Small-Town Politics, Big-Time Consequences: Understanding Culturally Motivated Voting Decisions in Putnam County, New York

by

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INTRODUCTION

I grew up in a small town in New York, north of Manhattan, in an area characterized by rolling hills, yellow school buses, and a bucolic aura of the archetypical middle-class lifestyle. I was born in Putnam Valley, and was raised there for eighteen years, until the day that I left for college. My father was raised there as well; Putnam Valley is a town that people do not often leave, where generations of families coexist with one another for decades upon decades. However, even though my family and our history are deeply attached to the backdrop of the Putnam Valley world, I have always felt a distinct lack of belonging there.

My hometown is a deeply politically conservative place, a cultural trait that has been a source of significant disconnect between my Democrat family members and the area that we have always called home. Putnam Valley is one of the most familiar places in the world to me, and yet, I have never been able to understand these politics that are so entrenched within everyone and everything there. After leaving to attend Wesleyan, one of the most liberal schools in the country, the inner polarization I felt between myself and my home grew. However, my desire to understand my childhood friends’ and neighbors’ beliefs, rather than just be angered by them, grew as well. In the aftermath of the 2016 Presidential election, which delivered an outcome that left a majority of Putnam Valley overjoyed, this desire took on urgency as unprecedented as the state of American politics, and so the idea for this project was born.

In November of 2016, a man with no political experience to speak of and a campaign platform grounded in hollow neoliberal economic policy, baseless promises
about bettering the nation, and blatant racism and misogyny was chosen as the leader of the United States. The voting base that led the charge toward this result was made up significantly of working-class, non-urban, white Christians. This group of people, feeling abandoned by their government in the wake of economic and cultural changes that they saw as negatively affecting their jobs, towns, and general lifestyles, found the appeasement and attention they were seeking in this candidate.

Donald Trump listened to their grievances; he promised solutions, however vague and improbable. And as a group, they turned out to have enough political capital to elect him. Yet, despite this power and the sheer number of people implicated in it, the Left has often labeled this entire class of voters as stupid, illogical, and, a particular favorite in the world of academia, as misunderstanding their own socioeconomic interests. These condescending accusations serve virtually no analytical purpose. Not only does this attitude fuel the fire of anti-elitism, which is itself an impetus of this political movement, it also does nothing to contribute to finding a solution. In order to truly understand why a majority of the United States’ voting population chose the President that it did, this group’s self-identified interests must not be brushed aside as simply incorrect and uninformed. Instead, we must look at the areas and populations that contributed to this electoral outcome and attempt to see their lives and self-identified struggles with as little bias as possible. Through this paper, I want to be able to fathom the political mindset of one such area, the place that raised me. In doing so, hope to contribute to an understanding of this current political moment in general.
My town of Putnam Valley is located in Putnam County, New York. The name “New York” elicits associations with the City and, perhaps, wealth, progressive politics, and a melting pot of cultures and histories. Yet just an hour’s drive north of that liberal bastion is a completely different world. Small town oriented, demographically homogenous, and characteristically conservative, Putnam County is essentially antithetical to those typical New York affiliations. Putnam and its incorporated towns have existed in peace for many years, but even an East-coast location and proximity to the city at the center of the world has not made the area immune to the plights that have been facing small-town America, the same plights that stimulated an entire portion of the United States’ population to generate a grassroots campaign that would eventually elect our 45th President.

Putnam County is worth examining for a multitude of reasons. On the one hand, in many ways, it can be seen as almost a microcosm of American Trump voters in general, and its various town-specific and countywide political events over the past thirty years can be seen as crystallizations of the larger political battles and issues that this group fights and faces. The area shares a multitude of characteristics with the classic Rust Belt regions that have served as a symbol of Trump support and the general far-Right populist trend. In both the Rust Belt and in Putnam, there is significant homogeneity in the form of an overwhelmingly white, working-class and Christian population, which has led to a deep-seated fear of other communities. The two areas have also shared a crucial population and culture shift as a result of country-wide deindustrialization in the last forty or so years. In a broader sense, Putnam voters have exhibited a strong distrust of government in general, which also
tends to be a cornerstone of the anti-statist lean that can be found in within the national Trump voter base.

While Putnam County’s microcosmic properties make it a viable subject for study in one sense, its uniqueness makes it an interesting topic in another. Putnam differs from other “typical” Republican areas in that its population is majority religiously and culturally Catholic. For decades, the Catholic working-class has been a staple of Democratic Party support, particularly in regards to worker’s rights and union politics. Today, they instead serve as a large portion of the Republican voting base. Many have written this switch off as solely the product of the polarization of the pro-life, pro-choice debate; however, other, underlying factors are plentiful, and deserve to be given equal if not more consideration. Particularly in the 2016 Presidential election, the Republican position on and recognition of this group of people, the white Catholic working class, and their interests appealed to the demographic enough to gain their noteworthy backing. Specifically, political backlash in the Putnam area has come in the form of increasingly anti-statist and tax revolt-based voting tendencies and movements.

Anti-tax sentiment has repeatedly been characterized as “against the interests” of the very group expressing it. However, as will be further explored, the self-interest of Catholics, who often use and pay for their own private institutions, does not necessarily include supporting public ones through taxation. Therefore, in Putnam specifically, due to the strong Catholic vein that runs through the county, this attitude is both dismissive and incorrect. Another unique attribute of Putnam County within the frame of Trump support is its reaction to deindustrialization. The Putnam regional
The economy has been able to offset decline in industrial activity through an increasingly thriving tourist economy, a move that other similar areas that are not located within such close proximity to a major city have not had the opportunity to make. However, while this economic turnaround has prevented the towns from ceasing to exist, a fate that has befallen similar towns in the Midwest, it has brought with it a new host of issues. Tourism has led to unwanted development for towns and townspeople that have been set in their ways for decades, and worries about rising property taxes are abound in local votes and movements. While Putnam towns struggle to stay afloat in this new economic reality, residents struggle against the intrusion of tourists and weekend homeowners within their towns, fighting any type of development that may promote these gentrifying tendencies in any way they can.

The topics outlined above are certainly not new areas of study; however, much of the literature that currently exists takes on a tone that may be less than constructive. The prime example of this is Thomas Frank’s *What’s the Matter with Kansas?* It has long been the default by which all thought on the topic of white working-class political backlash is based. When the Trump phenomenon is discussed in academia, it is always done with a foundational assumption that Frank’s analysis and views are correct. I believe that this assumption is simply convenient rather than accurate. I have found many flaws in Frank’s writing, which is both paternalistic and limited. Frank characterizes the “great backlash” as a movement of people who are focused on cultural issues and are thus tricked by politicians who “talk Christ and
walk corporate”¹, using the cultural elements that these voters care about to coerce them into also backing damaging economic policies. He plainly states this view in the introduction to his book²:

> “Cultural anger is marshaled to achieve economic ends. And it is these economic achievements – not the forgettable skirmishes of the never-ending culture wars - that are the movement’s greatest monuments.” (Frank 17)

However, within this characterization, Frank’s glib reduction of the economic components of the backlash misses key elements, some of which call into question his bedrock assumption that the economic policies of the Right in no way serve the self-interest of the backlash movement participators who support them. For example, on the economic side, one of the signature elements of the backlash he discusses is the tax revolt movement, particularly pushback against increases in local property taxes. This economic issue could surely not be characterized as corporate, and is, as my analysis will show, incredibly important to the people who make up the backlash movement; nonetheless, Frank has nothing to say about tax revolt politics. He is also largely silent on issues of development and gentrification, which are strongly tied to working-class economic interests.

In addition to the problems with his economic analysis, Frank is bluntly dismissive of cultural politics, such as civil rights, gay rights, and abortion rights, all of which he would characterize as “forgettable skirmishes”. Though he believes that

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² Ibid. Frank, Thomas, p. 17.
³ Ibid. Frank, Thomas, p. 20.
⁴ Ibid. Frank, Thomas, p. 17.
these issues are merely “marshaled to achieve economic ends”, Republican politicians have in fact delivered in all of these areas through such avenues as legislation and judicial appointments. Thus, they do not only “talk Christ”, they also walk it. Additionally, he thinks that the Left embraced a cultural politics of “gleeful obscenities”\(^3\) that are unimportant and counterproductive toward the liberal cause, chiefly because they provoke the backlash. However, my interpretation is that it is not the gleefully obscene Left that is eliciting this pushback, but rather the condescending elitist shaming Left. In fact, Frank himself participates in this same condescension when he discusses backlash participants using words such as “deranged”, as he does when articulating the overall goal of his work\(^4\):

> “My aim is to examine the backlash from top to bottom and to understand the species of derangement that has brought so many ordinary people to such a self-damaging political extreme.” (Frank 20)

In these moments, which occur throughout *What’s the Matter with Kansas?* and which embed themselves in the crux of his overall argument, Frank is not acting the part of the helpful academic who teaches his readers to appreciate and understand Kansas, as he imagines himself to be; rather, he is contributing to elitist cultural assumptions, and to the legitimacy of a group that ennobles itself by shaming others. Essentially, Frank is not only willfully ignorant toward the issues that my analysis will show as significant motivations, which warrant more than just a caricature, for the voting decisions made among white working-class people in Putnam County, he is also a supporter of the elitist shaming force that drives this political movement. The

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\(^3\) Ibid. Frank, Thomas, p. 20.  
\(^4\) Ibid. Frank, Thomas, p. 17.
way in which he and many of his contemporaries disregard pertinent cultural issues as
distractions rather than legitimate opinions is both dangerous and counterproductive.

In my study, I find that the interplay of culture and economic interest is a
central motivation in the decision to vote Republican for the citizens of Putnam County. I will show, in conflict with Frank, that these are not diversions thrust upon simpletons, but rather reasonable cultural and economic grievances that this voting base sought to be addressed. In the first two chapters, I will develop a correction of Frank through my localized focus on tax revolt and development politics, an economic component that he completely misses in his work. Both of these chapters will break down his strict delineation between culture and economics by showing links between cultural institutions such as the Catholic Church and economic issues such as rebellion against property taxes, and by exploring the cultural elements of development and economic displacement. In the third chapter, I will discuss the more abstract yet incredibly salient issue of cultural shaming as a producer of voting motivation, a problem that Frank is implicated in due to the way he presents the backlash population. Overall, my analysis aims to provide a meaningful and thorough understanding of why the people of Putnam County vote the way that they do, with a strong emphasis on the importance of the cultural implications of their political decisions.
CHAPTER 1: The New Catholic Political Right

Putnam County is the center of this study, and central to the essence of Putnam is the predominance of Catholics within the population. Religion is integral to politics. Thus it is only logical to take into account this characteristic of Putnam when analyzing its political tendencies as a red county. When discussed in a political context, Catholicism is almost always automatically associated with culture and cultural topics. For example, academia has largely focused on the issue of abortion, using this topic as a singular answer in the question of why Catholics, particularly white working-class Catholics, have become increasingly attached to the Republican Party. Racism is another such factor that garners significant attention and is commonly pointed to as a causal factor of the 2016 election outcome. As will be shown in the first section of this chapter, in Putnam, racism is a religiously connected cultural problem that has fueled this local political fire. In contrast, abortion has simply not been a local issue. It is undeniable that both of these issues, the pro-choice/anti-abortion debate and race politics, are incredibly important and may be central to Trump voters in Putnam, just as they are to Trump voters nation-wide; however, this is already well known and well studied. With this analysis, I want to supplement the typical understanding of white Catholic political views with other, less well-understood dimensions of their cultural politics. Specifically, I have found, and will further explore in a large portion of this chapter, that Catholicism can also be directly related to economic grievances, particularly property tax revolt politics.
Political and Religious Demographics in Putnam County

The U.S. census does not track religious affiliation or identification. Due to this gap in individual-based surveying, I found that the only clear option for data collected on the religious breakdown of a community was through the Association of Statisticians of American Religious Bodies’ 2010 U.S. Religion Census. When tracking Catholic proportionality per county, the ASARB calculated the number of congregation members in each Catholic Church in a specific county, and defined this number as the number of adherents to Catholicism in said county. I find this methodology to be inherently flawed, particularly for the purpose of understanding religious breakdown by county lines, because it does not take residence of congregation members into account. My own area of focus provides an ideal example. Using this methodology, the ASARB’s findings report that 45.89% of people in Westchester County, New York are Catholic adherents, while only 41.54% of people in Putnam County, New York are Catholic adherents. However, Westchester has over 100 Catholic churches, and Putnam, due to its more rural layout and smaller size, has only 9. Additionally, the Catholic churches in Putnam are concentrated in the northern part of the county. As a result, many people from the more southern areas of Putnam County attend church across county lines, in Northern

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Westchester. This statement is supported by the differences in the proportions of people with ancestry from traditionally Catholic countries. The 2010 census reports that the population of Putnam County is a combined 55.13% Irish, Italian or Polish, while the population of Westchester County is only 31.75% Irish, Italian or Polish.\(^8\) Assuming that the grand majority of Irish, Polish, and Italian-American people in the area are Catholic, the proportions in Westchester do not add up; seemingly, there are more people attending church in Westchester than the assumed number of Catholic residents in the county based on European ancestry. This distinction is also important to this analysis because of the specific focus on non-Hispanic white Catholics. Thus, in order to ensure the most accurate proportionality of white Catholics per county given the body of information available, this study will rely on Euro-ethnic categories; namely, census-reported Irish, Italian and Polish ancestry, as these are the white-European groups that are the most predominantly Catholic.

With this definition of regional Catholic breakdown established, it is now possible to see if there is a relationship between Catholicism and right wing voting by county. For the purposes of this analysis, I looked at the county-specific bipartisan voting results for the 2016 General Election, as provided by Politico and the Associated Press.\(^9\) Alongside Putnam County, I chose to look at the surrounding counties of Westchester, Rockland, and Dutchess. As Table 1 shows, Putnam County had both the highest proportion of presumed white Catholics and the highest

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proportion of Republican votes of the four counties. Additionally, Dutchess County, which has the second highest proportionality of white Catholics, is also the only other of the four counties in which the majority of the population voted Republican in the 2016 General Election, although by a much closer margin than Putnam.

Table 1:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Putnam County</th>
<th>Westchester County</th>
<th>Dutchess County</th>
<th>Rockland County</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Proportion Voted for</td>
<td>57.1%</td>
<td>32.1%</td>
<td>48.4%</td>
<td>46.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trump 2016:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proportion Voted for</td>
<td>39.3%</td>
<td>64.9%</td>
<td>47.3%</td>
<td>51.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clinton 2016:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Proportion</td>
<td>55.13%</td>
<td>31.75%</td>
<td>44.52%</td>
<td>29.72%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presumed Catholic:</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

While this finding shows that there is a correlation between the concentration of white Catholics in an area and a tendency toward right wing voting in the same area, it does not determine causation. It also does not show a correlation between Catholic proportionality and voting Republican, as Westchester County has the third-largest percentage of Catholic residents but had a lower proportion of Republican votes than Rockland County, which had fewer Catholics.

Putnam County itself is deserving of its own demographic-based breakdown. As shown in Table 2 below, the boundaries drawn by town lines provide another, closer look into the correlative tendencies between Catholicism and support of the Republican party, specifically in the 2016 Presidential election. Due to drastic
differences in socioeconomic characteristics, one area of Putnam County, Philipstown, was left out of the analysis. Philipstown, which is comprised of the villages of Garrison, Nelsonville and Cold Spring, is the portion of Putnam County located directly on the banks of the Hudson River and has a concentration of extreme wealth that creates an outlier within the general makeup of Putnam. The other five areas that comprise the county are Putnam Valley, Carmel, Southeast, Kent, and Patterson, and all are relatively comparable in terms of demographics within their respective populations.

Table 2:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Proportion Voted for Trump 2016:</th>
<th>Putnam Valley</th>
<th>Carmel</th>
<th>Southeast</th>
<th>Kent</th>
<th>Patterson</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>54.6%</td>
<td>62.4%</td>
<td>54.9%</td>
<td>56.2%</td>
<td>56.5%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Proportion Irish:</th>
<th>Putnam Valley</th>
<th>Carmel</th>
<th>Southeast</th>
<th>Kent</th>
<th>Patterson</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>22.4%</td>
<td>26.2%</td>
<td>26.2%</td>
<td>20.4%</td>
<td>23.8%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Proportion Italian:</th>
<th>Putnam Valley</th>
<th>Carmel</th>
<th>Southeast</th>
<th>Kent</th>
<th>Patterson</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>31.7%</td>
<td>33.3%</td>
<td>30.5%</td>
<td>23.7%</td>
<td>21.2%</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Proportion Polish:</th>
<th>Putnam Valley</th>
<th>Carmel</th>
<th>Southeast</th>
<th>Kent</th>
<th>Patterson</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3.5%</td>
<td>5.2%</td>
<td>4.5%</td>
<td>4.5%</td>
<td>2.3%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Total Proportion Presumed Catholic:</th>
<th>Putnam Valley</th>
<th>Carmel</th>
<th>Southeast</th>
<th>Kent</th>
<th>Patterson</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>57.6%</td>
<td>64.7%</td>
<td>61.2%</td>
<td>48.6%</td>
<td>47.3%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As in the cross-county comparison, the data for determining white-Catholic proportionality among the towns in Putnam County was derived from census
information on European ethnic ancestry.\textsuperscript{10} Once again, it can be presumed that people reporting Italian, Irish or Polish heritage are also culturally Catholic, as these countries’ immigrant populations in the United States are majority Catholic. The proportion of Trump voters per town was calculated using a map of the county generated by USA Today’s LoHud website, which used certified county data to record number of votes per candidate per voting district.\textsuperscript{11}

While the element of correlation does not run as clearly in this comparison as it does in the comparison between counties, it is still true that the town with the highest number of presumed Catholics, Carmel, is also the town with the highest proportion of Trump voters. Additionally, in each of the towns, the proportion of people who voted Republican in the 2016 Presidential general election and the proportion of presumed Catholics consistently fall within ten percentage points of one another, with most only holding a difference of a few percentage points. While it cannot be determined that the same group of residents make up both categories, this simultaneity is not likely to be pure coincidence.

\textit{Changing Political Allegiances}

It is becoming increasingly obvious with each passing election cycle that the relationship between the Democratic Party and the Catholic Church has changed


drastically since the early and mid-twentieth century. Historically, Catholics were a central component of the core of Democratic voters, an impression that many have held for long after it remained accurate. Beginning in the Great Depression-era of the 1930s, the four pillars of the Democratic Party were Roosevelt intellectuals, African-Americans, labor unions, and the Catholic Church, with the latter two categories being quite inextricably tied to one another after a century of Catholic-led unionization in many working-class fields. However, as early as the 1970s, fissures began to appear in the seemingly perfect relationship between these two institutions. In 1972, Democratic presidential nominee George McGovern was unable to sustain Catholic backing in large part due to the fact that his party had become strongly affiliated with cultural liberalism, a characteristic that many white working-class Catholics found to be unnerving and in opposition to many of their own cultural views and ways of thinking.

The 1970s were only the beginning of a downward trend in Catholic support for Democratic candidates. In the 1996 presidential election, Bill Clinton carried white Catholics by only 7 points. Four years later in 2000, Al Gore lost them by 7 points, and then in 2004 John Kerry lost them by 14. The Kerry loss was particularly significant due to the fact that he himself is a Catholic; however, he is pro-choice, and in favor of the “liberal culture” that a majority of the Catholic voting base clearly did not approve of. In the most recent election, 2016, 60% of white Catholics voted for Trump, the highest proportion of white Catholics voting for the

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Republican candidate in the past 16 years, according to a Pew Research Center analysis based on exit polls. This extreme switch of political allegiance within white Catholic voters is reflective of a general rebellion amongst this group, in favor of extreme neo-conservatism and vehemently against the type of liberalism that they see as threatening their own established culture.

The recent historical pattern of unease that has developed between white Catholics and the Democratic Party was and continues to be further heightened by the aggressive racial tensions between Catholic-Americans and African-Americans. In the 1970s, when this switch began to become evident, Catholics did not agree with the Democratic Party’s support for integration in the construction and trade unions, which had been predominantly white-Catholic. This sentiment eerily echoes the racial tension between these same groups a century earlier. The element of racism, and its deep entrenchment within the culture of white Catholicism in the United States, is one of the most compelling reasons as to why this group changed its political allegiance to the Right, and deserves close examination.

The History of Irish-Catholic Racism

In this day and age, most Americans would not think twice about categorizing those with Irish heritage as racially white. Two centuries ago, however, this was not the case. In the antebellum period, Irish-Americans and free African-Americans were grouped together as one socioeconomic classification of people: a low-class,

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disposable workforce. Today, our institutionally racially stratified nation has kept the perception of African-Americans as a general population within this limiting frame. How did the Irish, then, manage to change this notion and become certain, if not characteristically enthusiastic, members of the white race? It’s a complicated story, centuries old, yet it is one that continues to have a significant impact upon the political stance of the Irish, and subsequently Catholics as a group and voting base, in the modern United States.

The Irish Catholics were systematically and institutionally discriminated against in Ireland for years before they began emigrating in droves across the sea to the U.S. in the early 19th century. Though they varied in class, language and culture, the Irish immigrants arriving at this time were grouped together by Americans into one singular and extremely undesirable “Irish” category. After the Potato Famine in the 1840s increased their numbers significantly, the undesirability of the Irish grew substantially in the eyes of those groups with more established backgrounds in the U.S.15

The Irish in the 19th century United States essentially created a large reserve army of labor, banished to the ghettos of cities and excluded from the mainstream definition of American, but utilized for the labor intensive and dangerous jobs that those of higher standing would not do. However, the slavery issue provided them with a unique political opportunity. The Democratic Party of the antebellum period, which was then the pro-slavery party, saw in the Irish the potential for a large group to support their cause. In order to utilize the Irish, the Party began to more thoroughly

embrace the “color line” in the slavery conversation, and moved toward rejecting the concept of nativism, which had been the true barrier keeping the Irish out of “whiteness”. The Democratic Party essentially facilitated the Irish-American move into the confines of the white race, thus simultaneously increasing their political and economic potential and capital. In return, the Irish dutifully supported anti-abolition.16

Ireland itself has a strict antislavery tradition, dating as far back as the twelfth century, and so during this pre-Civil War era in the United States, when racial tensions and political fervor over slavery issues were high, Irish leaders pleaded with their countrymen overseas in America to join the fight for abolition. But another political issue of the day complicated this stance: the Repeal movement, an almost entirely Catholic-led Irish crusade to end British occupation and help Ireland gain home rule. The Repeal movement and its supporters chose rather quickly the side of anti-abolition, viewing the anti-slavery cause as a British cause, and thus as anti-Irish. Eventually the Repeal movement died off, but many of those Irishmen in America remained pro-slavery, and this became another factor in the Irish politically positioning themselves against free African-Americans.17

Perhaps the most succinct way in which the white race accepted the Irish into its ranks is through both the politicization and demise of nativism. The nativist group was the most sincerely anti-Irish, anti-Catholic group in the United States at the time, and its degradation of the Irish people to the lowest caste of society is part of what equated those poor workers with poor, free African-American workers. Through nativism, social standing and economic class rather than skin color defined race, and

16 Ibid. Ignatiev, Noel.
17 Ibid. Ignatiev, Noel.
all poor workers seemed to lack distinction from one another. Nativism came to its final culmination in the 1850s with the rise, and fall, of the Know Nothing Party. Soon after its dissolution is 1860 and the beginning of the Civil War in 1861, the Irish had become institutionally white, having been welcomed into the Democratic Party and, as a result, the pro-slavery cause.  

Opportunistic societal and political ladder climbing and the zeal of the Repeal movement put the Irish on the side of slavery, and it was not too difficult to keep them there. Many Irish at this time were also convinced that more free African-Americans would mean more job competition, as the two groups would be competing for the same menial-labor, low-wage, low-skill employment. Additionally, Irish workers resented the abolition movement because many felt that their cause was equally, if not more, important. The impression of many Irish laborers at the time was that their conditions, those of the free working class white man, were worse than that of the African-American slave. While this is certainly a misinformed exaggeration, working conditions for the Irish, who made up a good portion of the manual labor working class, were nothing if not horrifying. In this we find the origins of the Irish tradition of labor organization.

In an effort to put the cause of the free worker ahead of that of the slave, and in order to ensure work for white workers over free African-Americans, the working class, with the Irish at its helm, began to form labor groups. These groups mainly functioned using riots, strikes and intimidation tactics to get their points across. Labor unions were created with the Catholics at their helm, and they were also created with

18 Ibid. Ignatiev, Noel.
racial conflict and exclusion as a central motivation. Therefore, it is impossible to think about labor issues and unions today, organizations that continue to be heavily influenced by and implicated within working-class white Catholic culture, without also greatly considering the racism that built these institutions.

Whiteness is a precursor to success in America. The Irish found their way to whiteness through their political utility for the anti-abolition cause within the Democratic Party, aided by their ability to organize in the interest of white Irish labor. The foundation of the political interests of the Irish-American, and thus of the Catholic as well, is labor rights and the subsequent racism that has always accompanied it. These two issues were prominent factors within societal life in antebellum America, and remain so to this day, as is made clear in recent events that have unfolded in Putnam County. Irish Catholics are an influential portion of the religious and cultural group that dominates the Putnam County area. A result of this influence, in combination with the racial homogeneity that afflicts the county, has been a societal acceptance of racism. This acceptance has had both overt and covert political connotations, on the local and broader, national scale. In the towns of Mahopac and Brewster, both located in the eastern part of Putnam, blatantly racist movements have shone through more than once, illuminating this indisputably ugly side of the politically conservative area.

**School Sporting Events & the Pervasiveness of Racism in Mahopac**

As is demonstrated by the history of the group, racism, particularly against African-Americans, is inextricably tied to the success of white Catholics in the United
States. Thus, as it is a significant portion of the bedrock that makes up the American-Catholic position, it is institutionally engrained within and readily accepted by white Catholic culture. Nowhere is this clearer than in a community such as Putnam. With its majority Catholic population and its low proportion of people of color, racism has been a serious community issue for years. This becomes particularly evident when Putnam-based towns are, for one reason or another, situated against or near a different and more diverse area.

In small towns, local schools often become the center of community life. When a specific religion factors heavily in an area, as Catholicism does in the towns that make up Putnam County, education and schooling can become an area of political tension as well, a topic that will be further explored in the latter portion of this chapter. In spite of this disconnect, broader social life in Putnam tends to be centered on the public school. In particular, high school sporting events serve as unofficial meeting places in communities that do not typically have much else going on. Due to their widespread popularity amongst all echelons of a given town, the events can often take on a life of their own, becoming excessively important to residents, almost emblematic of the worth of the town itself. Thus, the ways that the residents perform these events and the interactions that the sporting events initiate can be reflective of the culture of the area as a whole. In many cases, they are also emblematic of political undertones. Such is the case in Mahopac, and such was the case in 2014 when an incident at a high school basketball game sparked significant media attention.
According to the 2010 U.S. census, Mahopac is 91.1% racially white and 2.1% black, while Mt. Vernon, a small city located in nearby Westchester County is 24.3% white and 63.4% black. USA Today reported that minorities in general make up 95% of the student body at Mt. Vernon High School, and only 11% of enrollment at Mahopac High School. On February 27th, 2014, the all-white Mahopac High School boy’s basketball team narrowly lost to the almost entirely black Mt. Vernon High School team at the section semifinals in the Westchester County Center. The Putnam-based team’s players and fans reportedly subjected the winning team to taunts and racial slurs, and after the game, several Mahopac students published numerous overtly racist and derogatory tweets about the Mt. Vernon players. More indicative of the pervasiveness of racism in Mahopac than the tweets themselves was the reaction of the district and the town in the aftermath of the tweets and the widespread attention they grabbed.

While in official statements the school and community condemned the behavior, Mahopac’s actions reflected a defensive and somewhat casual response to the events. The town was supposedly “embarrassed” by the events, the actual actions of the town as a general, cohesive group was one of defense and support of the

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19 Ibid. United States Census Bureau.
students and of the image of Mahopac. Punishment did not extend very far, and the community received specialized support from Republican State Senator Greg Ball, who directly blamed the Mt. Vernon team for creating the “toxic environment” that led to the remarks. The community reaction was so disheartening for the basketball coach Kevin Downes, who is black, that he resigned two weeks later after seven years as the leader of the boy’s varsity team, citing the Mahopac community’s complacency as reason for his departure.

Eight students were suspended from the school, with the caveat of undergoing “sensitivity training” upon return. Feeling that this punishment was not adequate, Mt. Vernon Superintendent Judith Johnson called for the suspension of the team from playing for a year, but Superintendent of Mahopac schools Thomas Manko called this request “excessive”. Although he publicly condemned the incident in his statements, the main point Manko continuously drove home was that this was an isolated incident, not a consistent pattern of behavior indicative of the views of the student body as a whole. He even went so far as to call for investigation of behavior of Mt. Vernon’s fan-base, equalizing the raucous behavior of both sides, an indication of

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Manko’s and the district’s unwillingness to acknowledge the racial power dynamics at play within the issue at hand.

Despite Manko’s insistence otherwise, this was actually not the first time, nor the last, that Mahopac’s students and fans would be accused of similar actions. The following year, in 2015, another incident occurred in which a Mahopac player allegedly directed racial slurs against a player from Carmel. Additionally, members of the broader Putnam and Northern Westchester area have described this kind of behavior as archetypical for Mahopac. After learning of the tweets, Jeff Pearlman, a writer who grew up in Mahopac and attended the local high school in the 1980s, wrote about his own experiences as a Jewish person in the town. He described a community that could just as easily be placed in the Deep South: incidents of cross-burnings in the yards of black families, a petition being passed around in an attempt to prevent a black family from moving in to one neighborhood, and general covert and overt prejudice against anyone who was not a white Christian.

The direct link between the racist behavior of Mahopac citizens and the racism that tends to pervade white Catholic communities is perhaps not immediately and obviously clear, it does not take much investigating to find the cultural influence of the group within this event. To begin with, the area is predominantly white Catholic, as Table 2 showed above. It falls within the larger area designated as Carmel, which is, in fact, both the most significantly Catholic and the most

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Republican, particularly Donald Trump-supporting Republicans. With this group making up over two-thirds of the entire population of the town, it would be remiss to suggest that it does not have a dominating impact on the cultural leanings of Mahopac as a whole. And, as history shows, implicit within the establishment of Catholic-American politics is racist sentiment against African-Americans. Thus, it is not surprising that such lashing-out has occurred.

In addition to the general make-up of the community, there is the fact of the major players defending the team and the Mahopac community. Thomas Manko, the complacent Superintendent, left the Mahopac School District at the end of the spring of 2014 and became the School President at Archbishop Walsh Academy and Southern Tier Catholic School, a private Catholic school in Olean, New York.\textsuperscript{28} It can be derived from this that he, a Catholic, has enough ties to his religious group as to change his career path to be more directly involved in Catholic education rather than public. Additionally, Greg Ball, the State Senator who spoke up to blame Mt. Vernon for the abuse inflicted upon them, is a devout Roman Catholic himself.

Irish migration in the 19\textsuperscript{th} century marked the beginning of the world of the Catholic-American. As history shows, this world was built upon the utilization of the discrimination and degradation of African-Americans in order to bolster the image of the working-class Catholic immigrant. As the largest religious group in the Putnam region, Catholicism is a centrally influencing component of Mahopac society, and in the county more broadly. As is exemplified by the events described, the racist

\textsuperscript{28}“Thomas Manko's Professional Profile.” \textit{LinkedIn}, <\texttt{www.linkedin.com/in/thomas-manko-54b44b9a/>.
tendencies implicit in this culture have seeped into the fabric of the town as a whole, into the actions of the residents and thus the politics and voting choices of the area.

**A New Perspective in the Catholic Political Connection**

Clearly, the prevalence of racist sentiment, derived from the history of white Catholicism, can be quite strong in Putnam towns, and can deeply affect local politics. Connecting racism to Republicanism is not a new idea by any stretch of the imagination. Along with the abortion issue, racist tendencies are one of the first qualities commonly pointed to by analysts studying Catholic politics. Despite the risk of redundancy, it was imperative to include racism within this section; not only would it be wildly inappropriate to leave it unacknowledged in a discussion of the making of Trump’s America, its inclusion here provides valuable insight into the culture that is being portrayed. Racism pervades these communities, and it does so because it is a piece of the foundation of the culture here. However, racism and anti-abortion beliefs are not the only culturally grounded topics with strong political implications in the world of white Catholicism, though they do get the most attention. In this same world, and holding the same amount of influence, is a different issue altogether: that of the strained relations between Catholics and local public institutions, an impassioned subject that ties itself to Republican politics more than is typically acknowledged.

**Parochial vs. Public Schools: A 250 Year-Old Rivalry**

Tension between public schools and parochial schools has a long and hard-
fought history in New York, dating back to some of the earliest conceptions of public schooling in the United States in the 19th century, which coincided in New York City’s history with mass Catholic immigration to the area. Prior to this period, in the 18th century, the city had few public services available to its citizens, including schooling, which was almost entirely reserved for wealthy families with the means to hire tutors or pay for private schools. For those without such means, churches maintained charity schools for the children of the families that attended their parishes. For many years, this sufficed. The populace, in large part because of the religious heterogeneity of New York City, did not necessarily seek out public education. There were so many different Protestant sects in operation at the time that no mass amounts of citizens felt the need to establish communal schools. Eventually, however, the clear religious domination of schooling became problematic, and the Free School Society, which later became the Public School Society, was established to educate primarily those lower-class children who were not in a religious school.

At the same time, in the early 19th century, New York City was facing a massive influx of Irish Catholic immigrants. These immigrants lived in the worst conditions in the city due to their significant economic disadvantages as a group. Harsh nativism manifested itself in the 1830s in anti-Irish and anti-Catholic campaigns, limiting or banning Irish use of many jobs, living areas, and other institutions in New York. The only place in which Catholics could find solace from the discrimination and from seemingly inescapable living conditions were in the

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Church. However, due to the poverty of its parishioners, the Church in the United States was quite poor itself, and so could offer little but spiritual support. Catholic leadership also felt that their parishioners were being exposed to Protestant propaganda and an attempted coerced assimilation into Protestant New York culture. To protect their people and preserve the Catholic culture, clergy began to discourage parishioners from allowing their children to attend the early public schools that existed in New York City, seeing as they were not truly secular but rather preached thinly veiled non-denominational Protestantism, and were generally disparaging of Catholic traditions and values. In fact, textbooks in the Public Schools Society institutions contained open slurs against Catholicism and Catholics, which the schools neglected to voluntarily censor, and which made it clear that religious neutrality was not necessarily on the agenda of the public schools. 30

In the late 1830s, New York State Governor William H. Seward became aware of the number of Catholic children, of school-age, that were not in attendance in schools. He took up the position that public schools excluded this particular group of children, even if the exclusion was unintentional, and so this was an impediment to universal education, which he saw as a basic right. Consequently, he backed the idea of creating Catholic schools, a recommendation that the Catholic community and clergy members saw as an opportunity to pursue public funding. In 1840, they drafted a petition on behalf of the eight Roman Catholic churches in New York City, which each supported a free school, seeking public subsidies. The thought of a portion of

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common school funding being doled out to Catholics specifically received widespread opposition, and was condemned by other religious groups, by the press, and, most aggressively, by the Public School Society, who said it would be a violation of the separation of church and state. The Committee on Arts and Sciences and Schools officially opposed the Catholic claim to funding, stating that “no tax should ever be imposed for the benefit of any denomination of religion”. Catholic leadership continued to argue that the Public School Society was non-sectarian, and appealed the rejection of their petition with the city’s Board of Aldermen. After that was again rejected, they took their battle to the state level. After almost a decade of political battles, the Catholics were not able to secure public funding, though they did succeed in making New York’s public schools more secular and less Protestant. In the end, the most substantial result of these tensions would be the foundation of antagonism between the New York public school system and parochial schools.

_Taxes and Tuition: Who Pays?_

Though the powerful Protestant opposition toward the Catholic school system was a roadblock in its path to successful establishment, it did not prove to be corrosive to the parochial education movement. Catholic schools survived long after these battles in the 19th century, and began to grow and thrive, particularly in the early and middle decades of the 20th century. Yet in contemporary times, Catholic schools have seen trouble once again, and in a much more institutionalized battle than the one they faced against the Protestants. Around the same time that George McGovern was

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31 Ibid. Ravitch, Diane, p. 43.
running for president, the neo-conservatism that had begun to form was manifesting itself politically among various right-leaning groups through the anti-taxation movement. The movement held particular significance to Catholics, and became one of the principal links between them as a voting group and the Republican Party, which they had become increasingly implicated within. The anti-tax movement is inclusive of many different groups across the United States. Catholics, however, make up a significant number of anti-tax supporters, and certain patterns and changes that the Catholic community has faced in past decades coincide with the growth of the tax rebellion movement, which leads to the conclusion that the connection between Catholics and anti-taxation as a political crusade is noteworthy. One large change that occurred in tandem with the growth of the anti-tax movement was suburbanization. In the postwar and Reagan eras, suburbia was on a rapid rise, and white Catholics were heavily implicated in this trend. However, although they did migrate upward from their urban origins, the themes of suburbia were threatening to Catholic culture in a general sense. Suburban areas tend to also breed a focus on consumerism, and the way that they are designed, with the predominance of isolated single-family dwellings, takes away from the sense of community that holds Church-going communities together.

Suburbanization also proved to be destructive to Catholic schooling, another important component of Catholic community sustenance. The generational effect of the varying waves of Catholic immigration to the United States kept enrollment in parochial schools on a steadily upward trend until the mid-1960s, when a period of decline began. While in 1962 an estimated 52% of Catholic children were in Catholic
schools, in 1987, this proportion dropped to 27%. This decline can and has been attributed to mass migration out of urban centers, or, as we have called it here, suburbanization, which was occurring along the same timeline as this enrollment decline. It also falls along the theme of reduction in parish attendance, a result of the disorientation that the isolation of suburbia breeds. Yet most significantly, this shift can be in large part attributed to the double-taxation effect. Suburban communities often offer solid public school education, much better than that in cities.

Additionally, residents of suburban communities must pay taxes to support their public school districts, whether they have children in attendance or not. Parochial schools, though not as expensive as other forms of private schooling, have tuition. Therefore, parents that wanted their children to attend Catholic schools but were faced with financial constraints had to choose between keeping their school-aged kids in the educational system that aligned with their faith and values while also paying for the maintenance of the public school system, or foregoing the cost of parochial education while also foregoing its benefits and meaning. This forced choice felt unfair to many Catholic families, and through anti-taxation campaigns they pushed back against the need to pay for public schools that they did not use nor could afford to support. At the time that public schooling was becoming more central to new suburban areas, Catholic education was also becoming more elite, particularly on the high school level. Before the 1960s, Catholic schools were accessible to lower

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and middle-income people because of the fiscal and human resources provided by the parish community.\textsuperscript{34} However, in towns and areas such as Putnam County, where wealth is fairly homogenous and not at all concentrated within the Catholic population, and where community centered on the church has lost its luster, these resources have diminished. Catholic schools today are accessible only to those who can afford them.

\textit{The Anti-Taxation Movement and Putnam County Education}

In a general sense, suburbanization made white Catholics feel vulnerable in a new way, and the unease that this vulnerability created needed a political outlet. The anti-tax movement provided the perfect space for such an outlet, as it was directly pertinent to Catholics in terms of schooling, and was particularly sharp felt in working-class Catholic communities, where monetary resources are scarcer. With these motivations, Catholics whole-heartedly joined the anti-taxation political moment, and, particularly with debates over state funding for Catholic schools in the 1960s and 1970s, greatly contributed to the strength of the movement. These decades in which the effects of suburbanization, which truly began in the late 1940s and early 1950s, were starting to be felt by the communities that were most involved. In the Putnam area, the 1950s and 1960s were the time in which the county received a large influx of Irish and Italian Catholic families moving north from the Bronx. They brought with them, of course, their cultural institutions. Three local churches that attract the largest group of parishioners from Putnam County are St. Columbanus,

\textsuperscript{34} Ibid. Greene, Jessica, and Joseph M O'Keefe, p. 166
which was established as a church in 1950 and then formed its school in 1975\textsuperscript{35}; St. Elizabeth Ann Seton, which established its church in 1963 and then formed its school in 1966\textsuperscript{36}; and St. James the Apostle, which relocated its church, first founded in 1947, to a larger location in 1962, and formed its school in 1954\textsuperscript{37}. Additionally, other Putnam-based parishes such as St. Lawrence O’Toole expanded their church and schooling locations in the 1950s and 1960s to suit the growing Catholic population\textsuperscript{38}. The fact that so many churches and parochial schools were being founded or expanded in Putnam in the 1950s and 1960s is no coincidence. Catholics were moving out of the city in larger numbers than ever before.

In the year 1960, when the United States was on the precipice of truly feeling the effects of suburbanization and just before the renewed debates on state funding for Catholic education began to gain traction, Catholic school enrollment was at its national peak. Since then, enrollment in such schools has steadily declined, becoming more obvious in the past twenty years, with over 1,260 Catholic schools closing their doors between 2000 and 2008, according to the National Catholic Education Association. In New York specifically, a reorganization plan in 2007 by the Archdiocese of the state led to numerous closings throughout the lower Hudson Valley area and the Bronx, all due to costs not being met because of declining enrollment and thus declining funding through tuition.

\textsuperscript{38} “Our History.” \textit{StLawrenceOtoole.org}. <https://www.stlawrenceotoole.org/33>. 
The consequences of this shift have reverberated throughout the Putnam area in quite significant ways. The Franciscan High School, which was located just over the Putnam County border in Northern Westchester, served numerous students from Putnam County, including many from Putnam Valley, next to which it was located. It was established in Mohegan Lake in 1961 during the mass migration of Catholics from the city up north, and co-educated to serve a larger population of students in the 1970s. However, it began to face financial trouble, and closed in 1991. This was just two years after the first 1989 proposal for building a public high school in Putnam Valley, which would eventually lead to the establishment of such a school in 1999. It is logical to see a connection between these events. Franciscan High School received a large amount of its enrollment from Putnam Valley students who did not have their own high school to attend or to pay for. Once the building of Putnam Valley High School was proposed, and residents could foresee their inevitable tax increase, enrollment, which had already been declining, further dropped and the Catholic school closed its doors.

This was not the only time in recent history that a Catholic school in the Putnam area has closed due to competition with public schools. The year 2008, while widely notable for its coinciding financial crisis, was also the year in which the St. Lawrence O’Toole grammar school in Brewster, NY, was told it needed to raise over $1 million for teacher’s salaries and building maintenance, or else it would be closed. Soon after, having not met this financial goal, the school was significantly downsized from a grammar school to an early childhood education center, serving pre-

kindergarteners. The St. Lawrence O’Toole School had been a pillar of the Catholic community in Brewster, having been in operation since 1926 and serving numerous families, many of which had multiple generations attend. However, despite closings such as that in Brewster, Catholic Church membership nationwide is higher than ever. It is not a shortage of Catholics causing the closings of Catholic schools. Instead, one of the driving forces of declining enrollment is the competition that such educational institutions face from local public schools in communities where parents pay high property taxes to support the public school district. Such is the case in the town of Brewster. Here, we see the issue of double taxation have an incredible tangible effect - it led to the closing of the St. Lawrence O’Toole parochial school, a fixture in the local Catholic community beloved by many.  

Catholic schools are in trouble, and one place in which this can be seen quite clearly is in the competitive outlook they harbor toward local public schools. I spoke with Dave, who has been a trustee on the Putnam Valley Central School District’s Board of Education for over six years, and has been a resident of Putnam Valley for almost forty-five, about this phenomenon. Having both attended the schools in the district himself and sent his own children to them, he has an insider’s understanding of the way that his district and public school districts like it work and relate to other institutions. In Putnam County specifically, there are not any convenient options for alternatives to one’s public school district other than parochial schools, of which there are quite a few locally. The Putnam Valley public school district has no working

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relationship with its Catholic school neighbors, according to Dave. Essentially, they just hope for no dramatic swings in the number of in-district children attending the parochial schools. If too many kids enroll in local Catholic schools rather than in the Putnam Valley district, it would cause issues of unused resources. However, on the other hand, if a Catholic school closed and resulted in a large influx of new kids enrolling in PVCSD, this would cause issues of increased class sizes, increased budgets, and thus increased taxes in the town. Essentially, the relationship between the Putnam Valley school district and the parochial school nearby to it comes down to financial resources.

On the side of the public school district, there is really no ill will toward the Catholic schools, and this is primarily because the school district has institutionalization on its side. Public schools like Putnam Valley have the significant advantage of being able to tax the district for the expenses that they need in order to keep the school running. They will never be without funding; even when a district budget gets voted down by the town, as happens from time to time in Putnam Valley, the district simply receives the same budget it was given the year before instead of the one proposed for that year. Parochial schools, on the other hand, must rely on donations and tuition, which is directly proportional to enrollment. Additionally, the people that they seeking the tuition from, are also responsible for paying the property tax that funds their local public school, whether or not they have children that attend. It is within this fact that the tension lies, particularly on the side of the parochial schools. In working-class communities such as Putnam, often times, religion and religious preferences is not enough to convince parents to pay an additional fee for
schooling. In order to maintain the justification for families to pay this double-tuition, Catholic schools must be in constant competition with their surrounding public school districts to keep the quality of the education and educational resources they are offering up to or exceeding the par set by the public schools. With the financial stress resting solely on the shoulders of the parochial schools, it is no wonder that Catholic educational institutions find themselves at odds, at the very least symbolically, with their comparable public school districts.

Catholic education has been fighting for its ability and right to exist since large numbers of Catholics first immigrated to the United States in the early 1800s. The rough beginnings of parochial education were a result of pushback from the powerful Protestant elitism that characterized the country, and New York City in particular, at the time. However, this situation proved not to be entirely destructive to Catholic education. Instead, the true battle that proponents of Catholic education face is the issue of double-taxation, which is a product of suburbanization. Working-class Catholics, such as those in Putnam County, find it difficult to justify paying both the tuition for a parochial school along with the burden of the property taxes that go toward their local public school. It is here that the anti-taxation movement and anti-statist politics resonate so well with the Catholic community, because for those families that want their kids to have a Catholic education, it is truly not in their own self-interest to support taxes that fund institutions they do not use.

**Grasping the Specificities of the Catholic Republican**

Clearly, there is something to be said for the political implications that the
pervasiveness of Catholicism in an area like Putnam can have. On the one hand, there are the social issues that stem from Catholic culture; as described in this section, racism is foundational to the existence of Catholic-Americans, is an obvious driving force in the Trump movement, and continues to be pervasive in local Putnam events. Another politicized topic that is deeply related to Catholicism but is not addressed in this chapter is abortion. It is an important issue, one that deserves to be studied within the context of our political moment in order to understand the occurring backlash as a whole. However, it does not manifest in Putnam County politics, and therefore is beyond the scope of this analysis. Abortion is an issue that Frank also does not address in his writing, viewing it as an unimportant subject and another “distraction”. Frank also does not reference tax revolt politics, a matter that is quite central to the argument I present in this chapter.

Essentially, I have found that much of the Catholic allegiance to the Republican Party has come about due to Catholic-specific fiscal interests. The distinctiveness of a Catholic basis within this section of the tax revolt movement is not often studied. Therefore, this chapter has not only filled this gap, it has also provided yet another example of the limitations of Frank’s work. If you analyze a topic of 30,000 feet, as Frank does, it is easy to miss crucial dimensions that help explain political orientations. Getting as local as possible, as I have done in this chapter when exploring the connection between Catholicism and the tax revolt, reveal particularities that would not otherwise be seen.
CHAPTER 2: Whom Does Putnam County Belong To?

Within the frame of Catholicism, the extent to which it is embedded within the cultural values of the Putnam population, and the political implications of these values, anti-taxation sentiment appears as a major driving force of Republican Party affiliation. However, anti-tax politics transcend Catholic association, particularly in Putnam County. Aside from the double-taxation schooling issue that was described in the previous section, the more general fight against development and gentrification and the rising property taxes that accompany these issues is directly causal to the anti-statist and right-wing leaning of the area, and has been gaining particularly intense traction in the past few decades.

*West Coast Origins: Proposition 13 and the Beginning of the Anti-Tax Movement*

In their analysis of class-based displacement in urban locations, Neil Smith and Michelle LeFaivre provide us with a thorough and far-reaching definition of gentrification: 41

"Gentrification is not just a physical process, it is a social one involving the movement of people and the movement of capital, and, as a social process, it embodies many of the characteristics of the larger society in which it occurs.” (44)

Gentrification is not just simply the development of a space in order to raise its general value. Rather, it is a complicated process that encompasses a variety of social and political elements. Places are commodities in and of themselves, but rather than

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the kinds of commodities that we typically think of, such as food or toiletries, places are rarely discarded after use. Instead, they are transformed, re-used, and altered.

When an area has maintained the same characteristics for an extended period of time, the society created there is, in part, based on collective interests that intersect with the location, such as the utilities offered and the risk of natural disasters in the particular place. This kind of collective interest is what builds communities, which then become the driving force against change. This is typically due to the fact that development and growth in an area usually does not work on the behalf of current residents.\(^{42}\) The existence of a place-centric community, a connected group of people with similar interests, is exactly what allows for organized pushback. Most studies of gentrification and related political issues focus on urban neighborhoods, particularly those in large cities, this phenomenon is not limited to these locations. The driving out of established populations from the places they have long called home is also a relevant political matter in suburban and rural areas, including the locational focus of this paper: Putnam County.

The fight against development, rising property taxes, and the displacement that they generate has a long and intense history in the United States. In particular, when scholars think of the tax revolt movement, its inception is traced to the campaign for Proposition 13 in the 1970s in California. The story of this foundational fight is contextually important in understanding subsequent fights against development and taxation, such as those that have taken place in Putnam. Tensions

surrounding taxes in California had been building for decades prior to the Prop 13 vote. Property taxes in the state were at their fastest rise in history during the 1950s, which led to significant yet quickly extinguished protests in 1958. In the 1960s, issues continued to mount as the process of tax assessments became more and more rigid and less receptive to citizen concerns. In the 1970s, with property taxes still on the rise, particular on owner-occupied, single-family homes, California residents began to organize around this issue. After experiencing severe unresponsiveness in local government, activists began to feel as though they had little voice; this condition fueled their anger and their desire to push back even harder, adding a secondary goal of increasing general political influence. At the same time, the tax revolt campaigners were also fighting back against development, which very directly influences rising property taxes, and the intensity of anti-business feelings within the movement grew with the opinion that there were fundamental differences between the interests of homeowners and those of pro-development businesses. Clarence Lo describes the sentiment of the way in which these events unfolded perfectly in his close study of the Prop 13 movement:

"During their protests to reduce property taxes, activists in middle-income communities discovered that the governments of their towns, cities, counties, and states were unresponsive to their petitions. Through their own experience, activists learned that small businesses would offer little assistance and that community business leaders and large corporations would not help at all. Activists gave tirades about

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the unresponsiveness of big business and big government and, in doing so, were able to tap the feelings of many citizens who felt powerless against all dominant institutions.” (91)

Tax revolt activists in middle-class areas were completely disillusioned by the almost pathological inaction of their government structures. However, they still needed some form institutional assistance in order to get anything done. The Left was more inline with the anti-business stance that these activists had taken to, but was rigidly pro-government due to its significant association with government-administered and controlled social programs. Trade unions would have been another liberal avenue through which the movement could have acted, but these, too, were heavily bureaucratic. Instead, the tax movement rooted itself in the political Right, especially those right-wing groups that directly catered to the anti-big business and anti-government attitude that the movement had broadly fostered. 45 To this day, it is still a movement associated with the Republican Party and with Right-leaning areas.

In the end, Proposition 13 passed in California and property taxes were decreased. It was an incredibly successful and entirely grassroots movement, a fruitful pushback against not just taxes, but also development, displacement, and a government structure that did not understand its people and did not try to. Additionally, it was a grassroots movement associated with conservative politics rather than progressive politics, as such movements are usually assumed to be. What is so important about the Prop 13 movement, and why it is so relevant to modern tax revolt sentiment, is that it was an event that showed that citizens had the ability to

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fight back against the government in order to lower their taxes. Its success remains
inspiration for groups across the country.

**Gentrification Comes to the Hudson Valley**

All across the United States, it is being reported that the “small town” is
dying. Mass reliance on local industrial employment and the subsequent
disintegration of such work has forced out many long-time residents in many areas,
and has left towns without a large enough residency to support local economy. In
many areas that are disconnected from a major urban center, deindustrialization has
meant the certain death of such townships. However, in other regions, economies
have had the opportunity to switch focus and sustain a new type of survival. In the
Hudson Valley, towns once supported by local factories have started to find financing
in tourism by residents of New York City. Putnam County is one portion of the
Hudson Valley that has, in part, experienced such economic turnover.

Putnam is a dramatically mixed-income county to begin with. With the scenic
Hudson River comprising its western-most border, wealth of residents and of towns
tends to diminish rapidly the further one moves eastward. The Metro North Hudson
Line runs along the western part of the county as well, adding urban accessibility to
the towns of Garrison and Cold Spring, which subsequently increases affluence by
allowing for white collar employment of locals and by catalyzing the tourism
industry. To the east, Metro North operates another railroad line, the Harlem Line,
which connects the Putnam County towns of Brewster and Patterson to Manhattan as
well. However, in general, just about the entirety of central Putnam County, as well as
much of the east, is largely isolated from urban life. Although technically a commutable distance, it is an incredibly inconvenient commute, particularly into the center of Manhattan, and most residents who do work in New York City are employed in the more northern and more blue collar areas, such as the Bronx and Harlem.

Recent development in the Hudson Valley has had a twofold effect. It has stimulated the local economy through increased tourism, yes, but a consequence of this tourist-focused development has also been an increase in gentrification of many Putnam towns. With the Hudson Valley gaining recognition through the tourism industry as a quintessential small-town, family-friendly area, not only has income polarization increased but cultural polarization has as well. The new conditions effect the increasingly differing populations that make up Putnam County in opposing ways; the wealthier residents and the people who engage in tourism in Putnam rally against development proposals that are aesthetically displeasing, but are largely silent otherwise. Traditional working-class residents, on the other hand, have spent years fighting developments that they deem to be financially disadvantageous to them, particularly those which directly increase or create certain taxes or would indirectly increase property taxes, but are relatively complacent about issues that are unfavorable for aesthetic reasons. Over the past ten or so years, a variety of incidents have taken place on the county level, all of which clearly show this divide in interests.

Open Space Referendum: 2005

For many who migrate from southern New York to Putnam County, the area
is appealing due to its reputation as a bucolic landscape. For those who have lived there for generations, the atmosphere is of little consequence, and is certainly not an appropriate area for the investment of their tax dollars. In 2005, the Putnam County Legislature voted unanimously to put a bond referendum on the ballot for the coming fall with the purpose of allocating $20 million dollars toward preserving open space. The idea was initially produced and then carried forth by residents of Cold Spring and Garrison, the villages that comprise Philipstown, the western-most area of Putnam County. For twenty years prior to this proposal, the area had been rapidly growing, beginning with extreme jumps in the issuing of building permits in the 1980s. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, development pressures began to increasingly rise up from Westchester, bringing new housing developments, chain stores, and subsequently, less open space in “the county where the country begins” as outside sources love to characterize Putnam. The bond referendum was meant to keep the county as green as possible in the face of these types of changes, a mission lauded by many residents, particularly those in Philipstown; however, it would also mean an average $44 dollar per year increase in property taxes per Putnam household for the next 20 years.  

For the county as a whole, this amount proved to be not worth the advantages of sustaining a “bucolic atmosphere”, and the referendum was voted down.

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Hotel Occupancy Tax: 2012

In 2012, the Putnam Legislature decided to propose a plan to enact a hotel occupancy tax in Putnam County, a plan that County Executive Odell planned on vetoing from the get-go. Although Putnam did not have a marquee hotel, the county government was, and is, promoting the importance of tourism, and was hoping to attract one. The tax would be in preparation for that. However, many county officials, speaking on behalf of their respective populations within Putnam, spoke out against it, disavowing any new taxes in the county. They said that in the present moment, Putnam does not often attract overnight guests for business or tourism reasons, and so the hotel tax would end up effecting friends and family members of residents visiting from out of town. Odell did end up vetoing it, stating her commitment to not levying any new taxes on Putnam residents.

The anti-taxation coalition of Putnam community members and their representatives put pressure on leadership to veto the creation of the hotel tax, but the groups that were later so vocal in terminating the trailway ads and created a massive grassroots campaign against it were largely silent. These separate yet connected events are indicative of the widening fissure in political interests taking place in Putnam County at a time when the area was truly picking up speed in exposure to the tourist industry and in signs of gentrification. The difference in complacency toward these local issues among different types of Putnam residents, the multi-generation

working-class and the new upper class, may appear minute. However, it is representative of the differences in values, and the growing tension over opinions of development in the evolving county.

The Putnam Trailway: 2013

One year later, 2013, a different county-level proposal elicited a similar response, but from a different group of residents. The Putnam Trailway is a paved pedestrian and bike path in the eastern part of the county that runs a route which used to be the Putnam Division of the New York Central Railroad, through the towns of Carmel, Mahopac, and Brewster. Picturesque in good weather, it is a resource for all in the area, but has been a particular draw for many out-of-towners and weekend or summer homeowners in the area. In late June 2013, it was leaked to the general public that the County Legislature was planning to vote in a closed forum, on the sale of outdoor advertising space located on the Putnam Trailway to a private firm. County Executive MaryEllen Odell, who was also accused of having political ties to the company in question, spearheaded the planned sale.\(^5\) In the four days between the public’s discovery of the plan on June 29\(^{th}\) and July 2\(^{nd}\), an angry grassroots coalition collected 600 signatures on a petition calling for an opening of the floor of the Putnam Legislature to residents. While the Legislature had been planning on voting to back Odell’s plan without the input of the public, after such intense public pressure,

they ended up tabling the measure and eventually withdrawing the plan in late July.\textsuperscript{51}

The Legislators were fairly split on its support or challenge of Odell’s plan, and it is difficult to discern a party line, given that nearly the entirety of the Putnam County Legislature is Republican; however, one Democratic Legislator, Sam Oliverio of Putnam Valley, was an ardent refuter of the plan. In general, when looking at the people who spoke up about why they did not want the ads and their reasoning, there is a clear upper middle-class consciousness abound. Many of the people cited as users of the trailway are not from Putnam County, but rather from more affluent Westchester towns, such as Bronxville and Katonah, or even from Connecticut and Manhattan. Additionally, the reasons given for opposing the ads are not in line with the traditional opposition movements that have risen out of Putnam County towns in the past. Many are concerned with the lack of an environmental review, while others question the First Amendment infringement that this firm, which would not advertise for political organizations, religious organizations or adult entertainment businesses, might allow. Overwhelmingly and emphatically, all were concerned with the “eyesore” that these ads would provide.\textsuperscript{52} These grievances aren’t justified, nor are they incorrect, but they do bear the mark of the newer groups coming in and using Putnam; a more liberal, more elitist group that strives to create a green utopia in the idyllic Hudson Valley.

\textsuperscript{52} Ibid. LoHud.
**Tracing the Anti-Development Movement in Putnam Valley**

In order to look at revolt against development on an even more localized level, we can map out the progression of the fight against economic displacement and development-driven change in one specific Putnam County town over the past thirty years. Though often characterized by the outside world and eager real estate agents as a sleepy rural town, Putnam Valley has a razor-sharp anti-statist edge that has become increasingly apparent since the end of the Reagan era. Since then, a collection of events have occurred that truly demonstrate this anarchist streak, and do so with some of the most prominent and brutal displays of local political contention in modern Putnam history.

**A New Town Hall: 1988**

The 1980s marked both a surge in the growth of Putnam Valley in its conversion from a town of mostly summer and weekend homes to that of more permanent residents, and a surge in Republican-leanin anti-tax politics among residents. This political switch in the area was a theme common across the U.S. at this time when Reaganomics and general neoliberal policy were gaining popularity. In 1988, the town had complete Democratic leadership, with four-term incumbent Democrat Sallie Sypher as Town Supervisor. But the political pendulum was preparing to swing to the right, as was evidenced by an incredibly contentious vote that year.

In a February 6th referendum, the Town Board proposed the building of a new town hall, which would cost $1.25 million total and would be paid for by the
residents in an extra $28 in taxes that year, with that number decreasing significantly in following years. Putnam Valley residents voted overwhelmingly against it, 1,421 to 400. But the issue was more than just a simple vote for or against the building of a new town hall to replace the old one in a small rural town. It became an absolute political upheaval in Putnam, its suggestion a representation to the citizens that the government they had elected did not understand their needs. A group formed in reaction to the issue: the Concerned Taxpayers of Putnam Valley. It’s still around today, and is responsible for more recent political upheavals as well, as will be discussed later on in this section.

Many did not understand how the Board could propose spending tax-payer money on such a project when the town did not offer such amenities as trash pick up, municipal water supply, or outdoor children’s activities. Supervisor Sypher tried to correct such accusations, saying that the town performs many of its own operations that other towns rely on the county for in order to increase efficiency, but to no avail. The town had made its decision, a decision that marked the beginning of a significant period of change for Putnam Valley.  


The following year, another large-scale development idea was presented to the town: the prospect of building a high school. This was quite a contentious topic, and it took over ten years to reach a conclusion. I had the opportunity to speak with

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Maureen Bellino, a former employee of the Putnam Valley Central School District and a community leader who was at the forefront of the fight in favor of building the school. As per the information that she has kept in her files, on October 26, 1989, the proposal to build a Putnam Valley High School was put to a vote and passed by a margin of 97, with 1,325 yes votes and 1,228 no’s. After the vote passed, it was discovered that there was no legislation in place at the state level to allow Putnam Valley to receive construction aid to build a high school. Without legislation in place, if Putnam Valley built a building they would have received no state aid for construction. The Board of Education spoke to the local legislators at that time about getting the appropriate legislation in place so the construction could begin. The Putnam Valley area legislators were not interested in doing this, and pro-high school leaders at the time believed that this was because the anti-high school voters got to the legislators first. The anti-high school group used this as the basis to get people to sign affidavits stating that they had voted yes on the high school, but had they known that there was no legislation in place to allow construction aid for building of a high school in Putnam Valley, they would have voted no.\textsuperscript{54}

There was no way to prove any of the voters who signed the affidavit actually voted yes to begin with, and the attorneys working for the district at the time were confident that the state would not overturn a vote on this basis. About 100 people signed affidavits saying they voted yes but would have voted no, and these affidavits were presented to the state. Ultimately, the vote was overturned by the state, in contradiction with what had been predicted by the attorneys. This was a very

\textsuperscript{54} Bellino, Maureen. Personal interview. 14 Nov. 2017.
devastating time for those, like Mrs. Bellino, who worked for many years on getting the vote passed. It is believed by those involved at the time that the person who brought the information forward about the missing legislation after the vote knew this information prior to the vote, but held onto it to use in this manner. Legislators stated that they would never have moved forward with construction without the proper legislation because the cost to the public would have been prohibitive.

A short time later, at the suggestion of his daughter, a Putnam Valley resident, State Senator Joseph Galiber of the Bronx introduced legislation allowing Putnam Valley to receive construction aid on a new high school building. This legislation passed and was put in place, allowing the BOE to once again consider the option of constructing a new high school.\(^{55}\) High school-age Putnam Valley residents had for decades been attending the Lakeland Central School District for grades 10-12. Then, during the 1994-95 school year, it was determined to also send the 9th grade to Lakeland Central School District to alleviate overcrowding at the Elementary School and the Middle School. The pro-high school members of the community, while understanding the rationale of the 9th grade being educated in a high school building, felt that this would hold off a PVHS building vote for several more years, which it did. It wasn’t until the 1997-98 school year that the Board once again studied the feasibility of building a high school in Putnam Valley.\(^{56}\) It was determined by the Board that by 2005 it would be cheaper for the residents of the community to have their own HS as opposed to continuing to tuition. A vote was set for December 8,

1998, and the proposal passed by 215 votes. This may seem like a narrow margin, but in Putnam Valley, this is not a small margin, especially when compared to other votes that attract a large voter turnout. “I think the most interesting aspect was the number of voters who came out to cast a vote,” said Mrs. Bellino. “Over 3,000 voters is an amazing turnout. At the time, it was said that literally everyone voted.” In 2017, PV has approximately 6,900 registered voters, and is a much larger town now than it was 20 years ago. Thus, it can be assumed that 3,000 votes cast was a clear majority of registered voters in 1998.

The fact that this issue was so extensive that it caused essentially the entire town to come out and vote is no small fact. Clearly, there was persistent passion on both sides of the aisle, and while the pro-development constituency won this time around, it divided Putnam Valley in two and, after a ten-year battle, exhausted the politically competitive spirit of residents. A high school would not necessarily be seen as negative development to a town; any family with children at or approaching high school age would, hypothetically, be in favor of a local public school. Yet, the building of a school would mean changes in the town as a whole. Even though residents would save money over time, as the proponents of the high school showed in their studies, the real resistance was to the implications of adding a high school. Another school would mean population growth, and if the school became highly rated, it would mean increases in taxes and attraction of new and younger residents to the area. In general, it would mean demographic and cultural change. This was clearly not appealing to many residents.
Disbanding the Police Department: 1998

In the fall of 1996, the town board proposed that the local police force be disbanded. Citing almost nonexistent crime and heavy tax burden, the board proposed to the townspeople that the Putnam Valley Police Department be cut, calling it “a luxury the town can no longer afford”. Instead, county forces could patrol the area, and Putnam Valley residents would receive a significant tax break. This was no simple, clean-cut issue. To begin with, the members of the police force in question were none too pleased with this proposal, and numerous legal battles were fought throughout late 1996 and early 1997 until a final appellate court decision was reached on August 1997. The decision came after the Chief of the Putnam Valley Police Department William Carlos charged that town board members Carmelo Santos, Samuel Gambino and Charles Ferrante were proposing the abolishment of the police department in order to personally punish him for his political involvement. The appellate court that presided over this case ruled with finality that the abolishment of the town police force could be resolved by the town board after a public hearing, placing the decision in the hands of the Putnam Valley town board once and for all.

After the legal hurdle was cleared, the local conflict began to rapidly heat up. Just a month later, in September of 1997, the board voted to abolish the police department. However, town residents were none too pleased with their lack of a voice in this decision. Attendees described the numerous town meetings that occurred over

the next six months as “contentious”, but fierce may be a more accurate adjective. Shouting, pushing and minor scuffles, including an incident in which the tires of then-Supervisor Charles Anderson were slashed, stained the town’s demeanor. Still, the sitting town board refused to put the decision up to a vote. In response, that election cycle, residents promptly voted the town board out of office and elected an entirely new board for 1998. The new board, owing its existence to angry mass mobilization, decided it would hold a popular vote to decide whether or not the police department should be reinstated, just six months after it was declared to be eradicated.

Eager to exercise this new power of expression, Putnam Valley voters turned out in larger than usual numbers. Over 3,500 votes were cast, and in the end, the town voted overwhelmingly against bringing the local police department back, the final count being 2,473 to 1,035.59 Clearly, the anger that the townspeople showed in response to the board deciding to disband the department in September of 1997 was not due to their desire to keep the police force around. Rather, this overwhelming, unprecedented reaction was, it seems, a direct result of a feeling of voicelessness. When the board decided to make such a grand decision on behalf of the residents without their input, despite being elected representatives, it felt to the people of Putnam Valley as if they were losing something without their consent, even though the decision turned out to be one that they would agree with. In the end, Putnam Valley voters largely preferred the 31% tax cut they received to the existence of a town-specific police. However, what truly caused the most strife was not having a say

in the decision, even though the original decision reached by the town board was the outcome they subsequently chose.60

A Period of Relative Calm: 1999-2016

In the 1990s, Putnam County was facing a rapid and intense period of development and population growth. Beginning in the mid-1980s, new residents, particularly from New York City, had begun pouring into the various Putnam towns, searching for the bucolic way of life that they had decided fit this area, and Putnam Valley was no exception to this influx. Development proposals and, subsequently, battles over the development projects such as the ones described in this chapter became more frequent and more intense, particularly in the 90s, when population growth was reaching a new height. Then, for a little over 15 years, the political scene in Putnam Valley was relatively quiet. The town and its small cohorts that tended toward supporting positive changes and developments in the town structure, despite perceived minimal tax costs, had become disillusioned by the tumultuous decade that had been the late eighties through the late nineties. The disbandment of the police department had drawn national attention to the town, casting it in a harsh public light that highlighted the town’s tax revolt and anti-statist politics. Simultaneously, the building of the High School, a project whose founders did not foresee being such a contentious issue, was an incredibly long-winded and hard-fought uphill battle for the

minority of Putnam Valley residents promoting positive town development. Those
who conceptualized the idea for the High School assumed it to be a widely
acknowledged necessity for the town. Yet even this was bitterly fought. With these
events fresh in the minds of town leadership, there was a general wariness to attempt
any type of large-scale change, given the intensity of backlash and the sheer effort
and time required to achieve such changes. The win of the High School, however
difficult, sufficed for the time being. Thereafter, town leaders proposed virtually no
large-scale projects. While anti-tax groups continued to periodically vote down
school budgets and protest various town decisions, nothing as world-shaking as the
events of this decade were allowed to occur again until almost twenty years later.

Building the Rec Center: 2016

In October of 2016, the town board began to rustle feathers once again.
Putnam Valley submitted a grant for funding due to lack of available recreational
space in the town, which had, in the past four years, led to numerous cuts to
programming for both adults and children, including summer camps and certain after
school sports. With help from Senator Sue Serino, a $100,000 grant was secured to
build a new recreational center in the town park, which would include a large
gym/multipurpose area, office space, and classrooms. Numerous town leaders,
including Town Supervisor Sam Oliverio and Putnam Valley Parks & Recreation
Director Frank DiMarco, saw the center as a necessity for PV, and celebrated the
attainment of the grant. The following April, the board voted to bond the rec center
project. It would be a $3.8 million project that would be paid off over 30 years,
although, as Oliverio predicted, it could end up costing less due to potential revenue and town money saved from not having to rent outside spaces. This multi-million number, which would be the equivalent of a $24 tax increase for Putnam Valley residents, was incredibly daunting, if not all around unacceptable, to some residents.\(^6^1\)

Patty Villanova, now a familiar face on the anti-tax increase scene, was immediately antagonistic; on the day the board voted for the bond, she sat in on the board meeting and repeatedly verbally sparred with members, including board member Steve McKay, who reportedly told Villanova to sit down and be quiet and even threatened to call 911 at one point in the evening. Villanova subsequently began trying to collect 175 signatures so that the bond would have to be put up to a town-wide vote. Over the next few months, she made numerous claims about what the money should be used for instead, including toward building a public pool or a highway garage.\(^6^2\)

Villanova was not alone in her efforts. Another local anti-tax crusader Dan Vera helped generate the “vote no” campaign by distributing flyers and submitting an op-ed to the Putnam Daily Voice. His letter stressed the affordability of the center and questioned who would actually benefit from it. In one particular point, he asks the reader, presumed to be a Putnam Valley resident, “can you afford to have your taxes increased again on top of the 10% increased town taxes over the past 3 years, the

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$600,000 increased school budget, the 1% increased home assessment this year?” He goes on to cite incorrect hours of operation and says that classes would be unaffordable to residents. Vera’s campaign against the rec center did not begin or end with this letter; he also took it upon himself to distribute over 1,000 propaganda flyers that said that the center would only be open from 8am to 4pm Monday through Friday, with the insinuation being that these hours would disqualify most school-age children and working adults from using the facilities. These hours were a lie; the proposed center was going to operate from 7am to 10pm on Monday through Friday and from 12pm to 8pm on the weekends.

Sam Oliverio led the charge against these claims. He enthusiastically promoted the rec center, calling it a community necessity, and saying that it would add value to the community and to real estate interests. In the end, Vera and Villanova’s tireless publicity of incorrect information won over PV. Of the 1,584 votes cast, 744 were “yes” and 840 were “no”, leaving the rec center proposal rejected with a margin of 96 votes. Oliverio attributed this defeat to voter complacency, especially in the face of the mass mobilization spurred on by Villanova and Vera. However, this is clearly too simple a response. The proposal of the rec center was the first development-minded proposal of this scale put forth in Putnam Valley since the spectacular events of the 1990s. Additionally, Sam Oliverio, who had spearheaded the rec center movement, is the first Democrat Town Supervisor in

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64 Ibid. Cunningham, Doug.
Putnam Valley in many years. Akin to Democrat Town Supervisor Sally Sypher attempting to build a new Town Hall in 1988, Oliverio made a grab for expansion in Putnam Valley but was met with the backlash of his Republican-majority base. Waiting almost two decades since the high school victory proved to not have softened the anti-taxation and anti-development streak that ran through Putnam Valley before. Development and newer, more upscale residents have not ceased their influx, and so the crusades of the Concerned Taxpayers of Putnam Valley and their traditionalist contemporaries have not ceased, either.

**Why Putnam Fights Change**

This section has demonstrated that action focused on anti-development and anti-gentrification is a very salient issue that plays into politics at large in a crucial manner. One of the frontlines of the economic battlegrounds, particularly for small-town residents such as those in Putnam County, is this political sentiment. Whether it is countywide conflict over which types of changes are positive and which are not, or the continuous actions of a single town to prevent unwanted transformation for over almost thirty years, Putnam residents make it clear through their political actions and voting behavior that development is at the forefront of their minds. As was described in the introduction of this thesis, Putnam County is easy to view as a microcosm of larger white, working-class, small-town America; thus, the political actions of its residents are relevant to any study of such a population, including Frank’s. Yet despite this clear reality, Thomas Frank has virtually nothing to say about this phenomenon. Even though he prioritizes the importance of economic factors, he
disregards those related to taxation and development because of their association with cultural elements that he decidedly written off. In this chapter we have seen that the development politics of Putnam is just one potent example of the type of cultural-economic interplay that has such a serious effect on local politics, and that Frank so blatantly and confidently pays no mind to.
CHAPTER 3: Condescension, Local Pride, and Political Voice

When the 2016 Presidential election wrapped up and the demographic that had elected Donald Trump became easily identifiable, it was immediately determined that this grouping, white working-class small-town America, did not understand the issues it had voted in favor of. This attitude is, in fact, a significant portion of why this group of voters became so angered that they did mobilize themselves enough to choose the President. In Putnam County, there have been many events in which county or town residents have rallied in favor of an issue in large part because of the undertones of elitist shaming from outside, often wealthier, parties that the issue elicited. Many times, the events in question are reminiscent of larger fights, and can be seen as small encapsulations of nation-wide political debates. In this section, Putnam-specific battles about public libraries, hunting practices, and gun ownership will be clearly reflective of national tensions over education and gun control. An in-depth understanding of the results of these issues on this microcosmic scale can hold important lessons in developing an understanding of both the intricacies of these large-scale concerns. Additionally, and perhaps most importantly, seeing the motivating role that elitist shaming and condescension has elicited in Putnam may contribute to a deeper understanding of the Republican voters that decided our most recent election.

The Creation of the Public Library: Training and Taming

It is a commonly held belief that public libraries in the United States are by and for the masses, the middle class, and the people. However, their origins instead
lie in elitism, having been created in conjunction with uplift theory, which permeated conservative political thought in the early and mid 19th century. Around this time period, particularly in the post-Civil War era, the concept of leisure and leisure activities was becoming mainstream in America. Also at this time in Boston, leaders among the upper-class society began to develop the idea of creating a public library for the city. In large part, they were trying to harness the leisure epidemic by creating an institution through which they could encourage the right kinds of cultural tastes.65

George Ticknor of Boston was at the forefront of this movement, and he wanted the library to be aimed at the common man, as a “democratic and popular institution for continuing education”. This stance has often been interpreted and lauded as a liberal defense of the common man, but in reality, Ticknor was a staunch conservative and aristocrat, a leader among Boston’s Brahmins, or upper class New England Protestants. His idea for aiming the public library at “commoners” was rooted in the view that it should function to restrain such members of society from their less-than-desirable tendencies, and using education to “lift them up” to the more suitable level of the citizens of the upper class. Library boards and librarians are, to this day, a place within the institution of libraries where this elitism can still be plainly seen: the people who hold these positions are not elected, and they are often not generally representative of the population they serve, particularly when located in middle or lower-middle class areas. In essence, libraries were built on the foundational sentiment that the masses need to be stabilized and taught the proper

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way to behave and exist in society. This was the primary function of the library at its inception, and it continues to color the way in which the library is perceived by the very “masses” it intends to serve - as a way for the aristocratic class to teach those of lower socioeconomic station how to be “better”.

**When Books Become Partisan**

Like many towns, Putnam Valley has its own library, free to the public. However, as it is a non-for-profit institution in an area with limited public funds, it is not in the best condition, and has not been for many years. It’s not a department of the town of Putnam Valley, but uses the town for funding through contract. Recently, in the fall of 2015, the library’s board proposed a sustainable funding plan so that the library would always have money at its disposable and thus could be revamped over time, both architecturally and in terms of programs and other resources for Putnam Valley residents, particularly children. The funding would come from public money, namely, taxpayer dollars. The idea was not met as warmly as one might imagine; instead, the proposal for library funding became a major political battle among Putnam Valley leadership. I was able to speak with Priscilla Keresey, who was a member of the library’s board at the time of this controversy, about the events that unfolded in 2015.

The plan put forth by the library’s board to the town council was one that would raise taxes based upon a rate per household formula; on average, it would

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66 Harris, Michael H. “The Role of the Public Library in American Life: A Speculative Essay.” *University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign Library*, 6 Nov. 1976.
cost about $19 extra dollars per year. Republican council members reacted with animosity toward this plan. One suggested cutting the library’s budget by $50,000, and another suggested closing it altogether, given the fact that no one uses it.\(^{67}\) This comment, that no one in town uses the library, is not untrue; the Putnam Valley Public Library has largely been cast by the wayside in favor of school libraries in the cases of children and bookstores in the cases of those who have the means and desire to own books. For many in the community, the lack of use of the library comes from a general lack of interest and a lack of interesting activities offered. This issue could be remedied by increased funding, as the library board proposed. However, the underlying insinuation is that the community, as represented by its elected officials, does not see the library as a necessity or as particularly useful to residents. Additionally, and perhaps more importantly, the community does not want to be told that it should view the library as important, and that the townspeople are doing something wrong by not valuing it more. The animosity that both the Town Councilmembers and certain Putnam Valley residents expressed toward the plan is indicative of exactly this sentiment, as its intensity is a reaction to the feeling of being shamed for their disregard toward this educational tool.

The sustainable funds plan would typically have only be voted upon by the council, which would mean that the result could be decided by a majority of only three votes; however, given the political hostility that members of the town’s Republican party were showing, the library board pushed to put the issue on the town ballot through a petition gathering 350 signatures. This did not solve the issues of

\(^{67}\) Keresey, Priscilla. Personal interview. 18 Jan. 2018.
politicization of the library’s funding. Before the vote, certain
townspeople, undoubtedly members of the Putnam Valley Republican party, began
spreading false, fear-mongering information through Facebook and flyers about what
the library money would be used for. One sound byte this group favored was
the “taxation without representation” angle, arguing that the library enacting a tax
upon residents would fall under this label because the people on the library’s board
were not elected representatives. The fact that the people putting out this
information, who are members of a town-wide group called “The Concerned
Taxpayers of Putnam Valley”, elicited this Revolutionary War-era sentiment in their
propaganda is very clearly emblematic of their politics, particularly the Tea Party
faction of the Republican party that many Putnam Valley voters identify with. It is
also an interesting comment on the anti-elitism attitude that is so evident in this
political battle. To attack the fact that the people that run the library were not elected
by townspeople is also to essentially say that they are not “one of us”. The framing of
this puts the library board members in a category of Other, an Other that is in
opposition to the traditional Putnam Valley residents, and an Other that thinks it
knows what is best for these very same residents.

In the end, voter turnout was not large due to the vote being a referendum
rather than on a regular ballot, but the sustainable funding was rejected by a 400 vote
margin, with 1,200 townspeople voting in favor of the tax increase and 1,600 voting

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68 Propper, David. “Voters, Not Town Officials, Expected to Determine PV Library's
Funding.” Theexaminernews.com, The Putnam Examiner, 30 June 2015,
<www.theexaminernews.com/voters-not-town-officials-expected-to-determine-pv-
librarys-funding/>. 
against it.\textsuperscript{69} In one sense, the down-voting of the library funding can be seen as yet another simple example of townspeople not wanting an added tax burden. However, all political events are multi-faceted. In Putnam Valley, and in Putnam County in general, residents feel as though they are constantly being told that they are too rural, too low class, and that they should be more like their Westchester or Manhattan neighbors to the South. One way in which these groups of people, the upper class liberals who have also begun to invade Putnam spaces, typically tells lower-class groups to improve themselves is through education. The library is a traditional instrument of education, and education is a difficult topic to look at from any standpoint other than a positive one; however, elitism within education, and the presumed objectivity of the right kind of education, has been a sore spot in communities such as Putnam County for many years. The Putnam Valley Public Library is a resource that many residents do not see as useful, and thus do not want to pay to support, yes; but on the other hand, being told that they should support it, that they would benefit from its educational properties, may feel to many residents like an elitist shaming of the ways in which they have traditionally educated themselves, and the types of education that they subjectively value.

Essentially, this is a small-scale crystallization of a common tension, particularly in modern times, between Democrats and Republicans. Elite, more upper-class liberals often act on the belief that many working-class voters do not understand their own interests, and so vote against them, a mindset that the library board may

\textsuperscript{69} Keresey, Priscilla. Personal interview. 18 Jan. 2018.
represent to certain Putnam residents. In particular, the library controversy is reflective of disagreements about education that have taken place all over the country.

Oftentimes, working-class areas face debasing comments about their education systems from upper-class areas whose own schools are “better” in a general sense. The difference between the qualities of public schools is usually the result of funding, which is the result of the wealth of the populace being served. Yet, the less-wealthy districts are blamed for their poor showing regardless, and can feel victimized by this blame. Additionally, different types of education suit different populations, yet the traditional high school to college track is held up as the ideal. For many in areas such as Putnam County, young adults have the desire to enter into trade school or another type of training, such as construction or landscaping. Yet they are told and shown that this is a low-class plan, and that they are not educating themselves the “right” way. The library, with its privately-held board and its desire to better educate, may look to certain residents like another blow to the system they already have, another institution telling the town that it should be doing a bit better. Thus, the retaliation by certain organized citizens and the subsequent voter pushback that occurred when the library’s funding what turned down is symbolic of this same group’s feelings on this kind of condescension. However, the library is not the only place, or the most zealous, battleground for Putnam and its potential opponents.

**The Cultural Politics of Hunting**

In his 19th century study, Thorstein Veblen describes in detail the idea that the socioeconomic stratification that exists in modern times, or, more accurately, in post-
industrial society, is a reproduction of the societal structure that existed in feudal and tribal societies. These civilizations were essentially broke down into the elite leisure class and the lower working class that supported it. The leisure class characteristically did not engage in any professions that were directly economically productive, while the working class was assigned all jobs that required manual labor and production in general. One central occupation or activity of this upper class was hunting. An activity that is entertaining yet economically unproductive and not labor-intensive, hunting was a favorite of the leisure class in feudal times and continued to be a trademark of elitism throughout the 19th century, the time in which Veblen was writing. Due to its unproductive nature and the fact that it expends energy and resources without much gain, the activity was seen as distinctly aristocratic because they were the only people who could afford this kind of expenditure.

Today, hunting for sport continues to be engaged in by members of the upper classes across the world. However, as leisure activities have become more accessible to all social and economic classes, hunting has crossed a cultural bridge and become heavily implicated in many rural working-class societies in the United States. Such is the case in the lower Hudson Valley area, where seasonal hunting in the heavily wooded region is a favorite pastime of many residents. Two counties in which hunting is most often practiced as a leisure activity are Putnam County, the subject of this analysis, and its neighbor to the north, Dutchess County. Both share a generally rural landscape, and the have same legal hunting implement restrictions as determined by the State of New York’s Department of Environmental Conservation – that is, very

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few restrictions, with only rifles off-limits during deer and bear seasons. Yet, different populations are typically doing the hunting in these separate counties. In Putnam, the residents themselves are often the ones engaging in the type of camouflage-clad buck hunting, with the goal of catching a deer large enough to create a good enough trophy head and some decent venison jerky. In Dutchess, by contrast, the hunters can frequently be urbanites at their country homes or the owners of large rural estates, utilizing the age-old practice of the sport of hunting as it has suited their socioeconomic class for centuries. It is no surprise, given the class differences between the populations doing the hunting, that Putnam residents are much more often reprimanded for their hunting and gun use. In essence, these working-class people have co-opted an activity that had typically been reserved for those above them. For that, they have repeatedly been punished.

_Hunting Traditions and Disruptions in Putnam_

Putnam County was, for decades, an incredibly rural county, made up more of heavily wooded expanses of land than main streets and cul-de-sacs. Over the years, however, Putnam has been developing into a neighborhood-friendly area. Yet, the culture of the people who have lived there since its days of rusticity remains strong and relevant, and one component of this culture is the hobby and sport of hunting. While many established Putnam residents have kept their hunting tradition going, newer residents, particularly in the past fifteen years, have taken issue with it. In

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2004, a family who had recently moved from Manhattan to the town of Southeast, the Skeltons, stirred up anti-gun and anti-hunting sentiment when their house was hit by a hunter’s stray bullet. The Skeltons, obviously quite upset about the seeming danger that hunting had placed their family in, greatly publicized the event, which ended up raising the question of whether shotgun hunting should be banned in Putnam County.\textsuperscript{72}

Within this debate were the undercurrents of the assumptions that the demographics of the county were changing; calling it a “fast-growing” area has become synonymous with the influx of families like the Skeltons, who moved to the area in order to live out their pastoral fantasies. Ms. Skelton herself said in an article for the New York Times that she “did not subject herself to three and a half hours of daily commuting to Manhattan to live in the country, only to be shot at”. This quote is a not-so-subtle example of the attitudes of many Putnam newcomers: that this space is theirs to take. Ms. Skelton is saying that her decision to move to “the country” entitles her to the fulfillment of her exact idealization of the town and region in which she and her family now reside. With this attitude comes the insinuation that the pre-existing ways and traditions of Putnam are somehow wrong, and the ways of the Manhattan transplants are correct. The people of Putnam who exercise these “wrong” activities, such as hunting, should alter themselves to suit the newcomers, rather than the other way around. It’s no surprise that the materialization of this viewpoint in the form of legal action and policy might anger long-time residents.

Additionally, comparisons to Westchester, which has banned shotgun hunting and only allows bow-hunting\(^73\), is further reminiscent of a general push to change Putnam’s established culture to meet the needs and preferences of the incoming, gentrifying group. Westchester is Putnam’s significantly wealthier, more refined neighbor, and so contrasting the differing cultural landscapes of the two counties can often have a polarizing effect along the lines of socioeconomic class. When Westchester and its countywide policies are shown to Putnam as examples of the correct policies, it can also come across as though the people and lawmakers of Westchester know better. This sentiment, particularly when viewed in combination with the class differences between Westchester and Putnam, puts the former in the position of demerit-giver, and thus frames Putnam as their know-nothing neighbor. This is incredibly patronizing, and, particularly in working-class culture like that which characterizes Putnam, such patronization is incredibly frowned upon. Westchester looks down its nose at Putnam, as do the new residents who believe that Putnam should follow Westchester’s lead, and this is certainly angering for established Putnam residents who do not want to change their way of doing things, and do not want to be pushed in a more “upscale” direction.

Of course, Putnam residents have pushed back against this view and this condescension. In a more recent event, in November of 2015, a concerned Brewster resident named Paul Saloon presented a proposal to the Protective Services legislative committee requesting that Putnam County explore a ban on hunting. His argument was that within the past 20 or so years, the county has developed rapidly, and

\(^{73}\) Ibid. Kelley, Tina.
the development has meant less open space. With commercial and residential space growing and encroaching upon previously un-disturbed hunting space, there is a higher likelihood that these worlds uncomfortably converge, and someone gets hurt. When the committee met to discuss the suggestion, Saloon was not present, but fifty local gun-rights' activists were. One such advocate, Nick Pagliuca of Putnam County Fish and Game said that residents like Saloon "want to create New York City up here". But, he said, Putnam is not nor will it ever be another Manhattan. “This is a rural county,” said Pagliuca. “It’s different up here”. Pagliuca’s statement echoes the general feelings of Putnam residents when being told that certain aspects of the culture they have created for themselves is “wrong”. Essentially, the attitude stands as such: if you don’t like it, you can get out. Pagliuca and his allies are aware that newcomers want to change their area, and they will not allow it without a fight. Here, this battle is fought over hunting and general safety.

In a sense, it may be difficult to not feel that residents, old or new, deserve to feel safe in their homes, and unregulated hunting may infringe upon that. However, to the residents who have been constantly berated by these newcomers for their habits and preferences, the attempt to diminish hunting is symbolic of a larger attempt to diminish the Putnam County that they know and love. In addition to the residents who showed up to protest, the gun-rights’ promoters had political backing from officials as well. Legislator Roger Gross called hunting an important part of Putnam’s history, and said that residents are “under attack by the state administration” because “they

have a very anti-gun attitude, so it’s important to be strong on the 2nd Amendment issue because their goal is to ban guns”.

**Gun Ownership: A Scarlet Letter**

Hunting is not the only firearms-based controversy that has arisen in Putnam County. In fact, the ownership of guns in general has been a hot political topic for years. In the aftermath of the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting on December 14th, 2012, The Journal News took it upon itself to obtain, through the Freedom of Information Law, the names and addresses of legal pistol permit holders in Westchester and Rockland counties. On December 23rd 2012, the paper published a report and interactive map including all of this information. When The Journal News approached Putnam County Clerk Dennis Sant, he, with the backing of county officials, states that they will refuse a formal request by the paper to release the information of pistol permit holders in Putnam. This refusal violates New York law in withholding data, but political leaders did not care. “There is the rule of law, and there is right and wrong,” Sant said in a statement. “And The Journal News is clearly wrong.”

Other political figures who were supporters of the refusal, such as County Executive MaryEllen Odell and State Senator Greg Ball, said that releasing the

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75 Ibid. Propper, David.
personal information of the permit holders, of which there are reportedly over 11,000 in Putnam County, would be reckless and would endanger the lives of both pistol owners and non-owners. Senator Ball even called the editors of The Journal News “elitist eggheads”, and stated that the newspaper was attempting to place “virtual scarlet letters on law-abiding firearms owners” in the region. The evocation of the scarlet letter is specifically meaningful to the reasoning behind the argument on the side of the Putnam legislators resisting the exposure of the permit information. Although the gun safety debate is a much larger issue than can be held within the bounds of this mapping situation, the desire to plot out and publicize the location of pistol permit holders is, in effect, a strategy in exposing those who support gun use in a time in which such support is as taboo as it has ever been. Additionally, the people that the paper wanted to showcase with its map would be and were legal permit holders, who did not necessarily do anything wrong, but would be implicated as potential shooters. Thus, the feeling of being shamed through the mapping, especially when knowing that Putnam has a high proportion of pistol permit holders, is warranted.

These lawmakers and many residents are, as we have seen, on edge in regard to outsiders attempting to show them how they “should” be behaving. For both permit holders and those who defend them in Putnam County, the Journal News wanting to showcase the number of pistol permit holders in the county would undoubtedly turn into a degradation of the county as an area full of gun-wielding hicks. The request for

information from the News turned into a larger political battle, one in which Putnam County saw itself as standing against the attempts of elitism to scandalize its residents once again; they would not give in without a significant struggle.

In early October 2013, after Putnam County denied two Freedom of Information Law requests and a subsequent appeal, The Journal News officially filed a lawsuit against both the county and the county clerk’s office. On March 5th 2014, a judge with the Westchester County Supreme Court of New York ordered Putnam to turn over pistol permit records to the paper. The judge also cited the then-new NYSAFE Act, a component of which allows gun owners to remove their names from a public database, as reason for the county’s safety concerns being unfounded. But Putnam County officials were not willing to give up so easily, saying they would do everything they could to “oppose this crusade by the media to get their hands on an individual’s personal information". Officials actively urged residents with pistol permits to file to exempt their information, and for the larger Putnam population to compel state lawmakers to remove any way that this information could be made public. Additionally, they appealed the decision.

On September 14th 2016, almost three years after the issue first arose, a

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Supreme Court of New York Appellate Court decision stated with finality that The Journal News was entitled to the names and addresses of pistol permit holders in Putnam County. Despite this victory, however, the paper did not have any plans to revisit the information on gun permits, and had since taken down the interactive map of Westchester and Rockland. Meanwhile, in Putnam County, executives continue to urge residents to opt out of the publicizing of their information under the SAFE Act. This is indicative of how deeply felt this conflict was in the county; clearly, for Putnam and its legislators, it was not only about the map itself, but about protecting the reputation and rights of an area that has, in recent decades, often felt that its agency is slipping away, that outside people and institutions are making decisions about its future.

The repercussions of the Journal News mapping scandal are still felt today, years later, as numerous gun-rights activist groups, both county-wide and town-specific, remain pointedly active and vigilant of any threats to their customs. One such threat has come up recently, when this year the town of Philipstown, which is characterized very differently from the rest of Putnam County due to its higher proportions of both politically liberal voters and higher income residents, has been in the process of proposing a mandatory gun-storage law. The proposal, which has been in the works since 2016 but has gained new traction in the early months of 2018, has attracted significant attention from gun-owners’ associations across the county who

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feel offended by the law, calling it an infringement upon Second Amendment rights.\textsuperscript{83} This issue has caught the eye of activist groups from all over the county not only because it is related to gun restrictions, although that is certainly a large motivator; it has also garnered significant attention because of the part of the county in which this law is being promoted. Philipstown is the one area of Putnam County that would be characterized as upper- and upper middle-class. Located in the most scenic area of Putnam, right on the Hudson River, Philipstown is home to the best public school system in the county, the most significant tourist attractions, and numerous multi-million dollar estates. In short, it is the portion of Putnam that is not necessarily in line with the cultural tendencies of the rest of the county. Once again, Philipstown attempting to set an example for the other Putnam towns is not unlike incoming residents and other outsiders calling on Putnam County to learn from Westchester County; in both scenarios, it is the wealthy elite trying to show its lower-class contemporary the “correct” way to be. As Putnam residents have shown before and continue to display, this type of condescension will always be met with local political backlash.

Understandably, guns and gun rights are a difficult topic by which to evoke sympathy for an area seeking to keep itself as regulation-free as possible. This is not the point of the profiling of these pro-gun focused events. Instead, the portrayals of these battles are meant to show, without bias, the motivations of the pro-gun side, the side that Putnam has positioned itself on, and the ways in which this position is, in

fact, a defense of the self-identified interests of the majority of its residents and a defense of the ability of Putnam to make its own decisions and take pride in them.

*Understanding the Unfathomable*

Due to the particularly contentious nature of the issues described in this section, it may be difficult to view them with an empathetic eye rather than a purely politically critical one. Education, which the library controversy represents, and gun laws are hugely important topics on a broad scale, and hunting restrictions can drastically effect the lifestyles of Putnam residents and so are equally as important within the frame of their subjectivity. However, as this chapter has shown, these issues can take on larger meanings to certain populations who are affected by them in different ways. Education may seem as if it is a non-controversial topic; giving children more and higher quality resources through which they can learn, such as a better-funded library, is something that any community would presumably want; however, it is clearly a more nuanced issue than this. One may look at the hunting controversy presented and only see reasonable residents vying for safety and comfort, yet underlying these concerns are larger themes of cultural elitism and moralism. And what may seem to one outside group as a simple mapping of the locations of guns, at a time in our country’s history in which guns are a particularly polarizing and contentious issue, can actually seem to the group facing the issue as another way in which they are being told by others that they are lacking the proper ethics.

No topic is void of political context and meaning. Such is the larger goal of this project: to try to make sense of a world in which a different set of assumptions
have a significant role in the foundation of thought than what we, in the world of
liberal academia, know our own assumptions to be. Thomas Frank’s views on cultural
politics would turn these battles and the people defending them into parodies of
themselves. Frank views these types of culture-based issues as irrelevant, and so,
following the type of analysis he has thus far produced, he would characterize the
people of Putnam as idiotic. This chapter has attempted to do just the opposite, by
providing a multi-dimensional view of matters that can easily be portrayed as morally
one-sided. What has also been shown here is how Putnam County and its towns, in
positioning themselves pro-gun, pro-hunting, and anti-library funding, have done so
not out of ignorance or hatred, necessarily; rather, Putnam residents and legislators
have undertaken the defenses that they have in an effort to take control over the
county’s own cultural and economic changes, to take ownership and pride in the
differences that Putnam holds from the wealthier areas that surround it, differences
that Putnam is proud of, whether or not others understand.
AFTERWORD

The Putnam County political leaning is unwaveringly influenced by the Catholic background of a majority of its citizens, local resistance to development and gentrification that has slowly encroached upon the area, and backlash against consistent elitist shaming that has been directed at established cultural traditions among long-term residents. In this analysis, I have found that, in addition to the quintessential causes of this kind of Right-wing support such as racism and abortion issues, these other, more infrequently studied, cultural politics play just as significant a role in voting choices. It is the interplay of these different characteristics of the county and their varied implications, rather than idiocy and ignorance to their own causes as academia has oft suggested, that has created the political environment that now exists in Putnam, and which resulted in the population expressing such strong support for Trump.

Additionally, I have found that cultural and economic politics cannot and should not be disentangled, as they are connected in a multitude of important ways, many of which have not received the attention they are due. The relationship between the tax revolt movement and Catholicism in Putnam, for instance, or the ways in which fights against development correlate with local resistance to cultural change – these associations are imperative to the development of a comprehensive understanding of the political trends the accompany. This paper offers a thorough look at the politics of the Putnam population and delves deeply into the main issues presented, those that are the most important within the realm of Putnam County specifically; however, there is much more work that could be done on this general
topic. Namely, future scholarship attempting to understand why white working-class populations in the United States vote the way that they do needs to make a more concentrated effort to not analyze these populations with the condescension that has been pervasive in this area of study to date.

Throughout this thesis, I have used Thomas Frank and his 2005 book *What’s the Matter with Kansas?* as the central example of this patronizing attitude. For Frank, the implication of understanding the cultural concerns of white working-class Republicans is that we should stop talking about cultural issues and stop taking this bait that he believes politicians create in order to distract from economic policy. He recommends that we should instead be focused on speaking to economic self-interest, as he defines it, because it is the only political matter of any real importance. In my work, I do not minimize cultural issues as he does, and instead, in quite literal opposition to Frank, I focus on the unacknowledged issue of elitist shaming, talk about interplay of economics and culture, and analyze the importance of the long-standing economic groundwork of the property tax revolt. I believe that this approach is much more productive and appropriate. Moreover, by taking this dissimilar stance, I hope to have added new viewpoints and ways of thinking to the study of this topic, which has been dominated by Thomas Frank’s opinion for many years.

My unique place as someone whose entire upbringing took place within such a population, yet did not include or result in the same beliefs as my fellow Putnam Valley residents hold, has provided me with an advantageous positioning to approach this topic with both criticism and empathy, a position I have tried to exercise in this thesis. In order to productively discuss the political upheaval that took place during
the 2016 election, we must first make sense of the motivations of those who created the present political moment we wish to analyze. Understanding what led this group of people to make this choice is an imperative step toward identifying what kind of policy and action can lead to significant change.
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