

# 1 A Princeton sociologist spent 8 years asking rural Americans why they're so pissed off

2 Hint: it's not about the economy.

3 Sean Illing

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5 Robert Wuthnow, a sociologist at Princeton University, spent eight years interviewing Americans in small towns across the country.

6 He had one goal: to understand why rural America is so angry with Washington.

7 Wuthnow's work resulted in a new book, [\*The Left Behind: Decline and Rage in Rural America\*](#).

8 He argues that rural Americans are **less concerned about economic issues** and **more concerned about Washington threatening the social fabric of small towns and causing a "moral decline" in the country as a whole.**

9 The problem, though, is that it's never quite clear what that means or **how Washington is responsible for it.**

10 So I decided to speak with Wuthnow about what he learned and whether fears about America's "moral decline" are really just a cover for much **deeper fears about race and demographic changes.**

11 A lightly edited transcript of our conversation follows.

12 **Sean Illing**

13 When did you conduct the interviews for this book?

14 And where?

15 **Robert Wuthnow**

16 The research was done between 2006 and 2014, and we talked to people in every state in the country.

17 Basically, we limited ourselves to **small towns with fewer than 25,000 people** and only those that were away from suburbs or cities.

18 **Sean Illing**

19 Most people assume that rural America means white America – is that a mistake?

20 **Robert Wuthnow**

21 The percentage that is African-American is relatively small, but it depends on what part of America we're talking about.

22 There are many rural communities in the South that are almost entirely African-American, and the same is true of small towns in places like Minnesota.

23 But I'd say something like **90 percent of rural America is white.**

24 Although the demographics are quickly changing as Hispanics and other immigrants settle in rural parts of the country.

25 **Sean Illing**

26 In the book, you argue that the anger we're seeing in rural America is less about economic concerns and more about the perception that Washington is threatening the way of life in small towns.

27 How, specifically, is Washington doing this?

28 **Robert Wuthnow**

29 I'm not sure that Washington is doing anything to harm these communities.

30 To be honest, a lot of it is just scapegoating.

31 And that's why you see more **xenophobia** and **racism** in these communities.

32 There's a sense that things are going badly, and the impulse is to blame "others."

33 They believe that Washington really does have power over their lives.

34 They recognize that the **federal government controls vast resources**, and they feel threatened if they perceive Washington's interest being directed **more toward urban areas than rural areas**, or **toward immigrants more than non-immigrants**, or **toward minority populations instead of the traditional white Anglo population.**

35 **Sean Illing**

36 But that's just racism and cultural resentment, and calling it a manifestation of some deeper anxiety doesn't alter that fact.

37 **Robert Wuthnow**

38 I don't disagree with that.

39 I'm just explaining what I heard from people on the ground in these communities.

40 This is what they believe, what they say, not what I believe.

41 **Sean Illing**

42 Fair enough.

43 The title of your book, *The Left Behind*, rubbed me the wrong way.

44 It seems to me that many of these people haven't been left behind; **they've chosen not to keep up.**

45 But the sense of victimization appears to overwhelm everything else.

46 **Robert Wuthnow**

47 I make it very clear in the book that this is largely a choice.

48 It's not as though these people are desperate to leave but can't.

49 They value their local community.

50 They understand its problems, but they like knowing their neighbors and they like the slow pace of life and they like living in a community that feels small and closed.

51 Maybe they're making the best of a bad situation, but **they choose to stay.**

52 They recognize themselves as being left behind because, in fact, they are the ones in their family and in their social networks who did stay where they were.

53 Most of the people I spoke to grew up in the small town they currently live in, or some other small town nearby.

54 Often **their children have already left**, either to college or in search of a better job somewhere else.

55 In that sense, they believe, quite correctly, that they're the ones who stayed in these small towns while young people – and really the country as a whole – moved on.

56 **Sean Illing**

57 What I hear from many of the people in your book is  
**nostalgia for a bygone world  
or a world that probably  
never really existed in the  
first place.**

58 **Robert Wuthnow**

59 It's resentment that ultimately gets directed toward the politicians they don't like, or toward people who look different from them.

60 That's certainly part of what's going on here.

61 **Sean Illing**

62 I'm still struggling to understand what exactly these people mean when they complain about the "moral decline" of America.

63 At one point, you interview a woman who complains about the country's "moral decline" and then cites, as evidence, the fact that she can't spank her children without "the government" intervening.

64 Am I supposed to take this seriously?

65 **Robert Wuthnow**

66 It's an interesting question.

67 What does it mean for us to take that seriously?

68 I guess my point is that she takes it seriously, even if we don't or shouldn't.

69 Does she still spank her children?

70 Probably.

71 Is she just using that as an example of how the country is changing and how Washington is driving that change?

72 Probably.

73 Now, I doubt she made this us up herself.

74 She likely heard it at church or from her neighbors or from Fox News or talk radio.

75 Again, what I kept hearing from people is a general fear that traditional moral rules were being wiped out by a government and a culture that doesn't understand the people who still believe in these things.

76 **Sean Illing**

77 I guess I just don't know how to respond to these sorts of complaints.

78 Yes, the world has changed; it's always changing.

79 And I understand the sense of loss some people feel because of that, but at some point, we have to acknowledge that culture evolves and stop trying to unwind the historical clock.

80 **Robert Wuthnow**

81 I grew up in rural America; I still have a great deal of affection for rural America.

82 But I find a lot of this quite depressing.

83 Part of me wants to take some of these people, shake them up, and tell them to "move on."

84 This is the 21st century, after all.

85 **Quit listening to Rush Limbaugh and try to think as clearly as you can about what's going on.**

86 But another part of me says it's important to understand where they're coming from and not simply dismiss them as disconnected or out of touch with reality.

87 If they feel threatened by racial diversity or homosexuality or abortion or whatever it might be, I want to understand why they feel that way.

88 As a scholar, that's the only way I'm going to learn anything.

89 **Sean Illing**

90 The suffering in rural America is real, and I worry about social fragmentation and drug addiction and wage

stagnation and all the rest of it.

91 But do you think the xenophobia and the hatred of Washington in these places is diverting attention from the source of these problems and therefore making it less likely that things get better?

92 **Robert Wuthnow**

93 We found town managers and elected officials who were frustrated over the generalized anger toward Washington because it inhibited practical solutions from being pursued.

94 These officials knew they had to secure grants from the federal government, for instance, but found it difficult to do that when local elections were won by far-right candidates.

95 I think the concerns about moral decline often miss the mark.

96 I think a lot of white Americans in these small towns are simply reacting against a country that is becoming more diverse – racially, religiously, and culturally.

97 They just don't know how to deal with it.

98 And that's why you're seeing this spike in white nationalism.

99 **Sean Illing**

100 Which is why I'd argue that **the divide between rural and urban America is becoming unbridgeable.**

101 We can talk all we like about the sanctity of these small communities and the traditional values that hold them together, but, as you say, many of the people who live in these places hold racist views and support racist candidates and we can't accommodate that.

102 **Robert Wuthnow**

103 Yes, this is one of the most difficult aspects of the discussion we're now having about morality in America.

104 What counts as moral varies so much from place to place.

105 In the South, for example, you have clergy who are vehement about abortion or homosexuality, and they preach this in the pulpits every Sunday.

106 But then they turn a blind eye to policies that hurt the poor or discriminate against minorities.

107 **Sean Illing**

108 I know a lot of people who don't live in rural America are tired of being told they need to understand all these resentments.

109 But I'll set that aside and just ask: What's the most useful takeaway from all this research?

110 What do you propose we do to move forward?

111 **Robert Wuthnow**

112 Point one is that rural America is quite diverse.

113 People live in farm towns or coastal towns or mining communities, or they live in the North or the South or in Republican states or Democratic states.

114 So we have to be careful about lumping people together under one category.

115 Point two is that rural America does have real problems – population decline, a brain drain, opioid addiction, etc.

116 We can make of that what we want.

117 But that's not the whole picture.

118 Not every small town is full of people who are suffering and bitter and angry at Washington.

119 Point three is that there are significant differences between small towns and large cities, but there are also commonalities.

120 Since we're living in a polarized time, it's worth remembering that not all divisions run along the rural-urban divide.

121 The conservative-liberal divide or the Republican-Democrat is just as pronounced in many cases.

122 So we've got a lot of work to do in this country, and it goes beyond this one fault line.