in camper trailers, and who did not even have their own bed.. As I asked my participants to tell me about how they formed their political beliefs, and about political discussions held in hometowns, I recorded a variety of accounts. I recorded accounts of being taught empathy towards other humans

through learning about animal husbandry in 4-H and Future Farmers of America. I recorded accounts of having the space to 'do what you want' so long as it does not hurt your neighbor— a neighbor who might be over 10 miles away. I also recorded accounts of feeling the need to constantly defend oneself for being different from other rural community members. Though participants had a variety of experiences in their early childhood and adolescence, these experiences were informed by the surrounding rural culture.

Throughout the rest of this chapter, I consider Geertz's (1973) definition of culture to examine rural Oklahoman culture as explained to me by participants through interviews and focus groups. Culture is the "historically transmitted pattern of meaning embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic form by means of which men communicate, perpetuate and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life" (Geertz, 1973, p. 89). Before beginning this study, I had a somewhat narrow view of what rural Oklahoma was. I only knew what I had seen—red dirt roads, cow fields, horse farms, casinos scattered here and there, in a seemingly random dotting across the landscape. Everyone from the rural part of the state that I interacted with before the beginning of this study were cross-wearing Christians, predominantly conservative, and rugged down to earth people. Through this study, I came to learn that the land itself, and the people that inhabited it, were more diverse than that. One participant described coming from the Northwestern part of the state, which he described as "cowboy culture." Others described growing up in lush green forests and on the lakes of Eastern Oklahoma, describing themselves as "hillbillies." I had several

participants who grew up on Native American tribal lands in various parts of the state. My participants ranged from growing up very rich to growing up very poor. While the students of rural Oklahoma had diverse childhood experiences, several cultural themes resonated across all accounts: rural Protestantism as the basis for social conservativism, the juxtaposition of wide-open spaces and living in an echo-chamber of beliefs, the role of agriculture and hard work for the cultivation of rugged individualism, and the linking of Whiteness with rural Oklahoman culture.

**Rural Protestantism and Social Conservativism**

Religion came up in every single interview and focus group, even for participants who were not religious or were against organized religion altogether. I describe the description of religion being tied to social conservativism as "rural Protestantism," which encompasses the traditions, beliefs, and values related to the religious traditions that inform these communities of beliefs. Churches were described as cornerstones in communities, and as places where political conversations took place. Religion was also discussed as being closely tied to conservativism. One interview participant highlights this well in the following interview excerpt:

> INTERVIEWER: How would you describe hometown politics?
>
> PARTICIPANT: We have like I mean, there's like at least 12 churches in this town. It's like and there's not very many people to go to them. So, it's just to say that there's just a ton of like--definitely that's how the view [gets formed] …

INTERVIEWER: So, you said there are like 12 churches in your town. As we're kind of talking about politics… how do you think that's related?

PARTICIPANT: It definitely is. I feel like it has a lot to do with it, just because…I feel like people are very conservative and it's easy to just be like, 'well, this goes with the Bible.' Which I mean, personally I agree with a lot of those things, but I feel like it's I don't know […] nobody's willing to listen to anything really once they get like …

INTERVIEWER: It's this way or that way, right?

PARTICIPANT: But a lot of times it's not even Biblical. What they say is just, well, he's, the President, said it, whatever, and he talks about God also. So, it must be equal.

Religion in these towns trumps all else when it comes to politics. Religion became a means of validation for community members. Another participant described the sheer number of Baptist churches in their town, saying:

PARTICIPANT: Oh, for sure. Yeah. It's Baptist country out there. There's it's there's like 16 Baptist churches in {my hometown}. It's really interesting and there's no Catholic churches. The yeah, definitely Baptist-country out there!

Here, the participant describes the dominant denomination by countering it with what it is not: Catholic. In this case, the hometown is "Baptist-country." In the next excerpt, a participant reflected on her childhood, living in poverty and being influenced by parents and religion. She described her separation from the surrounding religious values, and, in turn, from the related conservative values.

PARTICIPANT: Yeah. So that's where I grew up. And then actually, prior to that, I think I was eight and [we] basically lived in a shack for a little while. We had a one bedroom, one bathroom. And it was four family members. Yeah. So I usually slept on the couch or the like, recliner chair. And then like when I was like middle school, early high school, middle school. I was very conservative {back then}. I remember getting all my impressions from talking with my parents and everything. And then I got into high school. I became an atheist. I was very religious prior to that, so I became an atheist and began questioning all of those conservative beliefs. Yeah, and then I started to just like hate religion and everything because of how people were treating each other. And then once I got to college, I sort of became more open-minded on everything. And so, I don't hate religion anymore. And now I am definitely a socialist and progressive.

This participant had a major shift in identity, which will be discussed in a later chapter. Religion, however, was a key part of how she saw herself before this shift in values. Largely, as she explained, because that was what everyone else around her believed, they reflected the values and traditions of her community and family. While she no longer related to those values, she went on to talk about how central those values were to her hometown.

The values surrounding what it means to be Protestant, Christian, Republican, can feel like 'lines drawn in sand.' They describe who "we" are and are not. These groups become mutually exclusive within these communities. If you are not a member of one of

the groups, it becomes difficult to be a member of the other groups. One participant put it this way:

> PARTICIPANT: I mean, I feel like, just like, I feel like it's hard because I can say like… I guess how I can't say like, being Christian, you know, and so {because of} that I can't love like gay people, you know? I'm saying… I feel like there's such like a line or something. And that it splits up the like political views. Like it's like it always seems like, like Republicans don't like people that are gay. They don't think that it's real, you know? And then like Democrats are like, 'Yeah, go for it!', you know? And then it's just like different views.

Churches are central elements of what makes these towns tick. To be conservative and rural, for many of the participants, was synonymous with being a Protestant Christian. Protestantism has long been linked to the protestant work ethic in America as part of the capitalistic spirit (Hudson & Coukos, 2005). For these participants, it also meant holding values related to the family. Families are meant to be traditional nuclear families, including one man and woman, married, with children. Gender roles in these areas are tightly linked with religion, and the breaking of those gender roles is taboo. Likewise, being a member of the LGBTQ+ community goes against the protestant values in this region, as was noted by most participants. In some cases, conversations about having a gay or lesbian friend or family member acted as a catalyst for knowing that the hometown was conservative. For others, the LGBTQ+ community was used to describe the differences between the Democratic and Republican parties.

In the following interview excerpt, the participant, who viewed himself as a Republican, discussed the differences between Republicans and Democrats using LGBTQ+ rights as the defining difference between “us” and “them.”

PARTICIPANT: I think that especially around here, it's like Republican means with God.

INTERVIEWER: So that’s where you see it being linked, right?

PARTICIPANT: Yeah….

INTERVIEWER: How would you define Democrats then?

PARTICIPANT: Well, haha {chuckles heartily} for me, I mean, I'm not saying I see it this way, but I'm just saying the way that I grew up, it was like if you told someone you were a Democrat, they look at you weird.

INTERVIEWER: It almost becomes like a bad word, right?

PARTICIPANT: Yeah, exactly.

INTERVIEWER: So, what are some values that you might put as Democrats having?

PARTICIPANT: I, I definitely see where like it's more about, I guess, loving people just as they are, you know, and it's not like they had to fit into a mold or whatever, you know. And I, I like, you know, like just among like LGBT communities, like I get that people really like feel that way about themselves, you know. And I guess I was just like lucky enough or whatever that like just be how I am, and that also fit into the right mold, you know? So, I feel like the Democratic side is much more open to things, open-minded, and just more focus on just like

> loving people, like treating people like equally like and looking at them different. Um, but I believe they're still like for me personally, I don't like to treat anybody like, you know, like I just like I just like to love people as they are. But there's, there's a lot of extremes I feel like in the Democratic Party that I just don't agree with, so I guess I'm still Republican.

This excerpt shows that identifying with the Republican party was the norm in this participant's hometown, and that to be open to different values means to be open to the LGBTQ+ community—which, as this student describes, is not in line with other Republican values. In another excerpt, a participant described how they viewed their hometown as not being very "open" to outside ideas based on their conversations about the LGBTQ+ community:

> PARTICIPANT: I think socially they're very conservative, just kinda very more traditional. Not as big for like any type of like—intersex or same-sex marriage. Kinda just focused on things like that. Like those are kind of more like the conversations that I would hear from people. They were just maybe not as open-minded to the reformative social dynamics.

Several participants explained that they knew their town was more conservative based on how community members talked about those who belonged to the LGBTQ+ community. Based on what were oftentimes childhood conversations, it was made clear by family members and community members that being "gay" was against community norms.

> PARTICIPANT: Yeah. So, all the drama kinda goes around with everyone so everyone knows about it. So, everyone knew that he {our friend} was gay and

> everything. That kind of comes up a lot. I remember when the first time he my brother had invited his friend over to our house. We were living very close to my mom's brother. So, my uncle, we were living in akin houses, really close together, and he had come over with his friend. And all of a sudden…questions arise. Like, 'So, how do you feel about your friend,' or like, 'Do you agree with the way he's thinking?' My brother was probably like 12 at the time and he was like, 'What do you mean?' And that obviously the parents knew that he was gay and my brother did too. But like, it didn't really go through his mind that *that's* wrong. And I remember a conversation that happened where my mom was like, 'I just want you to know that we don't agree with what he's doing with his life, but we still love him and we're not going to like, be mean to him or anything.' And my brother was like, 'Well, why are we talking about this? He's my friend that I don't even think about him being gay.' That was just something I remember standing out to me.

In this excerpt, the participant recalled conversations had with his brother and other family members regarding a friend who was gay. The participant described himself more as a witness to the conversation, rather than participating in the conversation himself. As in other communities, the sorting of ingroup membership and outgroup membership is an element of childhood enculturation that often begins happening at a young age, often through conversations. Another participant described a conversation that she had with her mom regarding a high school friend. As an older adolescent, the example below shows

how the participant grappled with her own beliefs as they related to the larger community norms.

> PARTICIPANT: I was a senior, maybe even a junior {in high school}…. And my best friend at the time was not openly coming out as gay. And she was like, really in the closet, but not to me. Like, I knew that she was gay and she was afraid to tell my mom because she didn't know if like she would let her come over still. And so, I had to have that conversation with my mom. I was like, because she was asking me… 'So does Tyler have any, like, boyfriends or whatever?' And I was like: 'Okay. She doesn't have any boyfriends. She likes girls.' And my mom was like, you know, shocked obviously. And so, after that, like I just basically explain like, this doesn't have any effect on you, or even me. Like, I'm still going to be straight… This is someone else—her beliefs not mine. And I love who I love, and she knows who she loves.

I went on during the interview with this participant to discuss how this conversation shaped her views as she went to college. The participant and her friend both had a shared understanding that the 'other' sexuality was not in harmony with community norms and may not be accepted in the participant's household. When conducting these interviews, I was initially surprised by how many times LGBTQ+ communities came up in the conversation. As I reflected on my own hometown experience, particularly my adolescent years, I realized that this experience reflected what I had witnessed in my own hometown, too, where public school teachers would talk in class about "loving the person not the sin." This experience, I realized, was certainly transferable to other rural parts of

the country in which rural Protestantism prevails. The participants described conversations about LGBTQ+ members as being a bellwether for ingroup belonging and for what it means to be rural Protestant. While not all participants agreed with this measure of belonging, those who brought it up recognized it as being a key identifier, as being non-conservative and against group norms.

Part of what I term rural Protestantism is the distrust of outside views, including some scientific claims. In many instances, this made it quite difficult for college students to talk with their parents about issues related to COVID-19. On the more extreme end of the spectrum, several students described stories from their childhood where creationism was taught over learning about fossils or evolution, along with recalling conversations about climate change. For example, in the excerpt below, one participant discussed a conversation she had about climate change with her dad, where climate change is related to the enemy that was President Obama…

> PARTICIPANT: I honestly, I just remember like, it's, I mean, they would just say like 'Obama really wants socialism,' or like things like that. Or they'd be like 'basically all the Democrats want socialism.' And I've only had, I think I remember besides that was the idea that climate change isn't real. Cuz I only… because…
>
> INTERVIEWER: Was that more with your family that you heard it from, or more around in the community?
>
> PARTICIPANT: It was more from my family growing up. I mean…I was only like 12 then. So,{there weren't} like a lot of conversation about it between my

> friends. But it was definitely from my family because I remember…one day at school, we were talking about climate change or something that we watched on the news. And then I made a comment about it to my stepdad, and he was like, 'That's not even real like why are you learning about that at school?!' And I remember him being very mad about it.

Similarly, another participant recalled talking about creationism during class in high school:

> PARTICIPANT: In biology class, our teacher, he was like God's green earth than he was more creationary than like evolution.
>
> INTERVIEWER: So, did they… teach a creationist view?
>
> PARTICIPANT: Well, I, I'ma tell you. I'm a wildcard when it comes to like my views and opinions. Like I really don't know where I found these things. Because I'm like, well, what if both happened? Like He created the earth, but then evolution also happened from then on. And that's just like where my views kind of differ from my hometown.

Like conservativism, rural Protestantism is discussed as being central to the rural Oklahoman culture. Through religion, values are laid out in clear black and white categories. The Bible, or interpretations of it, dictates to members what is right and what is wrong, along with who belongs as ingroup members and who does not belong. Rather than being a political identity, rural Protestantism can be seen through the lens of identity politics, where elements of various social identities shape political views, as will be discussed in the discussion chapter. Views of science in relation to religion come up in

later conversations held by participants as college students grappling with a global pandemic. In the next chapter, I discuss the feeling of being an outsider in one's own community because participants knew that family members would view information coming out about masking and vaccines as false. Much of this knowledge, about how family members would react to conversations about scientific evidence, came from previous enculturation into the values of rural Protestantism.

Importantly, my conceptualization of rural Protestantism may not be generalizable to all parts of rural America, though the concept may be transferable to other regions. For example, I come from rural Appalachia. As a Catholic growing up in the region, I was regularly put in situations where it was made clear that I was an outsider. Similar to rural Oklahoma, however, these elements of values and beliefs are not the only cultural elements that make the region distinct. It is however, as discussed by the participants in this study, a central element of the rural worldview and key to how many in this region and other parts of rural America view politics.

**Wide-Open Spaces and the Great Echo Chamber**

Space played a noteworthy role in how participants described forming beliefs about freedom, patriotism, and party identification. On one side of the equation, participants described feeling like the amount of space allowed for the freedom to do what you want, when you want. This was often discussed in relation to hometown conversations about gun rights. On the other side of the equation, was the description of how insular and isolating hometown life was. Participants described everyone as having the same view, and as people just repeating what others in the community had said. They

described their hometowns as echo chambers. These concepts seem to act in juxtaposition: being spread out enough to develop independent beliefs, but, at the same time, insular, so that everyone has the same beliefs.

Having space, for some, meant "not having a code to follow." Being in wide-open spaces meant making your own rules. When talking about his childhood, one participant elaborated, saying:

> PARTICIPANT: Mmmm, not like a lot, I would say in a way, yes. Just because I grew up with my shotguns in the backwoods shootin' skeet and stuff like that. I mean, I like my shotguns. I'd like to keep those. And really the freedom of like, there isn't a code that I have to follow. You can do what you want out there.
>
> INTERVIEWER: That makes sense... there aren't as many people out there to bother you, so like, if you want your guns, you can have your guns?
>
> PARTICIPANT: Yea. Like… more freedom!

Wide-open spaces allowed for a certain "freedom" that participants experienced. It is not the same kind of freedom as constitutional freedoms, though it is often referred to as being synonymous. It is more of an anarchic freedom, the sense of answering to no one because no one else is around to answer to. When describing his hometown, another participant elaborated on the freedom that came with wide-open spaces:

> PARTICIPANT: It's like an agriculture base, like everyone goes hunting. They want their guns. They don't want their rights infringed on, like basically like they like minimal taxes-- like they don't accept— like they're not for like I don't, I don't want to say human rights as a whole, but like they don't like change.

*"They don't want their rights infringed on."* In this space, this wide-open space, there are certain rights or freedoms that are felt and experienced. Guns came up again and again in conversation with participants— sometimes they came up when we were talking about what it was like growing up in rural Oklahoma, while other times they came up while talking through how the participants knew that their hometown was conservative. While guns were a fact of life for many rural students, there were differences in how gun control was handled in families. For example, one participant detailed a conversation that she had at a friend's house:

> PARTICIPANT: So, I was at a friend's house, and I was going to reach for a cereal box on top of their fridge. And she was just, 'Oh, be careful, you know, just letting you know, there's a loaded handgun up there.' And so, I was like, 'Oh, OK. That's interesting.' Then her mom kind of talked about it more and she said just like, 'Yeah, we have about maybe ten to 15 guns in the house.' And that was kind of like an eye opener to me because my family we have maybe two just like in a safe in the closet, not just to have a kind of like on top of the fridge. It was interesting and she just kind of describe about how it's like, yeah, it's for safety. Just peace of mind. We teach our kids how to use and aim and whatnot. Her family had had more training with guns than mine for obvious reasons. You know, having a gun just right on top the fridge. Yeah. And the household needs to know about it.

Rights need protecting and the family unit needs protecting. The gun may act as a symbol for safeguarding those rights, but it also carries very real responsibilities. The experience

of guns in the household for protection and learning how to safely handle guns at a very young age resonated with my own experiences. In elementary school, I was enrolled in 'Target Smart,' a gun safety course for children, and was part of a shooting club that was affiliated with the after-school program at my public elementary school. Participants in rural Oklahoma described guns as part of everyday life, and were comfortable with firearms. They explained that being comfortable with firearms was important so that they could protect themselves and others. With wide-open spaces comes a legitimate problem: if something happens out in the middle of nowhere, you are the only one out there to protect yourself. It simply might take the police too long to come out. Obviously, this is not always the case. There is a very real symbolism in having a gun for protection and for children to know and learn about firearms. It is passed down from generation to generation, a belief that out here—in the wide-open space—you have to take care of yourself and your kin. If you do not protect your freedoms, or have a symbolic means of standing up for those freedoms, there is the feeling that those freedoms will be taken away. This idea is not only true for rural Oklahoma, but, based on my own experiences, it resonates with other parts of rural America.

The feeling of vastness, of wide-open spaces, is something that is starkly evident in Oklahoma. In my hometown in East Tennessee, you feel insulated by the mountains. In Oklahoma, where the prairies meet the plains, you can truly see how much land and space surrounds you. I have described it as having the opposite feeling from claustrophobia. It is easy to understand why one might feel alone and feel the need to be able to protect oneself and those who matter, most importantly, the family unit.

On the opposite end of the spectrum is how small the space feels in relation to one's community. Many of the hometowns described to me were depicted as insular, acting like an echo chamber for ideas. At the same time as describing the freedoms inherent to wide-open spaces, participants described a place where one knew everyone, where everyone knew one's name, and where communities were tight knit. For example, one participant explained:

> PARTICIPANT: I'll say, having that small-town feel gave more of a community feel, more of a belonging. Everyone was always checking in on each other. We always had like the Fourth of July neighborhood get-togethers and it was a lot of different, just close interactions with each other. We were always in each other's business.

Another participant talked about knowing everyone, saying:

> PARTICIPANT: It was nice. In a small town, you got to know people easier. Lots of people knew you. So, like even if I went to… church, a lot of the older people would know me, and they'd be good resources to reach out to. And then at school, as you got to know your teachers, they'd be good research resources to reach out to later in careers-- which I did a lot as I was getting ready for college or like recommendation letters and stuff like that. So, it was nice, the small town was I think was more of my fit for me. So, I have a lot more close friends like that. I think it benefitted me.

In small towns, knowing everyone had benefits, as the participant above described. While feeling reliant on themselves, people are also reliant on each other. There is a real sense

of community in these areas. However, family acts as the most important social unit, and what family one belongs to matters. One participant elaborated, saying:

> PARTICIPANT: Everybody knew each other. It wasn't as good because it was a lot of, like if you didn't already have a popular last name or whatever and the town, then you were like nothing, you know?
>
> INTERVIEWER: So, families really matter in those areas?
>
> PARTICIPANT: Everybody's related. And yeah…It's like it's like one family runs half the town. The other runs the other half, and then everyone else just falls somewhere in-between—ha (chuckles).

In small hometowns, division can happen across family lines. The family is the unit that needs protecting, as discussed with rural Protestantism. With protecting comes the idea of nurturing and caring for each other—if you are a member of the right clan that is. The great echo chamber that emerges in hometowns is closely linked with everyone knowing each other. The means for socialization, in this case political socialization, come from fewer people and organizations than what would be experienced in more urban environments. One participant puts it this way:

> PARTICIPANT: I don't think my town itself very much shaped my political beliefs. More so the people that I was around. And I think that people in smaller towns and rural areas just tend to be a little bit more conservative. I think had I been around people that were more liberal, I would have been more liberal, if that makes sense? The people around me were conservative, so I'm conservative.

Another student expands, saying:

> PARTICIPANT: It’s nice to have people who agree with you. It definitely reinforces your views. Which I guess that's a whole interesting thing about rural people. Like if you're around like-minded people, you just have an echo chamber of what you believe in and that's going to keep happening. And maybe it's a little bit of a vicious cycle there. You might get stuck in a certain…sort of systems. But I talk about my own political stances more there, because like, I dunno, everyone agrees with me.

If one falls in line with the rest of the community, politically, there is a sense of safety in expressing beliefs. Those beliefs are reinforced and repeated across the community through a shared system of beliefs. Put differently, a participant explained:

> PARTICIPANT: I would agree with that statement because like, where I'm from, that's basically how everyone was and it was just like you didn’t really question that… you just followed the group, kinda…fall in line.

The echo chamber of political ideology is taught and reinforced through various means of enculturation. Families, for example, pass ideas down. Political ideology becomes historically transmitted from parent to child over generations. One participant explained:

> PARTICIPANT: Like in my hometown it is super common to like be molded into your parent's views. And I feel like my parents were the same way. And I saw that, like, because basically in my hometown it was like, you know, their students, their family like, you know how they work and stuff. And it was all like super close knit and tight. And I found that all of the students, pretty much, like verbatim said what their parent’s views were.

The echo-chamber is also reinforced in various organizations and through religion. One participant described how politics come up at his church, saying:

> PARTICIPANT: Like sometimes my pastor talks about it. Like he talks about how like he doesn't endorse anybody that he says like, kills babies, and he talks about how he doesn't want people to, agree with the new things that are coming out and looked for with the Democratic party. Yeah, transgender stuff, or like stuff like that. He believes that that's like counterintuitive to Christian values.

Religious values, social values, and political values mold into one, which is shot through the great echo chamber through the voices of those who hold power or have a voice in the community. Ultimately, many participants described feeling they needed to "fall in line." For one participant, this feeling came up when explaining how she voted.

> PARTICIPANT: Yeah. Yeah. I'm tryin' to think honestly, if people {from my hometown} just asked me like, why I voted, how I voted, --like, 'who did you vote for?' The expected response was a Republican. And so, when I said Republican, everyone just said, 'okay,' because it was expected. But then if I voted Democratic? Everyone would have been like, 'Why did you do that?' But yeah, so it was honestly, I didn't really get feedback from it because everyone was just like, 'Oh yeah, that's expected'—like, kinda, 'Good job.'
>
> INTERVIEWER: Ok. So, the conversations were very short conversations?
>
> PARTICIPANT: Like I said, because I wasn't against the status quo. So, I would just kinda, more like soaked it in—what others were saying. But then it's like:

> ‘Did you vote for this person? Yes? Okay, then you’re cool.’ It wasn't like they generally questioned—they just agreed most of the time.

Here, there is a recognition that because this participant ‘fell in line,’ she received social approval. Conversations were shorter because she followed the social norm. Because she repeated what those around her believed, existing in the great echo chamber, she also received the social rewards of fitting in, which will be discussed more in the next chapter.

The sense of wide-open spaces and the great echo chamber at first glance appear to be in conflict. The great sense of space and the need to protect oneself and one’s freedoms juxtaposes the close-knit communities and echo chamber of beliefs that the participants describe. In many ways, however, the sense of space creates the need for the echo chamber. While community members are spread far apart, there is safety in commonality. The sense of community acts as an additional form of protection, in this case, the protection of values and beliefs.

**Rugged Individualism: Hard Work and Hard Set in Beliefs**

Closely related to the idea of wide-open spaces was the connection to the land and the work ethic that comes with agriculture. This work ethic has also been linked to religion—if you work hard enough, you will be blessed. Land itself was described as both something that was owned by people who had the right to do whatever they wanted with it, and as something that marked individuals as being rural and was central to the rural identity. One participant described this as “rugged individualism,” explaining that there was a toughness to the people that came from hard work and open spaces, where people fought to do what they wanted. The participant’s link to rugged individualism reflected a

history of calling on “rugged individualism” going back to President Hoover in the late 1920s and still used by conservative political figures as a term of endurance.

There was also a sense that the passing down of values and beliefs came from being hard workers. During a focus group, one participant referred to the older generation as being “set in their ways” because of all the hard work they had done.

> PARTICIPANT: I would say like talking to my grandparents or other people around {my hometown}. A lot of them are coal miners and farmers. So… they don't really want to listen to somebody else, {or have others} tell them what to think or what to do. Because a lot of them have built their own businesses or they have worked for so long for something and they don't want to give that up. If that makes any sense. So, they're set in their ways.

Another participant echoed this statement and explained how he had trouble talking with hometown members in this mindset. He described it as a sense of frustration, as follows:

> PARTICIPANT: I wouldn't say it's pity. I'd say it's more along the lines of not even really frustration because you just get more angry at it because maybe you're trying to help in a certain way, but they've only known one way to do things. And they don't want to change that because they know that it works. And I'll say for farmers, especially like chicken farmers, they don't have the money… they just don't have the resources to try new things. So, I think that's also where it may come from. They're afraid of change because they have what they have already.

Being set in ways becomes not just working hard for those beliefs, but also a means for protecting what one has. Again, there is a sense of the need for protection to hold on to what is there. The participant above went on to explain how this mindset was encultured:

> PARTICIPANT: Old folks, but also in those areas, a lot of those farms are passed down to younger generations. And this cycle kind of continues because that's the only job that, say my cousin would have. That's the only job that he'll have for the rest of his life because he's been working on the farm forever.

Other participants agreed that staying in hometowns meant maintaining hometown beliefs and traditions, and that leaving meant that one could change their beliefs. The ones who felt they had changed carried a sense of frustration with not being able to discursively reach family members. Overall, though, they carried an understanding and respect for where those beliefs came from, and how those beliefs were held tight in hometowns. Working hard for physical structures—basic income, keeping a farm running, and a roof over the family's head, seems to translate to working hard to maintain firmly crystalized political beliefs, along with passing down those beliefs.

**Rural Whiteness**

To truly be a member of the ingroup in rural Oklahoma is not only about having the right religion, the right last name, the right political beliefs, and the right working class hard-working attitude; it is also about having the 'right' race. Time and time again, participants spoke about the lack of ethnic and racial diversity in their hometowns, and how members who were not White were treated poorly. In several cases, the participants themselves were the ones being treated in overtly racist ways. In other instances,

participants described remembered conversations about non-White races or how people of Latinx/Hispanic ethnicity were treated poorly. Lack of diversity, and the White view, were connected with conservatism. One participant explained:

> PARTICIPANT: My entire high school was completely White. Like all of us… there is nothing else. So, I also feel like in my town, especially like everyone was extremely like right on the {political} spectrum. Like there was no like looking over to the other side. It was like Democrats were these evil people that I didn't know what they were doing. And they were just like basically idiots as what the people in my hometown viewed them as.

While highlighting the hometown echo chamber and holding of conservative beliefs, Whiteness and lack of diversity is also connected with conservativism. This participant described her hometown high school as all looking and thinking the same. When describing how their hometown was different from the University of Oklahoma, one of the main differences students pointed out was the lack of diversity in hometowns, and how much more diverse college life was. For example, one participant stated:

> PARTICIPANT: Yeah. I was mentioning that in my high school there was not a lot of diversity. There wasn't a lot of other perspectives other than rural White southerners. And then I got to college, especially, at the University of Oklahoma, there was a lot more diversity. And even though OU's still a very White school, there was way more diversity than when I use used to.

In many instances, participants describe Whiteness as being the norm, as being what signified someone was the ingroup member. The only race outside of Whiteness that was

mentioned as existing in hometowns was “Mexican” or Hispanic. To not be White was to be a member of the outgroup. One participant described her hometown racial demographics, saying:

> PARTICIPANT: I would say it's very conservative. I know in high school we had like… It was the majority like White student population. I had a friend. I have like two friends and they were Mexican. I think we had like, let's say like six Mexican people out of the whole school for pre-K through 12th grade. …and five of them were siblings. So, you can probably guess about how well that went.

Another participant recalled how a friend was treated just after Trump was first elected in 2016:

> PARTICIPANT: So, I was like, yeah, I don't know about this. And I just remember like my family, like celebrating when Trump won the presidency. And I was like bawling in my room. Because the next day, one of my Mexican friends. They got bullied on the bus and {people were} like, ‘Why don't you go back to Mexico?’

Several of the participants who no longer aligned with hometown beliefs describe instances like the above example, where overt racism made them re-evaluate their own beliefs. While most participants described witnessing racism, one participant described what it was like to be on the receiving end of it in rural White America.

> PARTICIPANT: So, a little bit about my background is, I'm a Mexican. So, we get…so my dad is from Mexico, but my parents are separated. So, we were living with my mom and she's American. So, a lot of people like knew that we were

> different because we have darker skin and we talk differently. And so, we got teased a lot in school because we were different than everyone… there's really no spine (backbone). As a child I didn't even realize how bad it was. I realized a few years ago, I was like, 'Wow, that was really wrong…' and it didn't bother me because I didn't understand what was going on… We were teased a lot. And one thing that happened, my brother was probably like a junior in high school and I {was} two years younger than him. So, I was probably like in middle school or a freshman in high school. And I remember like they have this project going on about like where you're from and what your dreams are. And my brother was like, 'Oh, like my family is from Mexico, and my dreams are to make them proud and everything.' And he got a lot of teasing for that. People said, like, 'Oh, when do you get your Green Card?' Like, 'When you come to America or even a citizen and do you speak English?' And that was by a lot of people that we thought were our friends. And so, when my brother told me, it was like, ha funny, and we kinda played into it, but I remember talking to my brother like a year ago and we both were like, some of the things that happened back there… I'm so surprised that we didn't understand it back then. What they were saying was really mean.

Clear ingroup and outgroup lines have been drawn on the basis of race in rural Oklahoma, along with other rural parts of the country. Some of these divisions might link back to the rugged individualism and protectionist view previously discussed in this chapter. It may also be linked to being historically impoverished and fighting to get on land—as the 'sooners.' Visually, Whiteness becomes an ingroup signifier. To be non-

White is seen as a threat, and as the participant above describes, to be non-White, even nowadays, is pointed out by others, even children.

Similar to religion and sexuality, race becomes intwined with political beliefs. For several participants, the first time that they talked about politics as children was regarding race. For example, one participant recalled hearing comments like:

> PARTICIPANT: Back then, it was the same old argument, Obama's from Africa and he shouldn't be our president and, just, you know, that that kind of conspiracy theory kind of stuff like that was everywhere.

If Whiteness is the symbol of belonging to the ingroup, then having a leader who is non-White becomes a threat. Several participants recalled President Obama being referred to as the Anti-Christ. They explained that these conversations occurred when they were very young, but that they never forgot how their family members and school friends talked about President Obama. He was a president that could not represent rural Whiteness.

***Rural Native America***

Of my participants, four self-identified as Native American. Their experiences were distinctly different from rural White participants' experiences. The participants who were Native American also discussed the divide between wide-open spaces and insular echo chambers of hometown life. Two of the participants lived on tribal lands and described their hometowns as lacking diversity and being racially homogeneous, because they only included tribal members. One participant described there being a clear division between White and Native experiences in their hometown, saying:

PARTICIPANT: Well, my experience is a little different because I went to an all Native American boarding school and I did live on, I do, I do still live on a reservation. So, things were really separated by White vs. Native things. And even where, in my particular area, even if you look White, like me… But for instance, like my father is like brown skin. And so, diversity was never, I guess, never seen as an issue…it was just Natives. Now we don't have a lot of people who are African American, very few Hispanics. And a lot of times if they were either one of those races, they were mixed with Natives. So, they didn't really claim that race.

Another participant described the divide in their region between White rural America and Native rural America as follows:

PARTICIPANT: There's an area in not too far from where I live, it's called XX, Oklahoma. And it's very, very rural, very disconnected, but not in the same way that my cowboy side of the family is. It's where they have Natives who live out there, but they have a blood purity status. So, it's full only. And a lot of them don't have smart phones either. A lot of them refused to rely on the XX Native American Nation for anything because they believe the XX Nation is too Whitewash(ed) now…Or in their words, assimilated. We have our own like police force out here called the XX Nation Marshals and they have higher jurisdiction than like regular city police. And if the Marshals go out to respond to a call or something out there, they are met with a lot of hostility. I had to go out there one time for a family get together because I have some cousins who live out there.

> And I definitely feel alienated since I'm so White looking, they don't even consider me one of their own kind. Even though I was raised in the culture and I went to all XX speaking school. I went to an all-native school. I've participated in tribal elections. I'm just not viewed as one of them. And a lot of times even my own father who is full blood XX is not considered one of them either. Just because of his skin appearance. So, you could be full blood, but you have to keep up to look as well.

While appearance still denotes ingroup and outgroup belonging among some Native Americans living in rural Oklahoma, the experience is not the same as the White rural Americans', largely due to historical power inequities. In the space that this dissertation allows, it is hard to fairly compare the two. Furthermore, I simply do not have enough Native American participants to do so. From what this data can speak to, along with the historical knowledge of this region, there is a distinct cultural difference between Native rural America and White rural America that has long been in existence due to atrocities such as genocide, ethnic removal and relocation, and the continual taking of land by White settlers (Landry, 2017). Much of the rural experience described above is that of a White rural America and cannot, and does not, apply to the cultures of Native people.

A part of the Whiteness described in this chapter that is distinct to rural Oklahoma is its relation to Native peoples. After Native American tribes were marched across the country, many of their members dying along the way in what is considered genocide, many were relocated to Oklahoma. That wide-open space was then taken away and given to White settlers in the 1889 Land Rush, and incidents that have continued thanks to

growing cities and the rush for oil (Landry, 2017). The mascot of the University of Oklahoma, "The Sooners" stands in a crimson celebration of the White history. The feeling of deserving land because we "worked hard" and are "blessed" is not the historical experience of rural Native Americans, but rather, it was the experience of rural White Oklahomans. The beliefs and values related to the land grab have been historically transmitted to White populations in Oklahoma, not to Native Americans or other ethnic groups. As discussed above, Whiteness, and rural Whiteness in particular, stands in relation to other ethnicities. It only exists because of its relation to other ethnicities. While other parts of the rural South historically defined themselves as White on the basis of slavery, a big part of the historical transmission of White culture in Oklahoma came from the power differences between White and Native cultures. Other racial and ethnic inequities certainly formed Whiteness in this region. For example, Deep South hostilities towards African Americans were carried over by the land-run, and we cannot forget the Tulsa Race Massacre, or the sun-down cities that existed across the state (Oklahoma Historical Society, N.D.). However, I argue that the group dynamics between White settlers on Native Oklahoman land are an integral part of the cultural fabric in rural Oklahoma, much like the historical relationship of White settlers with other ethnic groups in this region.

**Trump Country**

For White rural Oklahomans, it comes as no surprise that this is Trump country. President Trump spoke in ways that resonated with rural Protestantism, protectionism, and Whiteness. Most of the participants described knowing that their hometowns were

conservative by the sheer number of Trump flags. One participant joked about there being more Trump flags than American flags. Another commented that patriotism and Trumpism were one and the same. To not be conservative, or to be a non-Trump supporter, is also a means of outgroup denotation. In the following interview excerpt, one participant described how his family tried to "fix" him, by making him a Trump supporter.

> PARTICIPANT: My relatives were saying to my parents that they were returning me to Trump, turning me too away from liberalism. And they were proud of that and touting that.
>
> INTERVIEWER: Wait, so this was like an actual conversation?
>
> PARTICIPANT: Yeah! And that was really almost surreal to hear about.
>
> INTERVIEWER: So, were they telling your parents this or you this?
>
> PARTICIPANT: They yes, god (eye roll/gasp)… they were talking about me saying that they were exposing the truth to me. And I guess by that, they meant, you know, every time I was over there, they would always have Fox News on, and that's their media diet. And my uncle would be playing, you know, a collection of Joe Biden bloopers, or conspiracy theories, or stuff about Benghazi {the attack on a US diplomatic mission in Libya}. And, you know, constantly yell like, 'Can you believe this?' … And so, to him, my political beliefs are the, are evil incarnate. And so, I can't really share that with him without becoming an agent of that evil. You know, this is a guy who briefly bought into the theory that Obama was the Anti-Christ, right?

INTERVIEWER: How did that make you feel, what was happening internally?

PARTICIPANT: It's not nearly as much the same way. I think it's more sort of flabbergasted when you hear from family. More than when you hear it from strangers. I mean, at this point is par for the course. But the first time that I realized something was wrong, we were watching a show on TV. It was me, my sister and uncle and their two kids. And we were watching it. And there was an interracial couple and they kissed. And my little cousin who was ten, couldn't be older than ten at the time, called it disgusting. And my sister always voicing her opinion, no matter what it was like, that's not disgusting. They're just two people in love. And my uncle talked to my mom about it and said she cannot share those opinions with our children.

This excerpt about how a participant's family wants to "save" him by teaching him to follow Trump highlights several key elements of this chapter. Trump spoke to rural Protestantism with the clear denotation of right and wrong, along with clear lines drawn for ingroups and outgroups. The enemy was clearly labeled—liberal as the ultimate evil. Other races were set as outgroups, and protectionism was encouraged. The great echo chambers allow for the simmering of these beliefs, while wide-open spaces and lack of diversity can make it easy to become isolationist.

In this chapter, I examined rural Oklahoman culture using several themes: rural Protestantism and social conservatism, wide-open spaces and the great echo chamber, rugged individualism: hard work and hard set in beliefs, and rural Whiteness. Through these themes, it becomes apparent that the passing down of beliefs, values, and traditions

has shaped the political landscape of rural Oklahoma. In the next chapter, I explore ways in which rural Oklahoman College students used political conversations to traverse differences in hometowns and on campus. Furthermore, I explore how the need to belong informs interactions in both settings, and how, for conservative and liberal students alike, the need to belong shapes interpersonal relationships.

# CHAPTER V

# TWO STORIES OF FITTING IN:

# FINDING BELONGING THROUGH POLITICAL CONVERSATIONS

Across all interviews and focus groups, participants talked about how moving to college exposed them to new ideas—and new conversation partners. There was a recognition that the new college environment had a broader range of beliefs and values. For some students, this recognition led to a comparing and contrasting of hometown politics to college politics. Some sought out conversation partners with similar beliefs and values. These same participants described feeling discomfort when having political conversations with discussants who carried differing political values. Some participants were very excited about being exposed to more ideas. Those who did not "fit in" in their hometown, particularly those identifying as more liberal, described a feeling of relief upon having political conversations with a more diverse range of conversation partners.

For conservatives, on campus, there was often a feeling of being attacked and the feeling of needing to stand up for or defend beliefs. For students who identified as more liberal, the opposite was true. They felt more comfortable on the college campus and as if they needed to defend their beliefs at home. Both groups sought out other like-minded people to discuss politics with and both struggled to find their sense of self in the midst of sometimes heated political conversations. Both groups also described feeling hesitant in political conversations for fear of how their conversation partners would react. How well

they knew the other person became a predictor of how much they were willing to share about their political beliefs. Seeing friendships and families torn apart from heated political discussion led many to avoid discussions with those they cared about, especially if they knew that they had diverging beliefs.

In this chapter, I tell the stories of two groups of students. One group of students consider themselves to be conservative and feel lost on campus when it comes to politics. The other group of students consider themselves to be liberal and feel lost at home. Both groups must navigate cultural differences during political conversations in hometowns and on the college campus, and both groups must negotiate their own sense of belonging during political conversations. At the end of this chapter, I discuss how this process of negotiation and navigating cultural differences shapes the sense of self for conservative and liberal students alike.

**Fear the Liberal Campus**

The rural conservative experience of political conversations largely primed participants to expect a big difference in beliefs. In their hometowns, they were oftentimes told that campus was going to be a very liberal place. On campus, they were put into situations in their new diverse location that challenged their existing beliefs. For many, college was their first time being exposed to people with differing beliefs. It seems only natural to be on-guard of their own political beliefs. One participant described this experience, saying:

> PARTICIPANT: I think that for people coming from high school and then going straight into college, you come into a liberal setting... your political views are

> challenged more than ever because you're going into a setting where you were comfortable with your conservative views to now a place, where there are very few like you. You have to search for the ones that are people that agree with you. And that can challenge, and I mean, that can even change some of your views, I think.

This participant reflected on there being a difference between her hometown and the college campus and viewed the college campus as a liberal setting where conservative ideas might be attacked. There was a strong feeling of needing to protect current beliefs. As the interview continued, this participant also reflected on how she felt she had the minority view on campus and reflected on the need to find like-minded others. Another participant talked about how she viewed conservative students as changing their values, saying:

> PARTICIPANT: I think it's almost the herd mentality because I feel like many of the people who come from small towns, like me, or at least a good amount of people who come from families that have strong conservative values, but then they all change you know? In like the students all become liberal. And like they just kinda follow the lead like everybody else. But I think definitely the faculty, like some of them are like very liberal.

The above participant reflected on the consensus that going to college made one liberal. In comparing and contrasting the feeling of having political conversations in her hometown, versus having political conversation on college campus, another one of the conservative students noted:

PARTICIPANT: It's a little bit more of a toxic environment for me personally... But I feel like in my hometown, everyone thinks the same. So, I think it's easier to be myself. But here I've noticed, like most of the people I see are like, 'if you don't think this way you are a terrible person.' So, I don't speak out because I'm scared that if I say anything that they will yell at you and say we're terrible, and like, completely cut you off.

This participant, in particular, spoke of avoidance out of fear of how the liberal others will react. In the excerpt below, this student's preconceived notion of what being a conservative on a liberal campus would be like was confirmed.

INTERVIEWER: And so, what do you mean that it's a toxic environment? Can you explain what you mean here?

PARTICIPANT: You have to agree with this side. Otherwise, you're known as like a bigot, like a racist, or like a terrible human being and like all of these things which I really don't agree with. Because yeah, I have gotten into arguments with some people about this because I was like, my point of view is America is based on a democracy. And so, everyone has the right to vote for whoever they would like to… But several of the people I know who go to OU had very different opinions and were saying… if you didn't vote for Biden, you're out of my life. Like, "You're a terrible person and I never want to see you again." …and I was just like… that's so toxic and insane.

Students on both end of the political spectrum reported this experience, that is, the experience of losing friendships over political differences. Several of the conservative

students, however, reported having the constant feeling of being attacked, and that they had to fight or stand up for their beliefs. It should be noted, however, that on the other side of the political spectrum people of color, the LGBTQ+ community, immigrants, and women concerned about reproductive rights were concerned about the policy implications following the 2016 and 2020 elections. Identity politics played a role in the genuine fear that many in these communities felt. So, while the conservative students felt attacked, many of their counterparts felt fear. This feeling of being attacked in the case of conservative students resonated with several of the participants. In the example below, the participant described this feeling as a personal attack.

> PARTICIPANT: It was more… personal. It was more emotional. It wasn't like, 'hey, here's like the evidence,' and say, 'Here's what they're doing like here's the reasoning behind it.' Instead, it was more emotionally charged.
>
> INTERVIEWER: Could you think of an example of one of those conversations?
>
> PARTICIPANT: Honestly, I think people who were against people voting for Republicans. Because they say if you vote for them, you're racist or you're against women, or you don't care about people who are poor and like socioeconomically struggling, stuff like that.

For several conservative students, there was a sense of not just being attacked, but also of the constant feeling of being the outsider. They felt like they were outgroup members and reported that, when one has the "outside view or outside place in society, you have to hook them." Not only was there a feeling of being attacked, but there was the feeling of needing to convince others of their ideas. Because of the feeling of being attacked and of

being an outsider, during the election year especially, these students sought out like-minded conservatives on campus. In the following excerpt from a focus group, three students talked about how important it is to find like-minded people on campus.

> PARTICIPANT 1: Just kinda like, not family members but just like-minded people just at college. Just surrounding myself with them, was just a breath of fresh air…
>
> PARTICIPANT 2: I guess I could say, something that's not helpful is to get like really isolated.
>
> PARTICIPANT 3: Yeah. I mean, …just like how you said coming to this liberal environment. Just to be able just to sit down and talk with somebody that agrees with you. It's gotta be good just for your, for your mind. Just to take a moment, to take a deep breath and just kinda—I don't know how to say it, like a breath of fresh air almost, yeah.

Finding like-minded others was refreshing. In one-on-one interviews, participants talked about how they felt more confident when talking to like-minded others. In the above excerpt, one student reflected on needing to avoid the feeling of isolation. Social identity allowed individuals to feel part of a group, and the political conversations had with like-minded others reinforced that feeling. While the feeling of being attacked, or being the other remained, the students were still able to find others with whom they shared political beliefs. Across the board, the conservative students reported having a network of friends on campus with whom they shared common political beliefs and regularly held political conversations. Some of these friends were roommates, whereas others were friends from

high school who were also attending OU, or friends that they had met in various social clubs. Several participants reported using political conversations to bond with like-minded classmates or using it for humor in the dorm.

Along with reaching out to like-minded individuals on campus, rural conservative students also reached back out to family members and hometown friends. This group of participants talked about how their views closely aligned with most of their family members' views, and how they felt confident when talking with other family members about politics, unlike how they felt on campus. Father figures and brothers were often referred to as being the primary means for information gathering. These students trusted the male figures in their hometowns to know accurate information about the elections, COVID-19, and other political events of 2020. This experience seemed to align closely with the structure of the family unit that fits with rural Protestantism. The father or male figure is the head of the household and the leader of the church—along with the greater deity being worshiped, Father God. It makes sense for the patriarch of the family to be relied on for political information and for there to be comfort in talking with the father figure about politics in such a heated political era. One participant put it this way, "I just feel at home when talking to my dad about politics." Male family figures provided a sense of stability for rural conservative students when navigating political conversations at home and on campus. Another participant explained:

> PARTICIPANT: My dad is like he's very much into politics. He knows what's going on, things like that. I think my mom, she does their own research, but I

think she gets a lot of it from my dad {as well}… And it's kind of nice to have him because I don't do as much research.

Another participant described the "grounded" feeling he got when talking with his dad, the feeling of being understood because,

PAETICIPANT: I mean, I always felt like understood and stuff like because like he loves me… and we could talk. So, he's raised me or like {instilled} certain values. So, I guess it kind of made me feel like…grounded. I felt like even though like other people don't have my views that, well, somebody does, you know? Like, you always have someone you can go to and talk to you about these things.

On a relational level, politics was something else that this participant could go to his dad for; this relationship grounded him and confirmed his beliefs. He felt confirmation and support from his father. Other participants echoed this feeling regarding male role models in their lives. In talking about how she looked up to her brother, another participant explained:

PARTICIPANT: I know I've talked to a lot of people, like my brother. I look up to my brother a lot, and I think that most of the things I do like comes off from the advice he gives me. He's very smart and he would like, whenever he researches something, he'll go in depth. And so, I trust that he knows everything, and he'll tell me something and I'll take it not as truth but like as close to truth as it can get.

In a focus group conversation, participants went back and forth talking about how they went to siblings for political conversations because they knew that they had similar values and that they respected their siblings' opinions. While sisters and mothers were

mentioned in these conversations, time and time again, participants talked about how they trusted the male members of their families to have knowledge of what was happening politically and to be able to tell them what was right and what was wrong. For conservative participants, the male household member acted almost as a 'fact-checker.'

For conservative students, a sense of hometown homogeneity was comforting. I conceptualize hometown homogeneity as the perception of uniformity across hometown beliefs and values. Recall from the last chapter, hometown conversations for these students often acted as an echo chamber for their beliefs during conversations. Because the sense of unity was so strong in hometowns for conservative students, the sense of change and diversity in political views, in particular when discussing political views with others, existed in stark contrast to the comfort of knowing what to expect from hometown family and friends. One participant described the challenge that comes with diversity as follows:

> PARTICIPANT: I think it's a lot easier. Because when you're in a rural community, you have smaller population. And it is, it does tend to be more conservative. Versus if you're in a city or on campus, you have much more diversity and political views. So, if you have people who are like-minded as you, you're going to have a lot easier conversations and a lot more comfortable conversations where you might not be, I guess, challenged in a way. But if you are in a more diverse group, you're going to be challenged. You're going to have disagreements, arguments, and probably some conversations that are a lot more uncomfortable.

While rural students were able to find like-minded comrades on campus, they reported feeling like they did not 'fit in' politically on campus. They felt like political outsiders on campus, which contrasted with the sense of belonging they felt with hometown friends and family. This remained true even for those who talked about having roommates of similar political orientation or who reported having a strong social network of friends with a similar political orientation. They reported having the need to defend their beliefs on campus. They also reported feeling attacked for their political beliefs during conversations on campus. At home, however, they reported a sense of comfort that came with knowing what their interlocutors believed.

**Lost at Home, Comfort on Campus**

For participants who viewed themselves as more liberal, the opposite phenomenon occurred. Many of the liberal students were excited to enter a diverse college campus and have political conversations with like-minded others, but felt lost in their hometowns. One participant described her family as being more liberal minded than the rest of her town, but that she could not have political conversations with hometown friends. Another participant said that he found liberal-minded friends in his high school, but always stood out among his immediate family. There was the feeling that they did not belong in their hometowns in the same way that they did on campus, and that political conversations during 2020 highlighted these differences for them. Despite these students feeling more politically at home on campus, several talked about being the liberal outsider at times when it came to college friend groups. They explained that, on campus, it was easier to find those who agreed with then than in hometowns, but that they had to

accept that this was a very conservative part of the country. Differences between classmates were most prominent during conversations about COVID-19 masking policies, the Black Lives Matter movement, and when talking about President Trump and the Presidential debates.

Hometown homogeneity also existed for the liberal students, but it was not perceived to be a good thing, as it was for the more conservative students. Rather, it was perceived as something that marked them as an outsider. Many noted these differences from a young age. One participant described her relationship with her father, saying:

> PARTICIPANT: I realized we were different as soon as I realized he had ideas. I was very young. Just because his ideas are so one way. You know? … He's very Republican, so it's like as far as far as right is you can get… So, I'm like, well, maybe it doesn't have to be exactly that way. Less or in the middle. And then I kind of started to think, 'What if it was the opposite? Yeah, you know, I wouldn't be so bad either'…I can't remember any like, specific topic we talked about, but I know I know the general tone of it was we were in the car going somewhere. He was listening to his talk radio at these guys just yelling, and I was kind of at the turning point of just hearing white noise. …And so, I asked my dad a question about what they were talking about because I just didn't really understand. I was like, 'What do they mean by this?' Like, 'What were they talking about?' And he always just kind of went on about how oh, there they are basically like slamming the Democrat Party for doing something. And he was like, 'This is why we need Republicans.' This, that and the other. And I asked him…, 'Well, what does the

> Republican Party do wrong?' And he couldn't really tell me. So, I can't remember the specifics, but I remember that his ideas and his way of thinking was very one-sided, that yeah, he'd consider what the Democratic Party did wrong. But he couldn't tell me anything that they did. That's the kinda vibe I got from him is that he wouldn't even kind-of entertain the other party's ideas. He just was so stuck in his ways, he couldn't see outside of it. I wouldn't be close minded.

The experience of talking politics in the car with her dad was one of the first realizations of a political *us* and *them* for this participant. Through this conversation and others, the participant explained, she realized at a young age that her father had a "one-sided" perspective. She ended the description of this conversation by saying that she made the decision to *not* be like her father, in that she "wouldn't be close minded." There was a recognition of differences between daughter and father. Through this conversation, the participant began a negotiation process of where she belonged and how her beliefs fit with the beliefs of those around her.

In the following interview excerpt, a liberal leaning student described a more recent conversation with family members. He explained that, for the most part, he tried to hide his views from family members, though at times his beliefs might 'bled' or showed in conversations held with family members.

> PARTICIPANT: I don't like sharing my political side with my family unless I have to, but I know sometimes like some of my views have shown through.
>
> INTERVIEWER: Can you provide an example when that happened?

> PARTICIPANT: Yeah… I think we're talking about herd immunity, like a month or two ago and she{my mother} was like, 'Why can't we just reach herd immunity?' I was like, 'Well, so many people have to die of Covid before we reach herd immunity.' And she was like, oh, like she didn't realize that at first, and I was like, 'I'd rather wear a mask for a little bit more than risk the lives of millions of people to reach herd immunity, especially with a vaccine on the way.'

The same participant further explained:

> PARTICIPANT: She'll I know she has like the Fox app on her phone and she'll talk about it if the news is on TV. She'll be like, 'Oh, I don't like this,' and I'll be like, 'Oh, well, I do.' And so yeah, we talked about it a little bit. I still try to avoid a little because I don't like… the pressure. I don't like sharing my political side with my family unless I have to, but I know sometimes like some of my views have shown through.

With this participant, there was a clear recognition of differences between him and his family, in this case his mother. With the recognition of these differences came discomfort, one that was echoed by other participants. Several participants talked about wanting to chime in when they heard something important being discussed, but that they felt like it "wasn't worth the negativity." For several, avoidance was easier than verbally acknowledging differences in beliefs. When it came to conversations about COVID-19, the liberal leaning students reported feeling the need to speak up, even if it outed them as being different, because it was such an important current event that had real and deadly

consequences. They viewed speaking up as outing themselves—as showing to family members that they were different, but also felt a responsibility to speak up.

Political differences in 2020 left some participants angry with family members. The theme that prevailed amid the pandemic, social distancing, became a desired outcome. These participants wanted to distance themselves from family members—more specifically, those family members who were very vocal about their political beliefs. This was highlighted in the following interview excerpts, in which after being asked about political conversations in her hometown, one participant described conversations with her dad and stepmom.

> PARTICIPANT: Well, I've had a lot of conversations with my dad this past summer, with a lot of things going on, because he's very right-wing conservative. And so, like I was like, hey, 'I like rights', and he was like, 'No, you need a husband to support you. Like it's against the Bible. If you don't have a husband like you cannot be an independent woman.' And I was like…'Goodbye. No. I will not stand for this.' Yeah. So those conversations are really strained our relationship in the past year.

She went on to describe an argument that she had with her father's wife, about COVID-19 and masking, saying:

> PARTICIPANT: And as far as like his wife… They're big into no masks like that's against their rights and everything. And she said, 'Hey, if you have any like scientific studies, like saying that mask work at all, send them to me.' And I said, 'Hey, not trying to be disrespectful anyway, found this and thought you might

> want to read it.' …And she went off into crazy-ville though. She was like, 'No, this is wrong and you're stupid and you're a disappointment to your family.' 'And I was like, well, I only thought was you should read this. But here we are.' And so now I have to have a very interesting conversation with him {my dad}. Like, 'Hey, I don't feel safe around your wife. I'm not coming to Christmas if she's going to be there.'

In the excerpts above, issues of gender norms are closely linked with political views. The participant explained differences in how her dad, a "very right-wing conservative," did not view a women's rights the same way that she did, and further, the participant linked this view with religiosity. The cultural themes of rural Protestantism prevail in this conversation, where gender roles are clearly defined, and the Bible becomes a lens for political interpretation. The participant then described conversations with her father's wife that shaped her relationship with her dad. When presented with what the participant described as facts regarding COVID-19, the wife became aggressive, fighting for the beliefs that aligned with other values. Other participants described rural family members treating COVID-19 masking and social distancing policies as an infringement of rights as well. In the previous chapter, I explained how there is a long tradition of 'fighting for' and holding on to various rights. The fight against social distancing and masking policies became comparable to the tradition of fighting for gun rights. These rights are part of the freedom experienced in rural Oklahoma and other parts of the country. The value differences created tension among the liberal college students, expanding the divide in values.

For the students in this category who still celebrated Thanksgiving and Christmas with family, the holidays led to a further deepening of the divide between self and family. The political conversations held around the dinner table made these participants feel separated. One participant described the feeling as "Awestruck, but in a bad way." In the following interview excerpt, another participant described political conversations that were held at Thanksgiving dinner. This conversation highlights the feeling of otherness that is experienced by liberal college students in their hometown.

> PARTICIPANT: It was at Thanksgiving. So, it was the people involved were me, a couple of my stepdad's friends and my grandfather. And so, you're just sitting around the table, and it gets a little quiet because there's like a natural low in conversation... So, my grandfather's obvious choice, of course, is to bring up politics. And said, 'Did you see how much the Democrats are spending in the Georgia elections?' What do I say? Nothing, because there's a lot of money in politics, I'm like, 'Okay, *maybe*.' And so, I don't say anything. And just yup, shut up. And then one of the relatives, or one of my stepdad's friends, starts to go off. 'Yeah, Republicans aren't spending nearly as much.' Which isn't true at all by any stretch of the imagination. And my father says, 'Yeah, they're trying to buy that seat. Yeah, the Democrats are trying to buy that.' And I don't know. That conversation … just reflect{s} the political atmosphere.
>
> INTERVIEWER: It reflects the political atmosphere? Could you describe that for me?

> PARTICIPANT: Yes. Just instantly you see like the dichotomy of realities that they're living in, because of what they consumed for news… My grandfather and those two friends think that Democrats are spending astronomically more money than Republicans. And so, you know, that's weird because usually numbers are the thing that people can agree on. But lately numbers are the thing that people disagree with the most. Because my aunt… was talking about or shared a post on Facebook that said Covid had a 99.96% survival rate. She got that. Some piece of s**t got that by taking the entire population of the United States and dividing the amount of people that had died so far…Yeah. And so, you know, it's just weird. It's surreal, abnormal, deeply disturbing. That even things like numbers and hard data, an entire fraction of the population is just saying no to.

The division felt at the Thanksgiving dinner table led to a reflection on why family members believed what they believed. The tone of voice that this participant had when describing Thanksgiving was a tone of defeat. The participant had a lot of emotion when describing the conversation. They tried to rationalize why their family members believed what they believed, but ended up feeling like there was nothing that he could say to change anyone's mind because even the things that people typically agreed on, "numbers," were being used as ammunition. The participant felt like he could not say anything. Instead, he turned to listening and reflecting on what was being said. Holidays came up for many as places where political conversations took place. For the liberal students, these instances made them feel more alone with family and led them to retreat. For some, the retreat was inward, leading to reflection. For others, the retreat was

physical. One participant said that she simply could not take it anymore, so she got up from the dinner table and watched television in the other room. Both internal and external separation occurred for these participants.

The liberal participants from these communities reported feeling helpless when trying to talk with family members about current events. Most of the participants described a sense of relief that came from talking to like-minded students on campus; however, several reported experiencing the same feeling on campus as they did at home. One participant described what it was like having a very conservative roommate, who she explained was offensive at times. Another participant described getting invited to college parties and being made fun of for not going because of Covid-19. She described the conversations as being politically charged, and that, though they did not explicitly say so, she felt: "They are all very conservative, so it makes sense. Really, it would be Trump over science. That's it. Just Trump over science." Another participant described a conversation that was brought up by friends while eating in 'the caf' (cafeteria). He was surprised that his friends were talking about jobs being taken away by immigrants and how they supported Trump, and so he did what he could to change the topic. The college campus was simply not the liberal safe-haven place that the conservative students perceived. Yes, the liberal students felt like they could find more politically like-minded people on campus, but it certainly was not a place that was over-run by the liberal voice. Both voices are present on the university campus.

**Sense of Self**

How students experienced the differences between political conversations at home and on campus depended on their political leaning. Interestingly, it did not seem to relate to if they considered themselves to be affiliated with the Republican or Democratic Party; rather, it seemed to depend more on how conservative or liberal they felt *in relation to those around them.* Most of the participants reported self-growth and a sense of confidence in oneself through the political conversations had in 2020. For example, the following excerpt from the conservative focus group reflects how these participants experienced personal growth through political conversations.

> PARTICIPANT 1: It's like I almost feel better. Like I feel stronger after this year because I'm like, if I could live through that, like, I could live through anything…. if I can maintain who I am as a person… It's like, wow, I feel very strong.
>
> PARTICIPANT 2: … It kinda opened my eyes. I have a voice and I need to use it.
>
> PARTICIPANT 3: I feel like I know myself more now.
>
> PARTICIPANT 4: So, it's not just a sense of empowerment, but like you had to defend yourself. Last year was really-really hard and I felt confused at times with where I stood. I can say now that I know who I am and that I know, like, where I stand on things more.

Earlier in the focus group, these participants described having to defend themselves. In one-on-one interviews, conservative students talked quite a bit about needing to defend their beliefs, and about feeling attacked. In the end, however, the students described a process of learning who they were and what they believed. Through more than a year's

worth of political conversations triggered by political events, news, and social media, students became more and more confident in themselves.

Participants also discussed being confident with having their own voice, even when that voice may not be the majority voice. In the liberal leaning focus group, one participant described the confidence that comes from being *okay* with having an opinion different from his family:

> PARTICIPANT:1 I think you gain a certain amount of independence because you're not being dependent on your family for your opinions. Which kind of goes hand in hand with like building your confidence in yourself.

In the same focus group, a different participant explained:

> PARTICIPANT 2: There's some amount of confidence gained. Confidence. Just because I'm allowed to have my own opinion. This is what I think is right. And, you know, at some point you have to accept that not everybody is going to agree with you, but you have to be comfortable and that's what you believe in and add that to that. {And} I think I've gained a lot more confidence in my views and the ability to back up what I'm saying, and actually talk about it.

Not only were these students more confident in their political beliefs, but they were more confident in their overall view of their self. Through political conversations with others, they were confident in sometimes being different. Their personal identities were able to supersede their social or communal identities due to a sense of confidence in beliefs. Along the same lines, many participants talked about feeling their beliefs were solidified through political conversations. Participants described self-growth. Several explained that

they had not been as confident in what they believed before 2020, but the turbulent year forced them to evaluate their beliefs. Comparing self to others also led to evaluation and crystallization of political beliefs. One participant explained:

> PARTICIPANT: So, my beliefs got more solidified. Especially… towards the end of 2020. Trump-- he really solidified my views, {along with} his supporters. And all of the crap that they were doing. I was like, I do not want to be associated with this. I believe in equality for everyone. That is my belief-- number one above all, like above the economy and like all of the other stuff like that. And when you leave a group out, and you antagonize them, that's not okay. And being what all of those people were doing like, saying that all lives matter like, cut it out… Listening to others talk about that… that really made me more secure in myself, and I was like, okay, like you're doing the right thing.

By seeing what she did not want to identify with, this student was able to evaluate her own political identity. Her political sense of self was developed through comparison with others. Other students described having gained confidence in their ability to provide evidence. Several participants talked about how they used their college education in political conversations. A journalism student, for example, explained that she felt more confident in political conversations because she learned how to find reliable sources. She explained that, even though her family did not believe what she was saying, or tried to argue with her, she felt confident in her own voice because she felt confident in her media sources. This was a common theme throughout the one-on-one interviews.

Participants described feeling more confident in conversations and their sense of self through the use of outside information sources. One participant put it this way:

> PARTICIPANT: I think through political conversations with friends, friends of friends and my family has allowed me to grow in my ideology, even for myself. So, like having to provide evidence and logic and reason to…say it out loud, and have someone else understand it, or even try to entertain the idea is really helpful for my sense of who I am. And just making sure that my, my views and values are inline {with each other} and ethically sound.

By talking through his beliefs, this participant was able to evaluate what he believed. As he put it, to "say it out loud" or to verbalize what he believed, and then to have the other person understand what they were saying, provided a sense of confidence in what his beliefs were. That confidence came from self-evaluation. Along with reporting feeling more secure in their sense of self, participants continually reported the desire to be understood and the desire to be heard. One participant described how special it was to "be heard" by a family member who had opposing views:

> PARTICIPANT: I was actually a little bit delighted because he heard. Yeah. He heard my point of view. And he actually considered it to the point of being like, 'You know what, that actually is a good social program. I'll agree with you there.' He actually listened to me.

Throughout the interviews and focus groups, participants described the desire to be both heard and respected. As they developed their sense of self, they often sought confirmation from others. There was a desire to hear that it is *okay* to have differing

political views. When this did not happen, when their opinions and beliefs were not respected, participants reported negative emotions and wanting to detach from that relationship, as illustrated in the following example:

> PARTICIPANT: I think I try to detach myself from having a personal relationship with the person. And I sort of…when I go into debate with my parents or something, I get really irritated when they don't give me the credit I deserved because they don't trust what I'm saying. So, I get really discouraged… Is it even worth it to share my perspective or anything? ... So, I think a lot of it is establishing your credibility and your like presenting your ideas in a way that they can agree with.

When participants talked about not being respected, they felt less secure in their sense of self. For some, this happened with family members, particularly when the student was liberal in a conservative hometown. While they may have felt confident in their political identity, their relational identity, or sense of self in relation to family and friends, was damaged.

Several participants explained that, because they were confident in their sense of self, they became confident in teaching others. This was particularly true for participants who talked about teaching elderly family members about COVID-19. Those participants who discussed confidence also carried a sense of resilience. They were able to "take punches"—even if those punches were imagined. They were able to have conversations with others that they did not agree with and still maintain friendships. One participant recalled talking in the car with her friend who voted the opposite way than she did, and

that because she was confident in her beliefs, the conversation did not hurt her relationship with her friend. Others described enjoying conversations with people who did not share their own political views. They did not feel threatened by hearing outside beliefs.

Political identity and the larger personal identity were not formed in a vacuum, but rather, in relation to others. Sometimes, these identities were formed by the recognition of different values in conversation with others. Other times, they were formed through the comparison of self to others through conversations and observations. Moreover, participants explained how respectful political conversations helped encourage positive self-esteem. Through my interviews and focus groups, I witnessed a universal desire to fit in somewhere—to feel like they belonged.

**Mindfulness**

One theme that stood out was how many rural Oklahoman college students described becoming more mindful through political conversations. This was not the case for all participants. However, several reported growth through political conversations held in 2020, in that they became more empathetic and they grew in their realization of how their words and actions might impact others. Furthermore, participants explained that they became more open to actively listening to others' beliefs and opinions, and that they had the desire to understand others' perspectives. One participant described political conversations as teaching him "tolerance" for outside beliefs. Another participant explained how listening to other opinions allowed her to be more open, saying "I

appreciate that actually because it allows me to like broaden my mind and maybe understand where they're coming from."

Participants reflected on how media coverage made it difficult to be mindful of self and others when participating in political conversations. For example, one participant explained that getting caught up with big news and social media made it easy to forget how the fights happening on national political stages over various policies actually impacted others. This participant explained:

> PARTICIPANT: But I think learning from others because I think they'll have a lot of different sources and experiences too. And when I'm talking to someone who is of a different race, gender, socioeconomic background, whatever, I like to hear how they've been personally affected by it. Because I think we get kind of caught up in the national news. We don't think about how it actually affects everybody.

Some participants recognized interconnectivity amongst people through being exposed to others during political conversations. One participant described how getting to know others on campus made her more empathetic in respect to political beliefs. She said:

> PARTICIPANT: I mean, just kind of like how it impacts all people. I'm trying to be very aware… And that probably has come just from like being on campus and being around like a ton of different people and like I have friends from different countries. I have friends from with different religions, different gender identities, different races, socioeconomic statuses. I try to actually really think about how this affects people like in general, not just how it like affects my immediate family. And it probably is different from when I was growing up. Before, I was

> just kinda like, ‘Okay, not my problem. Like, how's it going to impact like me and my neighbors,’ and that’s it. But now… I try to step back from it to think about how politics impact the whole country, not just me.

Not just political conversations, but general contact with people who held other beliefs or had different backgrounds, helped this participant become more aware of big-picture problems. This student was able to think outside of her original social group because she was exposed to diversity. Another participant described mindfulness as a strategy for positive political conversations, saying:

> PARTICIPANT: I learned one thing that really helps is…you have to understand that people come from vastly different experiences than you do. Very vastly different experiences than you. And I think sometimes the best strategy is to picture yourself in their shoes and think about where they've come from. Because one thing I think we all forget is that they didn't just come up with that opinion out of nowhere. I know I've seen a lot like on the media. Yeah. I've seen a lot in the media where, if someone I don't know was a Trump supporter, a lot of times they need they get labeled as a racist or a misogynist, or various others like homophobic, transphobic, that kind of thing. But I feel like a lot of times you have to put yourself in their viewpoint.

The above quote really reflects the purpose of this dissertation. Political beliefs and identities are not formed in a vacuum. They are a reflection of cultural contexts, reflections of values and norms that have been passed down for generations. They are formed through conversations with others and through the comparison of self with others.

Empathy and mindfulness are closely connected. Being able to take a new standpoint, to view the world from an interlocutor's shoes, allows for more positive outcomes—even if beliefs are divergent. Going to college provides rural students with the opportunity to expand their social network and thus expand the variety of people they encounter. Unfortunately, the political environment of 2020 encouraged folks to retreat to their comfortable social groups. It encouraged the opposite of mindfulness. As the rural student above pointed out, an empathetic perspective allows for more positive political conversations. Some participants described this new empathetic mindset caused them to be civically engaged. Beyond just voting, some became involved in grass-roots efforts, working polling places, and encouraging others to vote—regardless of *how* the other person might vote.

In this chapter, I told two stories. The first story was that of the conservative student who has been primed to fear being the other on a liberal campus. The second story was that of the liberal student who felt they could find like-minded others on campus, but struggled to find their place at home when talking politics. Both groups must navigate which elements of their personal and social identities to share during political conversations. Perhaps, more importantly, both groups used political conversations in considering their larger sense of self. Political conversations not only impacted how they saw themselves and others politically, but they also shaped participants' overall view of self and their self-esteem. Along with becoming more confident in their political views and sense of self, positive outcomes of successful identity negotiation included a newfound sense of mindfulness that could be used in other political conversations. In the

next chapter, I connect the findings from both results chapters to answer the research questions and connect to relevant literature. Methodological and practical implications follow, along with a reflection on my role as an interpretive researcher.

# CHAPTER VI

# DISCUSSION

In this chapter, I reflect on the findings from the previous two chapters. First, I discuss how the findings answer each of the three research questions. Next, I discuss the theoretical significance of this study. More specifically, I address ways in which this study speaks to theories of identity and political socialization. Following a discussion of the theoretical significance, I provide practical implications. The practical implications are specifically targeted towards how these findings speak to the college experience of rural students. The next section, methodological implications, addresses the use of technology to reach a broader audience, using Zoom for ethnographic inquiry, along with the use of technology for data analysis and sharing. Closely connected with the discussion regarding methodological implications, the next section discusses limitations of this study, several of which were related to conducting qualitative research during a global pandemic. In the future directions section, I discuss ways in which I plan on expanding this research. In the final section of this chapter, I discuss ways in which this study forced me to confront my own experiences and my own identity formation.

## Research Questions

Through in-depth interviews and focus groups and an interpretive analytic approach to transcriptions, I was able to answer each of the three research questions. Recall, the research questions listed below:

RQ1: How do cultural factors and elements of identity politics influence political conversations among rural Oklahoman college students?

RQ2: How do political conversations shape political identity formation among rural Oklahoman college students?

RQ3: What are the outcomes of political identity negotiation for Oklahoman rural college students?

The first research question focused on issues of identity politics. Identity politics refer to the way in which various social identities are used as the basis for political action (Brunilla & Rossi, 2018). Traditional descriptions of identity politics, such as those offered by Brunilla and Rossi (2018) and by Hess (2019), conceptualize identity politics as being purposeful, or a concerted effort by various groups to come together to create change. However, as seen in this study, the merging of social identities for political change is not always a purposeful, conscious act at the individual level. Rather, social identities become cognitive schema from which one can understand others during political conversations and when making judgements about political figures. Social identities become prototypes in which "us" and "them" can be labeled. To answer the first research question, I conducted an in-depth cultural analysis of rural Oklahoma through the discourse of rural Oklahoman college students. I found that the political beliefs held by the rural Oklahoman college students in my study were closely linked with the values, beliefs, and traditions passed down through hometown enculturation. This held true for conservative and liberal students alike.

In conducting the cultural analysis, I examined ways in which religion, the community layout, working class identity, individualism, and ethnicity influenced political beliefs and conversations. In examining religion, I explained that rural Protestantism acts as a lens through which to view politicians along with outgroup members, such as those belonging to LGBTQ+ communities and the "evil" Democrats. Next, in examining how rural community members interacted with each other through accounts of hometown conversations, I explained how being spread out and distant from neighbors led to a sense of freedom, one that needed protecting. While communities were physically spread out, they were also close-knit: everyone knew everyone else. Participants described hometowns as acting like political echo chambers, in which political beliefs reverberated across the community. To discuss views outside of those beliefs is to be an outsider; furthermore, it is to break the norms that exist within the rural echo chamber. I examined the interaction between religious and political worldviews through the theme of rural Protestantism, the ways in which wide-open spaces create a sense of freedom and the need to protect, rural Protestantism as the basis for social conservativism, the juxtaposition of wide-open spaces and living in an echo chamber of beliefs, the role of agriculture and hard work for the cultivation of rugged individualism, and the linking of Whiteness with rural Oklahoman culture.

The remaining two research questions, RQ2 and RQ3, were closely linked. RQ2 asked how political conversations shaped political identity formation among rural Oklahoman college students. Participants revealed that early political conversations in childhood and adolescence provided key political socialization that informed how they viewed and

talked about the socio-political events of 2020 and early 2021. Political socialization and the shaping of political identities continued and was triggered by political conversations in college in a turbulent political year. While some students did, indeed, develop a strong political sense of self, what stood out more was how rural Oklahoman college students used conversations to form an overall sense of self and to cross cultural boundaries. The understanding of political identities, along with the understanding of how related social identities inform political identities, was socialized into participants over time—largely through conversation with others. Conversations with others informed where students felt they belonged. As discussed in chapter 5, their sense of self oftentimes occurred in relation to their sense of belonging. Be it feeling lost at home but at home on campus, or lost on campus but comfortable at home, students viewed themselves in relation to others- consistent with literature on identity. In many cases, the elections made participants think about how they view themselves politically. They decided how to label themselves— as conservative, Republican, liberal, Democratic, Libertarian, Socialist… Oftentimes those students who labeled themselves as Republican or conservative were influenced by hometown conversations that said the college environment would be liberal. The feeling of having to defend oneself in political conversations was taught, or socialized, from a younger age. This is a sentiment that I too received, coming from a rural hometown, and one that is not limited to the rural hometowns of Oklahoma —that colleges are places of liberal elitists. For some participants, this lesson meant that they needed to be on guard during political conversations. Especially if the conversation is with someone who is not also conservative.  This socialization process was described as

continuing through their experience in college and was especially activated during 2020 and early 2021 due to the politically charged atmosphere.

As discussed in chapter 4, many of the conversations that were had in childhood shaped how these students viewed themselves and others. For example, conversations about other religions and sexuality, as linked with Rural Protestantism informed social conservativism, on both the group and individual level. Likewise, conversations about race informed who belongs and who does not belong, that is the ingroups and outgroups, within the region. As discussed in chapter 5, these early conversations in the cultural context of hometowns informed the conversations that would be had as young adults during the 2020 elections. Hometown homogeneity, where beliefs exist within an echo-chamber, wide-open spaces and rugged individualism formed by generations of hard-workers, community views on race—all shaped how participants interacted with others while talking politics. Some of the participants were influenced by their hometowns, in that they did not want their political conversations to mirror the beliefs of their upbringing. By going against the grain, these participants were still influenced by their early childhood and adolescent socialization. The third research question asked what the outcomes of political identity negotiation were for rural college students. As discussed in chapter five, identity negotiation more broadly occurred during political conversations. Students were not necessarily trying to come to terms with their political selves; rather, they worked on coming to terms with their overall sense of self, which was catalyzed through political conversations. In particular, finding 'where they belonged' became an important theme. At times, participants were clearly taught that they did not belong, such

as when political differences were pointed out at holiday dinners, or they felt "attacked" in conversations on campus. Being pinned as a political outgroup member taught these students where they did belong. In such occasions, students had to decide what elements of themselves to share in conversations, and when it is best to just walk away. In the interpersonal discursive moment, participants negotiated who they were in relation to the conversant.

Rural Oklahoman college students used political conversations to navigate cultural differences between their hometowns and their college campus. Depending on how their political beliefs aligned with hometown family members' beliefs, some felt politically at home on campus more than with family members. These students felt like outgroup members when political conversations occurred. Likewise, some students felt more comfortable talking about politics at home than talking about politics on campus, where they felt the need to defend their political identity. Both groups of students worked to find a sense of belonging. Some students managed to successfully code-switch between hometown and college communities. These students developed a sense of mindfulness, in which they were able to consider elements of their own identity along with the layered identities of family members. For these students, having political conversations led to a sense of self-confidence, and a new intercultural sense of self, in which they felt confident at home and on campus.

**A Theoretical Perspective on Political Socialization and Identity**

This study makes several important theoretical contributions. First, it speaks to ways in which early childhood and adolescent political socialization influences the

continued socialization process and crystalizing of political beliefs among college students. Second, it highlights the important ways in which social identities and identity politics influence political beliefs. Third, it illustrates ways in which various layered identities come together in the formation of political beliefs. Fourth, this study provides insight into how political beliefs and political conversations shape the overall view of one's self and others. As described later in this section, theories of identity development and identity negotiation can help explain the larger life-long implications of how political conversations shape the view of self and others.

This study speaks to ways in which prior political socialization influences college student's political conversations, along with the ongoing process of political socialization that college students experience. In particular, this study speaks to ways in which interpersonal discursive acts influence the political socialization process. Recall, Hyman (1959) refers to political socialization as social learning that corresponds to various societal structures and that is influenced by various agents. It has long been argued that political socialization begins at a young age, where political ideas and knowledge are passed down through parents, family members, teachers, and school peers (Atkin & Gantz, 1978; Eveland & McLeod, 1998). Much of the political socialization that was happening on the college campus, in particular regarding the political events surrounding the 2020 elections and COVID-19 pandemic, was influenced by prior socialization that occurred in hometowns.

The participants in this study described early childhood memories from their hometowns that shaped how they viewed the political world of today. This is consistent

with the literature on political knowledge and political socialization, which argues that families and primary schools influence political socialization through knowledge gained in traditional educational formats, conversations with parents, and conversations with peers (see Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1991; Hyman, 1959). ) Participants explained that conversations in the home about news events often sparked political learning. Several of the participants recalled Fox News playing in family homes or listening to the radio in the car with family members. One participant described how a car ride with her dad with the radio on became a major turning point in her own understanding of what it means to be conservative or liberal. Prior election years acted as teaching opportunities for parents, with the cultural backdrop of rural Oklahoma. Participants recalled political bumper stickers and yard signs as teaching them about which candidate about candidate their town supported- and perhaps who they should also support. Much like prior political socialization studies, such as work by Chaffee et al. (1970), participants described their childhood and adolescent political socialization occurred through various mediums or agents of socialization, including mass media sources, conversations with family and friends, and school. Event driven socialization, such as that described by Sears and Valentino (1997) which occurs during election years, was a catalyst for political conversations in the home and early childhood political socialization. Events in early childhood years and adolescence shaped how participants viewed the democratic system, how they viewed Republicans and Democrats, and how they viewed themselves as 'fitting-in' to the party system.

It should also be noted that many of the early childhood events participants described as socializing them into politics were not overtly political. For example, many described schoolyard or school bus conversations with peers about race and ethnicity as shaping their political beliefs. Church was also described as a socializing agent. Although the church did not typically overtly preach on political topics, participants explained that messages they heard in church growing up influenced how they thought and talked about politics today. Messages from church members, family members, and peers about the LGBTQ+ community received in adolescence and high school shaped the beliefs of many participants, in particular, beliefs about who belongs to each political party. As reflected in Nathanson and Eveland's (2019) study, how parents responded to participants' beliefs, whether they were congruent or divergent with their own beliefs, shaped how confident and willing participants would be to talk about politics in the future. In particular, being shut-down at family gatherings made participants not want to speak up or made them feel like they need to be defensive in the future. Being encouraged and having positive interactions with family members, for conservative and liberal students alike, oftentimes translated to positive interactions in the future. Furthermore, the conversations that occurred in early childhood and teenage years regarding race, ethnicity, and sexuality ultimately shaped how participants talked about politics as young-adult college students. Political socialization ultimately leads to attitude crystallization, or the solidifying of political beliefs and behaviors (Sears & Valentino, 1998). Participants in this study described becoming more confident in knowing what their political beliefs were because

they felt forced to verbalize those beliefs through conversations sparked by political events. .

As discussed in chapter 5, participants continued their identity formation through conversations with others. I explained in the findings that the sense of self was not so much about their general political identity—that is how affiliated they feel with a party or ideology, but rather, how they felt in relation to those around them. In terms of self growth, participants described feeling more confident, of feeling like they "found their voice." They felt stronger for having had the conversations. One participant described feeling more confident in being different, the sense that it was okay to have personal political beliefs, or other beliefs, that differed from their parents. Political conversations with others, as one participant put it, illuminated for the participant that "I'm allowed to have my own opinion." Essentially, participants described event driven socialization. According to Sears and Valentino (1997), political events, especially highly visible events such as elections, trigger attitude crystallization in older teens and young adults in part because they trigger interpersonal discussion among peers and family members and elicit strong attitudes and emotions. Consistent with the political socialization literature (see Atkin & Ganz, 1978), participants in this study were triggered by political news to participate in political conversations.

Mass mediated sources such as television, social media, and other news sources encouraged interpersonal political conversations among participants and an active process of political socialization, as seen in previous research (see Chaffee, Ward, & Tipton, 1970). Through conversations with others, participants described their beliefs

became more solidified. Social contact with others provides a means to become politically socialized and can teach individuals how to talk about political issues, as seen in Reedy's (2015) social contact model of immigrant political socialization. For the rural students in my study, one role that conversations played was to provide a means to sort out the bombardment of information oftentimes coming from news sources. Many participants explained that their parents kept the television playing news stations at home, and that the background of news and political information often time sparked political debate in the household. Participants also described being inundated with news on their phones via news aps and social media, which would often spark political conversations with friends and family members alike.

Cell phone use and social media were described as important media sources that influenced political socialization through interpersonal conversations. Most participants in my study explained that they received copious amounts of political information on their cell phones via various forms of social media such as Twitter and Facebook. This reflects findings from Wyant et al.'s (2020) research, in which social media largely influenced political conversations among international students at the University of Oklahoma and acted as a jumping-off point for learning about the American political system or related public issues. Likewise, in my current study on rural college students, participants explained that, after seeing a post or a tweet, they would bring it up to their friends or families in-person. Like the international students in Wyant et al.'s study, the rural students in my study brought up social media or news sources when they wanted

more knowledge or information about a topic, or when the topic was relevant to themselves or close others.

A common theme that arose across participants' responses was the feeling of intense and often negative emotions during political conversations with people who held opposing political beliefs. Consistent with Sears and Valentino's (1998) explanation, these emotions led to the crystallization of political attitudes. Participants felt the need to defend those attitudes during political conversation. Sometimes this occurred when liberal students had conversations with their conservative family members. This need also arose when conservative students felt "attacked" on campus. The need to defend often occurs when social identities are made salient. The socialization that happened as young adults on campus and at home, along with pre-adult political socialization, influenced how participants related to their ingroups and outgroups. Furthermore, the hometown social identities participants were socialized into as children influenced their unique process of political socialization. Tajfel and Turner (1979) explain that interactions with others provide individuals ways to socially define themselves. Individuals develop the understanding of what groups they belong to, and what groups they do not belong to, through communicative processes. As children and adolescents, participants described being taught about what groups they did and did not belong to. These groups were related to political party, religious identification, race, and place—such as what it meant to be country as opposed to urban. Importantly, to be social identities, these means of identification were pitted against a relevant outgroup. For conservatives, the outgroup was liberals. For Whites, the outgroup was anyone non-White. For rural people, the

outgroup was urban. Ingroups, explains Brewer (2001), provide a space for belonging, whereas outgroups provide an understanding of who does not belong.

Various social markers showed who belonged to the ingroups and who did not. For example, being a member of the LGBTQ+ community was a marker of being an outgroup member for multiple identities—rural Protestant, rural, and conservative. Although some participants did not subscribe to these ingroups and outgroups, they all described being socialized into them as children and adolescents. They described these multiple social identities as shaping their later political beliefs, especially those beliefs surrounding what it meant to be Republican or Democrat. The highlighting of perceived intergroup differences in order to feel more connected to one's own ingroup is known as the metacontrast principle (see Hogg, 2006; Tajfel, 1959). Participants described this process as happening during political conversations with others. One way that this process occurred was internally, in that participants psychologically perceived differences between them and others during conversations. This also occurred with an interlocutor with perceived similarities in political beliefs, when the two conversants talked about the outgroup—essentially using verbal labeling of outgroup differences as a form of bonding.

Also reflective of the metacontrast principle, the more group members can find outgroup differences, the more bonded group members feel to the relevant ingroup (Tajfel, 1959). In this case, rural college students sought out conversation partners who were perceived as politically similar to themselves to discuss outgroup differences. They also were keen to note political outgroup differences when conversing with those who did not share their political beliefs. As noted by Abrams and Hogg (1988), individual self-

esteem is enhanced when intergroup differences and intragroup similarities are highlighted. This often rang true for participants of both political leanings.

The interviews for this study focused on political conversations. During political conversation, students labeled what it meant to be Republican or Democrat by using other group-level identifiers. Religion, for example, was an important marker for Republicans and Democrats alike. What it meant to be a member of the Republican Party or Democratic Party was filtered through the lens of what it meant to be Protestant-Christian—or non-Protestant-Christian. Likewise, "us" and "them" dichotomies were built around race and ethnicity. In particular, participants discussed what it meant to be White versus "Mexican." They explained ways in which their race and the race of Hispanic or Latinx descent individuals were discussed in their hometowns, and how that ultimately shaped their political views. Other racial identities compared in the interview discussions about political conversations pertained to what it meant to be Native American versus White. As seen in past research (Lay, 2012; Gimpel et al., , 2003), proximity to diversity, along with how participants were exposed to outside races and ethnicities during conversations about those groups, shaped how rural students discussed race and ethnicity during political conversations as young adults. Interestingly, even when discussing the Black Lives Matter movement, the same dichotomy of comparison of the self to other based on racial groups was not made. Several participants did, however, describe racial incidents during prior childhood and adolescent socialization surrounding President Obama's campaigns and elections, specifically, surrounding hometown conversations about the birther conspiracy. Those conversations, however,

were not described as being foundational in the same way that conversations about classmates from Mexico, immigration, and Native American reservations were to participants. This may be related to hometown proximity to these groups (Gimpel et al., 2003). Relative outgroups based on race and ethnicity were largely created around the races that the students were most exposed to in hometowns.

The layering of multiple social identities to come to an understanding of one's political identity has important national political implications. In her book, *Uncivil Agreement: How Politics Became Our Identity*, Mason (2018) explains: "As American social identities grow increasingly party linked, parties become more influential in American political decision-making, behavior, and emotion" (p. 15). As reflected in the experiences of rural Oklahoman college students, various social and cultural identities outside of the traditional partisan notions inform how individuals view self and others in political terms. Mason (2018) elaborates on the power of multiple cross-cutting identities to form political identities. The alignment of partisan identities with other social identities increases bias and social distance between individuals; that is, these identities become a means to judge others. Furthermore, parties that are socially sorted along various social identifiers "motivate a preference for ingroup partisans and prejudice in evaluating national figures and conditions" (Mason, 2018, p. 140). The rural Oklahoman college students in the current study reflected Mason's (2018) findings. Their various social identities were used to make decisions regarding their own political beliefs, particularly those regarding attitudes towards political candidates, and acted as a way to sort themselves and others along partisan lines.

At the onset of this study, I expected to find that rural Oklahoman college students would use interpersonal political discourse to arrive at newfound or strengthened political identities. Rather, I found that elements of identity politics were continually used in conversations by these students to navigate and negotiate how the students viewed themselves in relation to their interlocutors. One contribution that this study makes is the unpacking of how intwined identity politics are with political identity. Recall, political identity has been referred to in this study as a self-ascribed social identity which individuals use to label selves as ingroup or outgroup members of a political party or ideology (Blum, 2013). Identity politics is the use of various social identities, such as religion, sexuality, or ethnicity, as the basis of political action (Brunila & Rossi, 2018). Many of the students in this study already had a sense of their political identities. They were not developing the identities as much as they were refining those beliefs. What was happening, however, was that students had to decide which other social identities mattered during political conversations, that is, a process of negotiation occurred.

In terms of identity development, participants were not necessarily becoming more Democratic or more Republican. Rather, they were using social identities in political conversations to come to terms with their overall view of the self and their view of their self in relation to others. This coming to terms with self is consistent with the literature on identity development and the nature of identity as a layered conception of self. Recall Erikson's (1958; 1963) previous work on identity—successful resolution of identity vs. confusion leads to the virtue of fidelity, and successful resolution of intimacy vs. isolation leads to positive virtues such as love. The students in this study were trying

to find where they belonged, political conversations happened as they were doing this. Interpersonal conversations inform the relationships being formed and maintained, thus informing a sense of self in the relationship—relational identity. By undergoing their journey of understanding across cultures, participants gained the positive virtues of confidence and empathy for others. I argue that political conversations help young people understand how to relate to others—both in the sense of their relational self and in the social or communal self (see Hecht, 1993).

College acts as a pivotal identity development age. The college experience allows for self-growth and understanding—causing "cause emerging adults to rethink their identities and reconfigure them in new ways" (Azmitia et al., 2008, p. 11). Part of understanding who we are, our sense of self, is understanding who we are in relation to those around us. For the students in this study, social networks consisted of hometown networks and newfound college networks. Political conversations during the 2020 election year helped these students negotiate their understanding of their self. Political conversations helped these students understand who they were in relation to family members, as college students, as rural Oklahomans, as Republicans or Democrats, and as people. Political conversations helped form a greater understanding of the self. Coming to terms with the self through political conversations became increasingly important for rural Oklahoman college students as they were forced to navigate cultural differences between rural hometowns and the college campus. Ting-Toomey's (2005) INT helps unpack how rural Oklahoman college students navigated their selves in their boundary crossing journeys. Through political conversations with others, participants

worked to maintain certain elements of their self, especially when certain social identities were threatened. At times, it became more important to maintain relational identities than political identities, while at other times, it became more important to maintain political identity. Cultural identity, that is identification with rural Oklahoma, varied between participants and ebbed and flowed within some. Some participants held on more tightly to their rural Oklahoman identities. Others began to reject that part of themselves due to fear of judgement from others on campus. Still others formed dual identities, where they were able to carry both elements of their rural selves and their academic selves into conversations with others. These students became more mindful in conversations with others and were able to choose which side of themselves to "turn on." Essentially, they began to code-switch in their political conversations, deciding which self to divulge and which self to hide in-situ. Put differently, they felt comfortable talking with both conservative hometown members and the more politically mixed college community. In the focus groups, some participants, especially those in the mixed group and the liberal leaning group, explained that they felt more comfortable talking politics, regardless of who they talked politics with- that they could comfortably talk politics with both communities because they were forced to partake in so many political conversations. That is, they had practice changing how they spoke and sharing different elements of themselves depending on who they were talking to.

**Implications for College Life and Democracy**

This study has important applied implications regarding how rural college students adapt to campus life and interact with others on campus. The University of

Oklahoma is instituting a new required first year student orientation course called "Gateway to OU," which heavily focuses on diversity and inclusion education. As explored in this dissertation, many of the rural, White, Oklahoman students simply have not been exposed to diverse environments. Diversity is not just about race and ethnicity, and its education should include conversations surrounding religion, sexuality, socio-economic statuses, culture, and political beliefs. As discussed in this dissertation, these belief systems influence one another. For the college students in this study, the values connected to rural Protestantism, Whiteness, following the cultural norms of rural hometowns, and protectionism made their way into political worldviews and, therefore, political conversations with others. Because of where the University of Oklahoma is situated, in a primarily rural state, the university should take note of how their rural White students adapt to a more diverse campus life. These students want to be recognized, and many of the rural students feel like political outsiders on campus.

University campuses, more generally, should consider political conversations in their diversity and inclusion classes. We should not wait until presidential elections come up every four years to start talking about national politics. Rather, we should encourage these students to begin talking about national issues with people who carry political worldviews other than their own *before* election years. While some of my participants became more open and mindful of others through political conversations, others latched on to group belonging, closing themselves off to others' beliefs. Many reported feeling exhausted after the long political year, and being sick of talking about politics. If

classrooms become safe spaces to discuss politics before election years, college campuses have the opportunity to encourage mindfulness and openness more generally.

Universities should also consider how they are being portrayed in rural America, as this may have very real future implications for the political makeup of college campuses, along with the broadening of American political polarization. If rural conservative parents tell their children that they will be brainwashed on college campuses, and tuition prices continue to increase, many may choose to not attend four-year universities. If this happens, then campuses really would become the liberal haven so feared by rural conservative parents. We may be encouraging an America in which the Republican Party becomes just a party of the White working-class and the Democratic Party becomes the party of the college educated. Already, education acts as a dividing line in American party affiliation. The findings in my study largely reflect national trends. A recent Pew report shows that the Republican Party holds 57% of the voters who identify as White and non-college educated, as opposed to the 30% of this voting bloc in the Democratic Party (Dohorty, Kiley, & Asheer, 2020). The divide between attending college, or not attending college, becomes a divide that shapes the broader American political landscape.

**Methodological Implications**

This study had several important methodological implications. First, it spoke to the role of technology in qualitative research. Specifically, this study can be an example for how to use Zoom and other video communication technology to reach a broader range of participants. The use of technology in qualitative research opens the door for insight

into communities when direct observation may not be possible. It also allows for participants to be closer to the culture and important experiences of interest, in this case, rural hometowns. Furthermore, this study provides insight into how online data analysis tools, such as AtlasTi as used in this study, allow researchers to organize, categorize, and share large amounts of text and image based data with ease. The use of technology during the COVID-19 pandemic forced many qualitative researchers, like myself, to move research activities online. As we begin to re-open our country and remove social distancing guidelines, researchers should not throw away their newfound tools. Rather, these tools should continue to be incorporated into qualitative research designs.

The first tool that should continue to be considered is the use of Zoom for reaching a broader audience. No longer must we limit our research to one geographic location, where we are able to interact with participants in person, but rather, we can reach participants across state and even international borders through video technology. While this technology is certainly not new, this study highlights how qualitative researchers can continue to utilize the sources in their own studies. Because the pandemic forced so many to move their work and school online, many participants will already feel comfortable in the online format. This tool is especially useful when research is being conducted over a vast amount of space, or when travel to various locations is not feasible. The use of technology decreases the monetary costs of conducting qualitative research. Allowing participants to choose their location for interviews may also make them more comfortable in the interview setting. There are, of course limitations to this

approach, such as technology and social barriers, as will be discussed in the limitations section.

I do not, however, propose that this technology should take the place of in-person observations. Ethnographers know the importance of participant and unobtrusive observations in the collection of cultural data. Ethnographers also recognize the importance of utilizing multiple methods as a form of triangulation. I suggest that ethnographers, in particular, should continue to utilize online video technology, such as Zoom, as an additional data collection tool even when the pandemic ends.

Along with using technology in the data collection process, technology became an essential element of the data analysis process. AtlasTi allowed me to easily categorize transcripts, code sections of text, and write and organize memos. AtlasTi cloud also allows for easy data sharing among co-researchers. While that was not highly utilized in this study, online data analysis tools should be considered by qualitative researchers when working on teams.

When considering what tools to use, qualitative researchers should use those that best fit their research questions. The use of video call technology and online data analysis software allows researchers to connect with participants previously out-of-reach and provides organization in collaboration with other scholars. Many academics were forced to move their research online. As we re-open, I propose that we should not do away with these new data collection and analysis tools, but rather, we should look for ways in which these tools can strengthen our qualitative inquiries.

**Limitations**

This study had several limitations related to data collection. The primary limitations were related to COVID-19 and the inability to conduct in-person interviews. The ability to connect with participants in semi-structured, conversational style interviews is extremely important. Participants need to feel comfortable with the interviewer in order to divulge information. In my own training and experience, participants are made more comfortable through information sharing or divulgence, and through body language and proxemics. This study was also limited by technological challenges. Several of the students in this study were living in a region experiencing the technological divide. That is, not all participants had access to reliable Internet, especially when they were at home over the holidays, when most interviews were conducted. The inability to control the background of where the interviews were conducted also posed unique challenges in data collection. In particular, it was important that participants did not feel that family members or friends could overhear their interview, especially since the interviews were about personal political conversations, a somewhat touchy subject. The greatest limitation in this study was time. As will be discussed later in this section, this type of research takes a lot of time. Set backs with data collection and the need to reach research deadlines posed the greatest limitation to this research.

The first limitation related to data collection was the inability to conduct in-person interviews. In the early stages of this study, I was limited in my ability to personally connect with the participants. When I conduct interviews, I consider communication theories, such as Berger and Calbrese's (1975) uncertainty reduction theory (URT). Uncertainty in new communication encounters can be reduced by amount of personal

information shared or knowledge about the interlocutor, liking, and perceived similarities. When I interview participants, I try to share information about myself and to be "real" with participants. I do not want them to perceive me as an elitist researcher. In this study especially, I tried to converge my communication style with participants' style. I typically find it relatively easy to adapt my conversation style to participants' style. In conducting this study, I found communication accommodation to be especially difficult in the online format. I ended up having a 'warm-up' period, in which the first several interviews did not yield data as riche as latter ones did. These interviews were quite a bit shorter and did not have the same level of storytelling and description as the later interviews. I believe this issue was due to my need for a warm-up period. I was not yet comfortable in the online setting, and thus did not converge my communication style in the early interviews as well as I did in the later interviews. Nevertheless, the first interviews revealed important similarities across rural student experiences and were an important element of this study.

The use of Zoom also limited my range of body language, facial expressions, and proxemics. Again, this issue is closely related to creating a space in which participants feel comfortable disclosing personal information to the researcher. In my own interview training, I was taught to sit at an angle from the participants, so they do not feel like they are being interrogated. Eye contact is also an important nonverbal element of interviews that can be interrupted in online formats. While eye contact still exists, it is mediated through the computer screen. Rather than looking directly at the camera, you must look at the screen. While video interviews are obviously better than phone interviews when it

comes to engaging eye contact, they do not provide the same warmth and encouragement as appropriate eye contact during in-person interviews.

When conducting interviews, it is important that the participant feels comfortable opening up and disclosing personal information related to the study to the researcher. As mentioned before, adjusting spoken behaviors to converge with participants' spoken behaviors is one way of accomplishing this goal. Gestures and body language can also be adjusted to converge with participants' body language. This is impossible to do in an online setting where the interviewer and interviewee are limited to the space of the computer screen and camera. As I reflect on the quality of the interviews conducted for this study, I know that they are strong and contain rich data. However, I cannot help but wonder if they would have been even richer had they been conducted in-person. I question if the participants would have opened-up even more with me had we been in-person with my full range of nonverbal expression available.

Internet technology also became a limitation in this study. Several of the interviews were with students whose families lived in rural areas—without the infrastructure needed for reliable Internet connection. For some interviews, this meant audio and visual connection cut in and out at times while interviews were conducted. This hurdle also pushed back my data collection, as some participants could not engage in online interviews while home for winter break. They had to wait until they returned to campus where they had access to the Internet. Working with this population made salient for me the technological divide that still exists in our country. Many who live in rural areas simply do not have the same access to quality, high-speed, Internet.

Time posed the greatest limitation in this study. First, it was essential that interviews were conducted in a timely manner in relation to the presidential elections and other political events occurring. The original goal was to conduct all interviews just before winter break starting in December of 2020, and during winter break. This goal turned out to be impossible as several participants lacked Internet access and shared close quarters with family members. Therefore, several of the interviews were delayed to January. The political conversations held during the previous year's elections were still salient for the participants who were interviewed later in January. These students also reported having conversations with family members and friends about the January 6th Capitol insurrection (which some participants referred to as a protest). The focus groups were held once all interviews were complete. Originally, I was concerned that these students would no longer be having as many political conversations. However, according to the participants, political events continued to spark everyday political talk with family and friends. The focus groups took place further away from the elections than I had hoped, and, therefore, conversations about the elections and debates were not as salient. However, political conversations were still occurring in hometowns and on campus.

In addition, the available amount of time to collect data also posed a limitation to this study. Truly ethnographic research often takes months or even years of time in the field for the researcher to be immersed in a culture. Having lived in both cultures certainly helped my inquiry, but due to academic timelines and a global pandemic, the data collection was limited to online interviews and focus groups. This research would be greatly improved by spending time observing real-life family conversations, and by

visiting students in their hometowns. As discussed in the future directions section below, I hope to continue this line of research through participant observation and unobtrusive observations in hometowns, along with additional interviews.

**Future Directions for Research**

In continuing this line of research, more work is needed in examining cultural influence on political behaviors. This study examined political behaviors related to political discussions. I propose that researchers in the fields of communication, political science, and anthropology continue examining how the varied cultures across the United States influence other political behaviors, such as voting. Mixed methods approaches may prove especially useful in this line of inquiry. Quantitative approaches may allow for the examination of various identities' influence on political worldview and political behaviors. Qualitative approaches may allow for insight into how citizens living in various American co-cultures experience politics differently, along with insight into the processes of political identity formation and negotiation of various social and collective identities during political conversations. This area of research is ripe for inquiry. Along with incorporating mixed methods approaches, researchers would greatly benefit from interdisciplinary collaboration. This study drew from literature in various fields, including communication, political science, sociology, psychology, and anthropology. More research is needed on the overlap between self-image, social and collective identities, political behavior, and culture.

Additional research should also be conducted in states that have higher proportions of Democratic voters. This study focused on political conversations held by

rural college students in a conservative and predominantly Republican state. While both conservative and liberal students experienced feeling like they had to change their self-portrayal in conversations at home versus on campus, and both noted personal growth through political conversations, the bigger changes were noted by those students who held more politically liberal worldviews and felt like outsiders at home. Additional research might be conducted to understand what this transition looks like in more blue states. Research questions might focus on how rural conservative students work to maintain their sense of self through political conversations on a truly liberal campus. A more urban environment than that offered at the University of Oklahoma's Norman campus might also make for a rich context in which to study this issue.

Much of the previous political socialization literature and social identity literature comes from a postpositivist perspective. While this research is certainly important, my study highlights the importance of understanding the cultural contexts in which political socialization occurs, along with providing insight into the real experiences related to how these students navigate their various social identities in political conversation. Furthermore, my study provides insight into how young adults experience political socialization, and the shaping of political identity as a social identity, through political discussion. As a call for future research, I implore others to examine the important role of culture in the process of political socialization. Furthermore, I call for additional qualitative research on this topic, wherefor we can gain insight into how individuals experience various modes of political socialization.

Finally, I call for additional research related to contextual factors that may impact political socialization. Future research should especially focus on elements of socialization that impact how young adults begin to connect with a political identity or learn to navigate various social identities related to their political beliefs and behaviors. As seen in this study, interpersonal interactions with others informed how students negotiated their own identities related to political beliefs. More research is needed on political conversations. Additionally, more research is needed on the role of family communication. Past research has examined how family communication patterns impact perceived outcomes of political conversations (see Johnson et al., 2019). Along with examining cultural factors, I call for future research to examine family political discussion more closely.

**Confronting Self**

This study required my own personal reflection on what it meant to be a college student from a rural area, my own political conversations during my time as an undergraduate, and what those political conversations look like for me today. I also reflected on my own biases that might color how I interpreted students' experiences. As someone torn between hometown and college politics, I tirelessly work to maintain a nonjudgmental stance in my political encounters with others. However, I know that I am not always successful in this endeavor. I was once very conservative in my political values, especially during my first two years of college. I recall how ostracized I felt when a roommate ostracized me for having Fox News on. In one interview, a student recalled

having the same experience. During the interview, I could not help but be transported to my sophomore self, feeling like an outsider on my own college campus.

As I neared the end of my undergraduate time, my own life story led me to become more liberal in my political beliefs. I believe this shift was largely due to my exposure to others through everyday encounters, that is, through communication with others. As I was exposed to a more diverse environment, I began to question my own beliefs. Traveling abroad in Europe and living in Germany made me question my stance on issues like healthcare and social services. Witnessing the struggle of refugees and immigrants forced me to question my beliefs regarding American protectionism. Even my personal spiritual and religious beliefs changed with my political beliefs. As I became more liberal, I noticed that I had trouble relating with family members during political conversations. My newfound political sense of self made me feel like an insider on campus and an outsider at home.

Early on in this transformation, I was very protective of my views, and I felt I needed to defend myself. As I became more secure in my political sense of self, I became more mindful during political conversations. Some of the more liberal student in my study were already very secure in their political sense of self and carried a profound mindfulness when communicating in both communities. Others, however, still maintained the need to defend themselves, the sense of mindlessness. As I listened to stories of struggling to belong at home, of family members trying to ‘convert’ students to being Republican, and of not speaking up at the dinner table political conversations

because you know that you carry the outsider opinion—I was once again transported to my own hometown experience.

My own transformation helped me to empathize with students of both conservative and liberal leanings, as I have personally experienced what it is like to interact with university colleagues and hometown family and friends— from both conservative and liberal perspectives. I was able to put myself into my participants' shoes in interpretive inquiry in ways that others may not have been able to do. My life experiences were central in several components of this study. First, they shaped the conception of the study. I wanted to write a dissertation that both resonated with my own experiences and that made theoretical contributions. Second, my experiences helped me with the interview process—to form meaningful interview questions and connect with participants during interviews. Third, in analyzing transcripts, I worked to take the participants' perspectives. My ability to empathize with participants due to my own experiences helped me to take the rural student standpoint in the analysis. Ultimately, this study would not be what it was without my ability to take this standpoint. This ability provided invaluable insight into how rural college students experience political conversations; an insight that I have developed thorough my own experiences as a rural college student coupled with rich theoretical and methodological grounding.

# CHAPTER VII

# CONCLUSION AND FINAL RECCOMENDATIONS

This study took place in a region that seems politically unidimensional. In just looking at the voting patterns in this part of the country, the state of Oklahoma is painted red. Across Oklahoma, this color prevails—red dirt, the red color of the University of Oklahoma, red rusted barbed wire lining the rural roads. As illustrated in this study, from interviews and focus groups with rural Oklahoman college students attending the University of Oklahoma, it is apparent that young adults in this region are influenced by more than just the conservative, red state politics that prevail here. Other elements of social and cultural identities come together to influence how these students think about politics. Socio-economic status, the vastness of the land, tight-knit communities, religion, and race, all influenced how this group of college students thought and talked about political events in 2020 and early 2021.

Participants in this study also described hometowns and college campuses as carrying separate values, beliefs, and traditions, and perceived the two locations as differing political environments. What most stood out for participants was the level of diversity on campus compared to their hometowns, and how that diversity opened the door for exposure to a variety of political beliefs. Rural conservative students often felt identity threats on campus but felt a stronger sense of belonging when talking politics in their hometowns. The opposite could be said for rural liberal students. Most were able to find like-minded cohorts on campus but felt isolated when talking politics with

hometown family members and friends. Both groups used political conversations to navigate differences between their hometown and campus communities.

This study focused on the intertwining of political identity with identity politics. In the research design phase of this study, I originally hoped to develop a theory of how rural college students develop their sense of political identity. The data collected simply did not support the idea that rural students formed a strong political identity through political conversations. While several participants described themselves as being firmly Republican or Democrat, most explained that these identifiers did not matter as much when it came to political conversations as other identifiers, such as sexuality, religion, and race. When describing what the opposing party was like, or the relevant outgroup, participants relied on other social identities. For example, liberal participants defined the Democratic Party as being the party of "angry old White men." Likewise, several conservative students described the Republican Party as being the party for Christians and the Democratic Party being more open to the LGBTQ+ community. Religion and sexuality were often linked when comparing parties for these students. Both groups of participants used religion to explain their political beliefs. In political conversations with others, rather than trying to navigate what it meant to be Republican or what it meant to be Democrat, participants underwent a negotiation process in which they decided which identity politics mattered most in that situation. Time and time again, being offended, backing up arguments, sharing ideas, and learning from others in interpersonal settings involved the negotiation of various social identities.

Rather than political conversations simply shaping how rural Oklahoman college students viewed themselves and others *politically*, or their political identities, my findings reveal ways in which political conversations shape the *grander view of self*. As young adults, college students are in a phase of identity development in which they come to terms both with who they are as individuals outside of their parents' homes, along with who they are in relation to others. At the group level, participants described the need to feel like they belonged, and often struggled when their political beliefs were not affirmed. On a more positive note, other students described a sense of self-confidence that grew out of being able to share their political beliefs. They described a transformative growth that took place through having a year's worth of political conversations with friends and family with whom they both agreed and disagreed. Others described the constant wave of political conversations as helping them to be more mindful of the other persons in political conversations. Because these students continually traveled between two cultures, they were able to experience how context matters-- how their parents and schoolmates were socialized to believe what they believed. Furthermore, those who sought out non-likeminded others in political conversations came to see the other as an individual, not just as a member of a political party. Some participants even described developing a new sense of self that could comfortably code-switch between two regions, that could act as chameleons in political conversations.

Navigating identity politics and political identity in the big red dot appears to be much more complex than just wading through various political beliefs. In interpersonal conversations surrounding political topics, rural Oklahoma college students must

navigate various social identities, while considering a mix of cultural norms. Running parallel to the mixing of social and political identities in conversations, students must navigate their broader sense of self. Not only are they navigating politics in the big red dot, but they are also on a journey of self-discovery, deciding who they are and who they are not.

**Overview of Study**

The first two chapters of this dissertation provided the context and theoretical framework from which the study was built. In the first chapter, I provided an overview of the political climate of the time. Of key importance here was the blending of local level politics, such as events happening with the Unite Norman movement, with the larger public sphere focusing on issues such as those surrounding the 2020 presidential debates and elections and policies surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic. In the opening chapter, I also discussed the importance of the rural electorate and how identity politics made their way into national level politics. I further explained why rural Oklahoman college students provide an interesting context to study issues related to identity and political socialization. I provided the original goals of the study, which were to gain insight into how rural Oklahoma college students experienced the political turbulence of 2020 through their political conversations. I was especially interested in the cultural boundary crossing journey that these students had to travel when talking politics in hometowns and on the college campus and how they navigated their multi-layered identities during interpersonal interactions.

In the second chapter, I discussed relevant literature and key theories. First, I explored what it meant to be rural and how ruralness has been examined in ways similar to the study at hand. In conducting this research, I followed a line of scholars studying politics in Rural America. In particular, Lay (2012), Hochschild (2016), Cramer (2016), and Van Duyn (2018) were all influential in forming how I thought about politics in rural America, and how I approached the subject matter. I answered their call for political research in rural areas. Next, I reviewed work on political socialization, which is defined as the "learning of social patterns corresponding to his societal positions as mediated through various agencies of society" (Hyman, 1959, p. 25). I focused on modes of socialization and the societal structures that shape political socialization, such as news media, family, primary and secondary school, and finally, the socialization that occurs in college as young adults. I then discussed how political socialization informs political identity and discussed the overlap of political identity and identity politics.

In the second half of chapter two, I explained theories of identity utilized to gain deeper insight into identity politics and political identity. I described theories of identity development, linking back to Erikson's (1959) model of identity development. I explained the complex and layered nature of identities (Hecht, 1993), along with the nature of identity, or the view of the self, as being something that changes over time, but remains somewhat stable (Wiegert, Teigt, & Teigt, 1986). I also highlighted the role of communication in socially constructing our view of self and others (Hatoss, 2012). I continued by discussing how Tajfel and Turner's (1979) SIT explains the "us" versus "them" phenomena so present in American society, and how social identity may

influence rural college students' navigation of identity politics and political identities in political conversations. Finally, I reviewed Ting-Toomey's (2005) INT to help with explanations pertaining to how rural Oklahoman college students navigate their various layered personal and social identities when talking politics in their hometowns and on the college campus.

Through the rich theoretical framework constructed in the literature review, I was able to form three theoretically relevant research questions: (1) How do cultural factors and elements of identity politics influence political conversations among rural Oklahoman college students? (2) How do political conversations shape political identity formation among rural Oklahoman college students? (3) What are the outcomes of political identity negotiation for Oklahoman rural college students? The three research questions shaped the research methods, which were covered in chapter three of the dissertation. The research questions informed research design by shaping the questions I asked participants and what methods I used for data collection. The research questions informed both data collection and data analysis, helping me to stay theoretically grounded throughout the duration of this project.

As discussed in the third chapter, the method chapter, I conducted online interviews and focus groups with rural Oklahoman college students attending the University of Oklahoma. Students were recruited through an email recruitment tool and prescreened to ensure that they fit the study criteria: participants whose hometowns were in rural Oklahoma and who had spent most of their childhoods in rural Oklahoma, who were between the ages of 18 and 24, and were full time college students at the University

of Oklahoma, who spent a sufficient amount of time in both their hometowns and on the college campus, and who had political conversations in both locations, and who showed interest in politics. A total of 22 students participated in one-on-one interviews, and 12 participated in focus groups. After completing interviews and transcriptions, data were analyzed using AtlasTi. Originally, a grounded theory approach was taken. Following member checking, data was re-analyzed utilizing a more flexible approach to finding and analyzing elements of discourse and culture in the transcripts.

In every stage of the study, from research design, data collection, and data analysis to results reporting and discussion, I took a qualitative, interpretive approach. I worked to understand the subjective experiences of the participants: rural Oklahoman college students. In doing so, I utilized my own experiences as a member of the University of Oklahoma, my time spent in rural Oklahoma, and my experience as a rural college student. I also worked to confront my own biases and worked to stay reflexive throughout data collection and analysis, while remaining theoretically grounded and empathizing with participants.

Findings were discussed in the fourth and fifth chapters. The fourth chapter explored relationships between rural Oklahoman culture, political socialization, and the influence of culture on the political conversations held by rural Oklahoman college students. More specifically, this chapter examined themes that resonated across the political conversations discussed by participants, including rural Protestantism as the basis for social conservativism, the juxtaposition of wide-open spaces and living in an echo-chamber of beliefs, the role of agriculture and hard work for the cultivation of

rugged individualism, and the linking of Whiteness with rural Oklahoman culture. I defined rural Protestantism as the values, beliefs, and traditions tied to Protestant Christianity that define group membership in this region and are closely linked with social conservativism and political beliefs. The next theme, wide-open spaces, linked geographical vastness with protectionism and the feeling of having the freedom to "do what you want." Juxtaposing wide-open spaces is the description of how insular and isolating hometown life can be, where everyone seems to have the same view and repeats what those around them say. Participants described hometown folk as being hardworking, and again, feeling the need to protect what they have worked so hard for. Finally, what it means to be White, or not White, was described as an important ingroup/outgroup marker.

The fifth chapter contained my findings related to how rural Oklahoman college students used political conversations to navigate differences between their hometowns and the college campus and formulate their sense of belonging. This chapter told the stories of two groups: conservative students who felt politically lost on campus, and liberal students who felt political lost in their hometowns. Conservative students described being primed from hometown conversations to fear the liberal campus. While on campus, many were exposed to diverse beliefs for the first time in their lives and became guarded in sharing their own political beliefs. Some described feeling attacked or judged and feeling like the political outsider on campus. They all, however, were able to find like-minded others, who provided them comfort during political conversations.

Liberal students also described finding like-minded others on campus. Several described feeling excited to move to campus exactly due to this reason. Liberal students described feeling like outsiders at home when politics came up in discussions. This feeling also happened on campus, at times, though, they found solace in friends with similar beliefs. Others described feeling more comfortable talking to friends on campus who had differing beliefs, because they were used to this experience from their hometown conversations. In both groups, those students who described successful negotiation of their layered identities in political conversations developed mindfulness that carried over to both hometown and campus conversations. Even those students who did not describe developing mindfulness described feeling more confident in who they were and what they believed. Ultimately, political conversations helped the students in my study come to a sense of who they were and where they belonged.

The sixth chapter discussed these findings further. In this chapter, I began by connecting the findings to each of the three research questions. Next, I discussed ways in which literature on ruralness, political socialization, political identity and identity politics, identity development, social identity, and identity negotiation relate to the findings. Following the discussion of theoretical implications, I discuss implications for college campuses, calling for diversity and inclusion classes to take special interest in providing exposure to this part of the student body and including political conversations as part of their curriculum. I also discussed ways in which these findings mirror the broader political atmosphere in the United States during this time. Next, I discussed methodological implications, specifically noting ways in which the use of technology,

such as conference calling technology like Zoom, can be used for conducting online interviews and focus groups. These tools may help researchers reach participants that live far away from the research site, while still having the ability to read some body language between participant and interviewer during interviews. Conducting interview online may also help make participants more comfortable, as they can choose the setting for their interview. I also discussed the possible benefits for using tools like AtlasTi Cloud—online data analysis software. Keeping data online means it can be accessed from any computer, which makes for easy collaboration. I then discussed methodological limitations, especially those related to the use of technology, such as conducting online interviews with a group of participants who lived in regions impacted by the technological divide. I also discussed limitations related to time and the inability to conduct research in the field. After the methodological implications, I considered future directions for this line of research, specifically, ways in which I might expand this study to an in-depth field ethnography by visiting families in their hometowns. I also called for mixed-methods approaches in this area of research, and highlighted the need to study rural student political socialization and political conversations in other regions. Finally, I provided a reflection on my own experiences conducting this research and ways in which I had to confront my own biases and past in order to empathize with participants during stages of research design, data collection, and data analysis.

This chapter is the final one, the conclusion. In this section, I have provided my final thoughts on this study and an overview of the study. In the subsection below, I close this study with a call to action.

## A Call to Action

In the discussion section, I proposed that colleges should consider including political conversations in their diversity and inclusion courses, and pointed out that rural students, especially, need the diversity training offered by universities. My final call to action, however, is not to universities. Rather, my call to action is for change at the individual level. It is my hope that anyone who reads this study, or an iteration of this study, stops to think about how they might be impacting others in their own political conversations. We all know how easy it is to fall into an "us" versus "them" mentality when talking about politics, especially when talking about politics with someone with whom one disagrees. It is very easy to get defensive and even verbally attack the other person. My most important take away from this study is simple: words matter. The ongoing pattern of attacking others in political conversations is toxic. The students in my study discussed ways in which their political conversations not only shaped their view of politics, but how these discussions shaped their overall self-esteem and sense of belonging. These conversations shaped how my participants viewed themselves and others, and how they interacted with people in their direct social circles, such as family members, long after the elections were over.

My call for action is to the readers of this study: be more mindful when participating in political conversations! It can be argued that mindfulness, though influenced by Eastern traditions, has become part of the American zeitgeist as we grapple with increased polarization and uncertainty in our society (Huang et al., 2017). Parents teach their children to be more mindful, people post Facebook posts about their daily

mindfulness practice, adults take yoga and mindfulness classes to increase their awareness of self and others, and self-help books are purchased on mindfulness in everyday life. While mindfulness is becoming a catchphrase in the American lingo, as reported by my participants, and in my own experience of 2020, mindfulness was often times completely forgotten during political conversations.

The type of mindfulness that I call for is communication mindfulness. Ting-Toomey (1988) discussed the connection between Buddhist teachings on mindfulness and mindfulness in communication research. As theorized in INT, mindfulness and communication competence are closely related in intercultural and interpersonal encounters through multiple interrelated means: integrating knowledge about self and the other, remaining open to other's ideas and backgrounds, and maintaining in-the-moment and not jumping to judgements based on group level judgements (Ting-Toomey, 2007). From a cognitive perspective, mindfulness during communication practices means having the ability to create new cognitive schema or mental categories by being open to new and sometimes unfamiliar information and being aware of the presence of multiple perspectives (Langer, 1989). Mindfulness, Langer and Moldoveanu (2000) explain, is defined as an active process, one that takes effort on the part of interactants.

My first recommendation related to mindfulness is for individualization rather than categorization in political conversations. Rather than looking for ways in which the other interactant fits into a category, individualization allows for the conversants to see each other as they truly are. This requires open-ness on the part of both parties in interpersonal conversations. It also requires empathy, or the ability to try and see the

world from the other person's perspective. Second, I recommend mindfulness as a practice in political conversation. Finally, related to mindfulness, I want to encourage the notion of interconnectedness. By realizing that we are all connected, and how we treat each other in interpersonal conversations impacts everyone involved beyond the speech event, we can slowly begin to untangle the great divide that has ravished this nation.

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# APPENDIX A:

# PRESCREEN

**Rural, Oklahoman, registered to vote college students**

RELIGION:

What is your religion and/or denomination?

How often do you attend church?

How important is religion to your immediate family (Mom, Dad, Siblings)?

Are you born again?

POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT:

Are you registered to vote?

Did you vote in the last election (2020 presidential election)?

How interested would you say you are in politics?

How often would you say you talk politics with other people?

How important are politics to your direct family (Mom, Dad, Siblings)

CAMPUS LIFE:

Do you live with your parent(s)?

If no, how often do you go home?

About how many hours/week do you spend on campus? (Estimate)

Had you ever lived away from home before you went to college?

RURALNESS:

Estimate: How many people were in your high school graduating class?

When did your family move to the place where they live now?

Would you consider your hometown, or the place where you spent most of your childhood, to be ‘rural’ or ‘country’?

What is the nearest city/what is the name of your hometown?

City_____, State _____

# APPENDIX B:

# INTERVIEW AND FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOLS

## Interview Protocol

**Semi-structured interviews**

Political conversations include anything dealing with policy; local, state, or national elections, political or public figures; and/or conversations about news coverage dealing with elected leaders or elections.

1. Describe your hometown.
2. Describe hometown politics.
3. How do you view yourself politically?
    a. What does it mean to be a Republican?
    b. What does it mean to be a Democrat?
4. How does being rural or from 'the country' shape your view on politics?
    a. What other elements of your 'self' shape your view on politics? (religious, ethnic, as a college student…).
5. Can you describe a conversation that you have had with college peers about the 2020 elections or current political events?
    a. How did you divulge or hide your own beliefs in this conversation? Have you had similar experiences in other conversations?

6. Still thinking about conversations with college peers: What tensions occurred, if any, and what was happening internally (thoughts, feelings, etc.) when talking about the 2020 elections or current political events?
7. Can you describe a conversation that you have had with your parents or people from your hometown about the 2020 elections or current political events?
    a. How did you divulge or hide your own beliefs in this conversation? Have you had similar experiences in other conversations?
8. Still thinking about conversations with parents and people from your hometown: What tensions occurred, if any, and what was happening internally (thoughts, feelings, etc.) when talking about the 2020 elections or current political events?
9. How did events of 2020 and conversations about 2020 political events encourage or discourage your political involvement this year?

## Focus Group Protocol

**Semi-Structured**

Begin with overview of study. Provide definitions for rural, political conversations, tensions in conversations

Okay, now that we have key terms, let's introduce ourselves. I'll begin…

1. Introductions
2. In what ways, if any, do you all think that rural students experience political conversations differently than your peers coming from more urban/city environments?

3. What tensions do you experience in political conversations?
    a. Probe for naming and description of tension
    b. Probe for how the tension was experienced
4. Does anyone experience different tensions when talking with family members or people from your hometown than when talking with people in college?
    a. Probe for naming and description of tension
    b. Probe for how the tension was experienced
5. Based on what you all have said, this is the list of tensions that you came up with…
    a. List tensions thus far.
    b. Would anyone like to add to the list?
    c. Do any tensions need further definition?
6. Let's move on to strategies for navigating political conversations—and overcoming various tensions.
    a. How do you all navigate political conversations?
        i. With people you agree with?
        ii. With people you disagree with?
    b. Let's come up with a list of strategies for other students navigating political conversations.
    c. Here are the strategies you came up with…
    d. Would anyone like to add to the list?
    e. Do any tensions need further definition?

7. As we conclude our focus group, I want to provide you all with the final lists of tensions and strategies for political conversations. My final question for you is this:
    a. What do you think are the larger outcomes of talking with others during an election year?