

# Reflecting on Michael McQuarrie’s ‘Revolt of the Rust belt’

Following Donald Trump’s surprise election win in November 2016, Michael McQuarrie of LSE Sociology wrote on the regional nature of Trump’s win. His blog article, [“Trump and the Revolt of the Rust Belt”](#), has now formed the basis of a [new article](#) in the *British Journal of Sociology*. We asked a several academic experts for their reactions to McQuarrie’s new article.

- [McQuarrie demonstrates the seriousness of the region’s economic concerns and shows that Democrats have failed to offer serious solutions.](#) – Ruth Braunstein – *University of Connecticut*
- [By linking his critique to place, he is better able to emphasize how institutions that normalize expectation around political participation serve a vital grassroots role](#) – Julian C. Chambliss – *Rollins College*
- [Elections, we should remind ourselves, are fickle things that defy single narratives](#) – Joshua D. Ambrosius and Jennifer Lumpkin – *University of Dayton*

Michael McQuarrie’s response:

- [All social science relies on interpretation and judgements. The question is never whether or not such things are happening, but whether those choices are reasonable and telling us something we didn’t know.](#)

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## McQuarrie demonstrates the seriousness of the region’s economic concerns and shows that Democrats have failed to offer serious solutions.



Ruth Braunstein – *University of Connecticut*

Within a week of the 2016 election, Michael McQuarrie published an essay – on [this site](#) – arguing that Trump’s victory could only be understood by taking the regional nature of politics into account. Trump had benefitted, he argued, from a confluence of historical, social and political factors that together produced a “revolt of the Rust Belt.” In his more fully elaborated version of this argument in the latest issue of *The British Journal of Sociology*, McQuarrie does not dismiss alternative explanations of Trump’s appeal: white nativism, economic concerns of working-class voters, or the low turnout of black voters. He rejects explanations that single one factor out above others, and insists that what matters is how these factors combined in a particular place and at a particular time to *shift* the political behavior of a key block of voters. This shift was the crucial thing. Parts of what McQuarrie describes are also happening, to varying degrees, beyond the Rust Belt, including in my own town in a postindustrial corner of Connecticut. But it did not matter that my town turned red in 2016, since it was ensconced within a still reliably blue state. It did matter in Michigan, in Ohio, in Wisconsin...

Among the many striking things about McQuarrie’s argument about this “revolt” is that it was very clearly *against* the Democratic Party rather than *for* anything in particular, including Trumpism. McQuarrie demonstrates the seriousness of the region’s economic concerns (it has, both literally and figuratively, been “dismantled”), and shows that Democrats have failed to offer serious solutions. Yet it is difficult, in this story, to disentangle the Democrats from the Clintons, and the Republicans from Trump. Indeed, these are two of the many reasons the 2016 election is so difficult to parse. Hillary was not merely a Democrat (or a woman, for that matter). She was always also a Clinton. And one cannot help but come away from McQuarrie’s article without sensing the profound disappointment that Rust Belt voters felt toward Bill Clinton, who made so many promises and kept so few. In another world, they might have identified with Hillary, who had also weathered her husband’s betrayals, like them, through faith and hard work; but in the real world, she was Clinton 2.0. Would a different Democrat have met her same fate?



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It is nearly impossible to know, and either way, the entire Democratic Party now represented that betrayal—of the Heartland in favor of the coasts; of the old economy in favor of the new. In a two-party system, a revolt against the Democrats leaves voters with two options: stay home or vote for the other guy. McQuarrie argues that black voters in the region took the former path, while white voters took the latter. But in 2016, to vote Republican was also to vote for Donald Trump—a candidate widely viewed as unqualified, even within his own party. Which leads me to my second question: Would these white Rust Belt voters have cast their vote for just any Republican, or was there something attractive about Trump? McQuarrie suggests that Trump's hostility toward the “political class” along with his break from the “bipartisan consensus” on free trade appealed to these voters in a way that mainstream Republicans may not have. This makes sense, but also prompts us to look upstream, to the primary election in which voters across the country chose Trump over more qualified Republican candidates.

This is of course a different question than the one that McQuarrie seeks to answer, but his rich analysis of shifts in political consciousness within the Rust Belt nonetheless helps us see connections between this region and other parts of the country. Namely, he vividly depicts how the injury of economic decline was exacerbated by the insult of political and symbolic marginalization. Katherine J. Cramer documents similar feelings across rural [Wisconsin](#). Arlie Hochschild, too, describes resentment among [Louisianans](#) whose way of life seemed to change, as if overnight, from a source of honor to a source of dishonor, especially in the eyes of liberal elites. Similar sentiments were on display within the [northeastern](#) Tea Party group I studied during this period, positioning participants not just against the left, but also against the political establishment of both parties. Around the country, some of these voters shifted from Democrat to Republican, others from moderate to “Tea Party” Republican. And in 2016, it seems clear that these complex feelings of [devaluation](#) played a role in driving voters toward Trump—in both the primary and the general elections.

It may have been reasonable for Rust Belt voters to revolt against the Democratic Party; and perhaps even to consider supporting a Republican. But supporting Trump was by nearly any metric an irresponsible gamble, albeit (like most of the vices Trump sells) perhaps a pleasurable one, at least in the short run—a middle finger to the political establishment, the political (and culturally elitist) left, and the idea of political community in general. This sentiment, in the grey area between “screw you” antagonism and “screw it” nihilism, is on the rise – [within](#) the Rust Belt, but also [across](#) America's scarred economic landscape – and it is among the most alarming artifacts of this election. Democrats are now scrambling to appeal to struggling regions like the Rust Belt, as they should; but if they wish to truly make inroads, they must, as McQuarrie does, understand that voters' economic woes cannot be disentangled from these feelings of displacement and anomie.

## By linking his critique to place, he is better able to emphasize how institutions that normalize expectation around political participation serve a vital grassroots role.



**Julian C. Chambliss** – *Rollins College*

Michael McQuarrie's searing indictment of the failure of the Democratic Party highlights the complex relationship between culture and property at the core of the U.S. experience. I applaud his cogent analysis; the problem he highlights is instructive because it helps us to define how the reality of political engagement in the United States was not in past and are not now free from concerns linked to identity.

By arguing Trump's 2016 Midwest victory represents a failure to recognize the impact of place, McQuarrie resurrects the critique found in [The Rise and Fall of the New Deal Order, 1930-1980](#). Then Gary Gerstle and Steve Fraser wrote, "No single event undermined the New Deal order; no particular individual, or even group of individuals, dug its grave." Like Gerstle and Fraser McQuarrie see a gap between what was promised and what was delivered as the crucial mistake. The goods identified by Gerstle and Fraser: citizenship rights, affluence, individual expressiveness, and stable international order directed by the United States, are similar to those McQuarrie argue have slipped from the reach of Midwestern voters.

Yet, by linking his critique to place, he is better able to emphasize how institutions that normalize expectation around political participation serve a vital grassroots role. Like Thomas Sugrue's [Origins of Urban Crisis](#), which discussed the impact of deindustrialization in Detroit to J. Mark Souther's [Believing in Cleveland](#), which highlights the failure linked to "decline and renewal" narratives in Cleveland, we see how organizations rooted in the community can either bolster or hamper action. The problem we should consider is how McQuarrie's analysis calls attention to the tangible benefits linked to political practice in the United States have been grounded in notions of property and prosperity constrained by identity. It is no revelation that region, identity, and action intersect to nurture specific policy.

Of course, the past saw concerns in the rural hinterland and urban area more easily aligned. Yet, those alignments were never truly equal. The industrial economy allowed its workers access to levers of collective power often denied rural agricultural labor. The New Deal order that fostered unions left out black agricultural laborer behind because FDR needed southern support. As Steven Conn [demonstrates](#), other New Deal policies from housing to road construction embellished an anti-urban fear of "concentration" associated with the city. In this past context, race aligned with region to hamper opportunity. Now, as the shift to an information economy has shifted jobs to the South and West, those same dynamics are at play. How we understand the legacy of race and space is crucial to developing the path toward inclusive policy. This reality animates new research into fee inequality in the modern economy from Devin Fergus and frames Carl Nightingale's [cogent analysis](#) of segregation's global impact. Thus, McQuarrie's analysis should be seen as a call for an ideology that feeds new grassroots institutions that wrestle with the problem of labor and property in the new millennium.

## Elections, we should remind ourselves, are fickle things that defy single narratives



**Joshua D. Ambrosius** and **Jennifer Lumpkin** – *University of Dayton*

Michael McQuarrie's new [article](#) for the *British Journal of Sociology* argues that Donald Trump's presidential victory was less about his voter appeal than it was about the Democratic Party's decades-long rebuffing of Rust Belt voters. Black and poor white voters turned their backs on Hillary Clinton with double-digit declines in turnout from 2012, argues McQuarrie. In their progressive march toward globalization, the Democratic Party left the Rust Belt behind—leaving voters to either stay home or hitch a ride with the only other ticket to the White House.

On a whole, the paper does a first-rate job describing economic and political shifts in the upper Midwest. We agree with many of the claims in McQuarrie’s analysis, but nonetheless see weaknesses in method, tone, and novelty that undermine his case.

Methodologically, McQuarrie’s argument is mostly sound but requires more support, both quantitative and geographical. The paper explicitly attempts to discredit conventional quantitative analyses based in exit polling, arguing that these typical descriptions of Trump’s electoral victory fall short of explanatory power. Simple demographics, the paper claims, do not explain the Electoral College shift that broke through Hillary Clinton’s so-called “blue wall” in the northern Midwest. While visualizing the shifts in percentage support for Democratic candidates and voter turnout supports McQuarrie’s thesis, the narrow selection of counties in Figure II of his paper does little to show where and to what extreme the Rust Belt’s hypothetical revolt took place. Eight counties appear here from the 745 counties contained within the author’s nine Rust Belt states, yet only Mahoning, Ohio, is described adequately in the text. A better approach could use mapping to show where the shifts occurred and at what level of intensity.



*“trump sign – 2016-11-08” by Tim Evanson is licensed under [CC BY SA 2.0](#)*

Furthermore, is McQuarrie’s paper meant primarily as a theoretical tome or an empirical analysis? The paper reads more as the former despite making a weighty observation about the reality of our recent election. More data on Rust Belt vote switching from Obama to Trump would be helpful. McQuarrie likely pulled sufficient data to support his case, but showing this would have a larger impact on readers. In particular, claims about lower black turnout require greater evidence—if not exit polling, then election returns from majority black counties. As it is, the paper feels less like an empirical argument about the political impacts of neoliberalism than it does a theoretical one.

The paper additionally strikes the wrong tone by making grand claims about the “true” story of the election that go quite a bit beyond the data presented. Elections, we should remind ourselves, are fickle things that defy single narratives. McQuarrie’s paper mentions other claims dealing with issues like race but then subsumes them under his grand narrative of regional rebellion rooted in economic abandonment. Along these same lines, he illustrates the state of the Rust Belt with one image showing a dilapidated home—an oversimplification of the regional housing market and a selection on par with darkly motivated disaster tourism.

Finally, the argument is profound but not exactly novel. We ran the basic claims by political science colleagues and they agree that the arguments made in this paper are more common knowledge than McQuarrie claims. Maybe it strikes a UK audience as unique, but here in the Rust Belt, the claims are generally accepted.

I (Ambrosius) previously extended my [work on election outcomes](#) in core, urban counties to the [2016 election](#). While McQuarrie looks at the Rust Belt as an almost uniform swath of poor white folk and angry black people, my approach treats urban and rural voters as separate groups. I tend to attribute Trump’s wins in the pivotal Rust Belt states to the GOP’s ability to mobilize the disaffected in places where the Democrats forgot to campaign—places where McQuarrie rightly sees the impacts of bipartisan economic policies. Would some targeted campaigning by Clinton and her surrogates have overcome Trump’s extremely narrow victories in these critical states? Maybe (even probably), which suggest that the supposed Rust Belt revolt is quite a bit less than a full-fledged revolution.

Differences aside, we also feel the devastation of a Trump presidency and believe that the Democrats must differentiate themselves from both mainstream Republican and Trumpian economic platforms to achieve lasting electoral success—Rust Belt or otherwise.

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**All social science relies on interpretation and judgements. The question is never whether or not such things are happening, but whether those choices are reasonable and telling us something we didn’t know.**



**Michael McQuarrie** – *LSE Sociology*

Let me start by thanking Julian Chambliss, Ruth Braunstein, Joshua Ambrosius, and Jennifer Lumpkin for their thoughtful comments; this paper would have probably been better if I had them in hand earlier. All of them have provocative arguments to make about the current moment. Some of my favorites from these scholars include Braunstein’s [analysis](#) of religion and Americanism in the 2016 election, Chambliss’s [piece](#) on Mar-a-Lago and how Trump’s struggles there anticipated his political career, and Ambrosius’s [piece](#) on urban support for Clinton.

Braunstein’s response asks a series of questions that are rooted in her own familiarity with a similar set of voters, stemming from her recently published book (you can hear her discussing her book [here](#)). She agrees that the devalorization of previously privileged people is becoming a pretty broadly accepted consensus, though I would add that there does not appear to be much depth of knowledge behind that consensus (what has been “devalued” and why is it important?).

Given a relatively common understanding of what has occurred in a lot of Rust Belt territories, Braunstein asks how much of this had to do with the parties and how much with the candidates. Another candidate might not have lost the “Rust Belt Five” in this election, but the party was certainly on a trajectory to lose Rust Belt counties eventually, regardless of candidate Clinton. This process has been unfolding for a while, but when Gore lost West Virginia in 2000, and Democratic candidates kept losing the state by ever-larger margins afterwards, the writing was on the wall in my view. The party hasn’t been a party of the working class for a long time now.

Some people will argue that the party’s abandonment of the poor, working class, and increasingly the middle class is because of an inherent tension between identity and class politics. I want to argue it is far more about the party itself, how it’s organized, and the institutions that connect it to voters. Interesting new work by Josh [Pacewicz](#), Karen [Orren](#) and Stephen Skowronek, and Stephanie [Mudge](#) support this. The party is premised on the depoliticization of the economy, a laissez-faire attitude to [new](#) economic formations, a [concern](#) for minority rights, and it reflects the values of meritocratic professionals. Hillary Clinton is the sort of candidate such a party produces, but it is hardly her fault that it does so. Of course, this subsumes the potential role of misogyny in determining the relevant vote swings in the Midwest. No doubt, there is no shortage of this, but is it explanatory?

I think there is quite a bit of research that supports the idea that Trump exploited divisions that had been present for some time and that the Obama presidency wore thin on Rust Belt counties despite a lot of initial enthusiasm. Clinton clearly was burdened by her husband in all kinds of ways, and it is useful to note that context didn't favor her in the Rust Belt. In the mid-1990s, right after Bill Clinton passed NAFTA, I represented the union I worked for on the Central Labor Council of Dayton, Ohio. The highlight of the annual picnic was the destruction of a brand-new Toyota with a wrecking ball. People don't forget stuff like that, and Hillary Clinton's continued support for free-trade treaties didn't exactly disassociate her from her husband. Nonetheless, it is important to remember that a lot has changed. Hillary Clinton did *far* better than her husband in terms of the national vote. Indeed, even though I was writing before the election about Trump's support in the Rust Belt, [I fully expected him to lose](#) anyway. The party is perfectly capable of getting votes, but it is not well-designed to get Rust Belt votes no matter who the candidate is. Federalism is annoying when you're in the majority.

If this is accurate, then the question of "irresponsibility" that Braunstein raises shifts a bit. Sure, it's annoying that Rust Belt voters voted nihilistically. On the other hand, they aren't really in charge of the party, the people it courts, or the policies it enacts. They are not, after all, the political professionals. Voting for Trump is irresponsible and unlikely to pay off for Rust Belt voters, but like racism, there's plenty of irresponsibility to go around and Rust Belt voters hold no monopoly on either. Expecting people who are struggling to hold their communities together to keep in mind their responsibility to the rest of us isn't unreasonable, but since we haven't demonstrated any sense of responsibility to them the expectation strikes me as tacky.

On the question of how the party is connected to voters, Chambliss takes up this issue in a provocative way that I attempted to take seriously in the paper, but probably not seriously enough. Chambliss says that political practices are "grounded in notions of property and prosperity constrained by identity." Chambliss notes that the institutional articulation of the politics of the New Deal was premised on the exclusion of agricultural labor (mostly black and Latinx), and, I would add, various kinds of "voluntary" and domestic labor (mostly women). My usual response to this kind of argument is simply to note that uneven development is real and the description of "urban vortexes" in the paper was meant to illustrate some of those dynamics without relying on the dry language of capital flows.

But that is probably not up to the task of dealing with Chambliss's point. Uneven development always privileges and marginalizes, but race, I think Chambliss is saying, is more than merely a dimension of these processes. It is constitutive. Our capitalism doesn't have a racial dimension to it, it is racial capitalism. The paper makes a concerted effort to illustrate the ways in which the regional privilege of the Rust Belt was racialized, but in treating race as a dimension of these dynamics, rather than constitutive of them, it might be missing the point.

Both Chambliss and Ambrosius and Lumpkin give a version of the idea that emphasizing place and its role in politics is somewhat banal. It is certainly true that when one says it, people don't reject it as crazy. And while historians like Chambliss are certainly well aware of the heavily regional nature in American political history (Chambliss gives the example of the Wagner Act in his comment), it is nonetheless also the case that most of our tools of election analysis obliterate place and its specificity. There is a related question about institutions and political articulation. Far too much political analysis is unable to operationalize the role of institutions, much less the role of place. The theories of action that lie behind what I call "actuarial" modes of analysis are usually simplistically mechanistic and they are premised on "de-placing" individuals. Chambliss says that historians know this already, which I believe, but Ambrosius and Lumpkin want to say political scientists do too. Well, if that's true they sure haven't figured out how to deploy these in their analyses very consistently or effectively. Looking at collections and journal special issues on the election I find hardly any papers or essays are attentive to place. Somehow, all this "place-consciousness" isn't organizing much analysis. The point isn't that place is somehow a discovery, the paper cites lots of people who mobilize place for analytical purposes, it is that we don't incorporate it very well into the social science of politics.

Ambrosius and Lumpkin accuse me of articulating a “grand narrative” that does violence to the messiness of empirical detail. This despite the fact that I say specifically that place reasserted itself in *this* election. By “grand narrative” Ambrosius and Lumpkin actually mean “a narrative”. This is sort of what historical explanation does, postmodernism aside. The long and short of this: I doubt Hegel would have me in his “grand narratives” club. But what about the obliteration of all those pesky details? Ambrosius and Lumpkin take issue with my presentation of the foreclosure crisis and its aftermath, to take up one issue in particular. Pictures and figures are, Ambrosius and Lumpkin tell me, supposed to be “representative” of some truth and mine aren't. They find a picture of a house with its siding stripped off to be misleading and suggest it is manipulative. The house, I'm told, is not representative of real-estate values generally. But just because the extreme cases are extreme doesn't make them any less instructive. Just because some communities managed to keep the siding on their houses is utterly irrelevant when they have lost 60 percent of their value. In this context cities go bankrupt and schools are defunded, siding present or not. And the house is still pretty representative, at least representative enough that the city of Cleveland spent nearly its entire share stimulus funding on housing demolitions and still couldn't keep up with the problem. And never mind that metal scrapping became a full-scale industry in the wake of the crisis. I didn't get a Ph.D in order to translate Gaussian distributions into English (I explain my reasoning on foreclosure in more detail [here](#) and the context for the Rust Belt Revolt argument [here](#)).

All social science relies on interpretation and judgements. The question is never whether or not such things are happening, but whether those choices are reasonable and telling us something we didn't know. The choices I made in the paper are in the service of a broader argument that needed to be made. It is too bad that Ambrosius and Lumpkin are not that interested in it. Writing from Ohio, they probably know too much already.

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*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of USAPP – American Politics and Policy, nor the London School of Economics, nor the authors' institutions.*

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