

Rural Perceptions of Urban Wisconsin: The Effects of Milwaukee

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Question

To what extent do rural Wisconsinites' views about urban places reflect an attitude about Milwaukee as opposed to attitudes about urban places in general?

Background

A growing pattern in the state of Wisconsin is the divide in political attitudes and identities between rural and urban communities. *The Politics of Resentment* (Cramer, 2016) shows residents of rural areas have negative attitudes toward Wisconsin's densely populated urban areas. Yet while Wisconsin has many other metropolitan cities, the conversation about urban Wisconsin is also profoundly focused on the state's largest city: Milwaukee.

Data and Methods

32 Rural Wisconsinites were interviewed about the following topics:

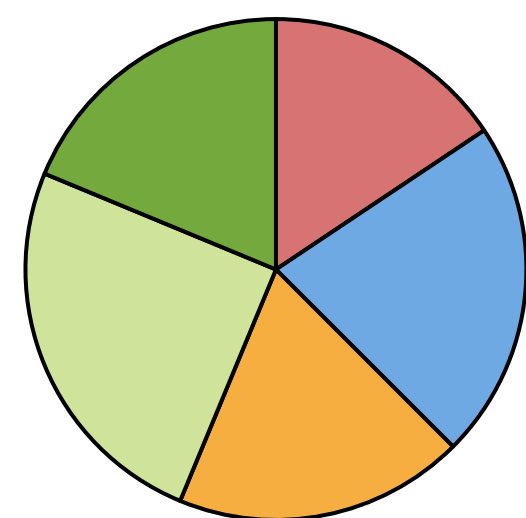
1. Describing place of residence on the rural-urban continuum.
2. Perceptions of rural and urban places in Wisconsin.
3. Comparing the quality of political representation in rural, suburban, and urban places.
4. Perceptions of the city of Milwaukee
5. Demographics consisting of political ideology, age, and level of education.

Political Party Identification Distribution

Democrat	Leans Democrat	Swings	Leans Republican	Republican
6	10	2	8	6

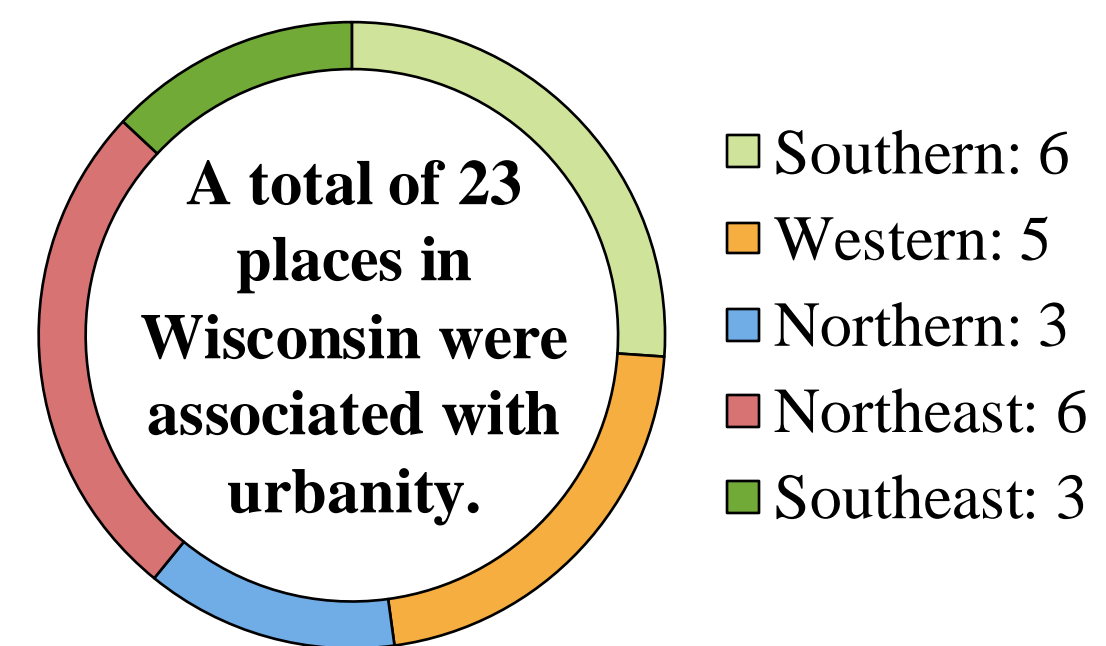
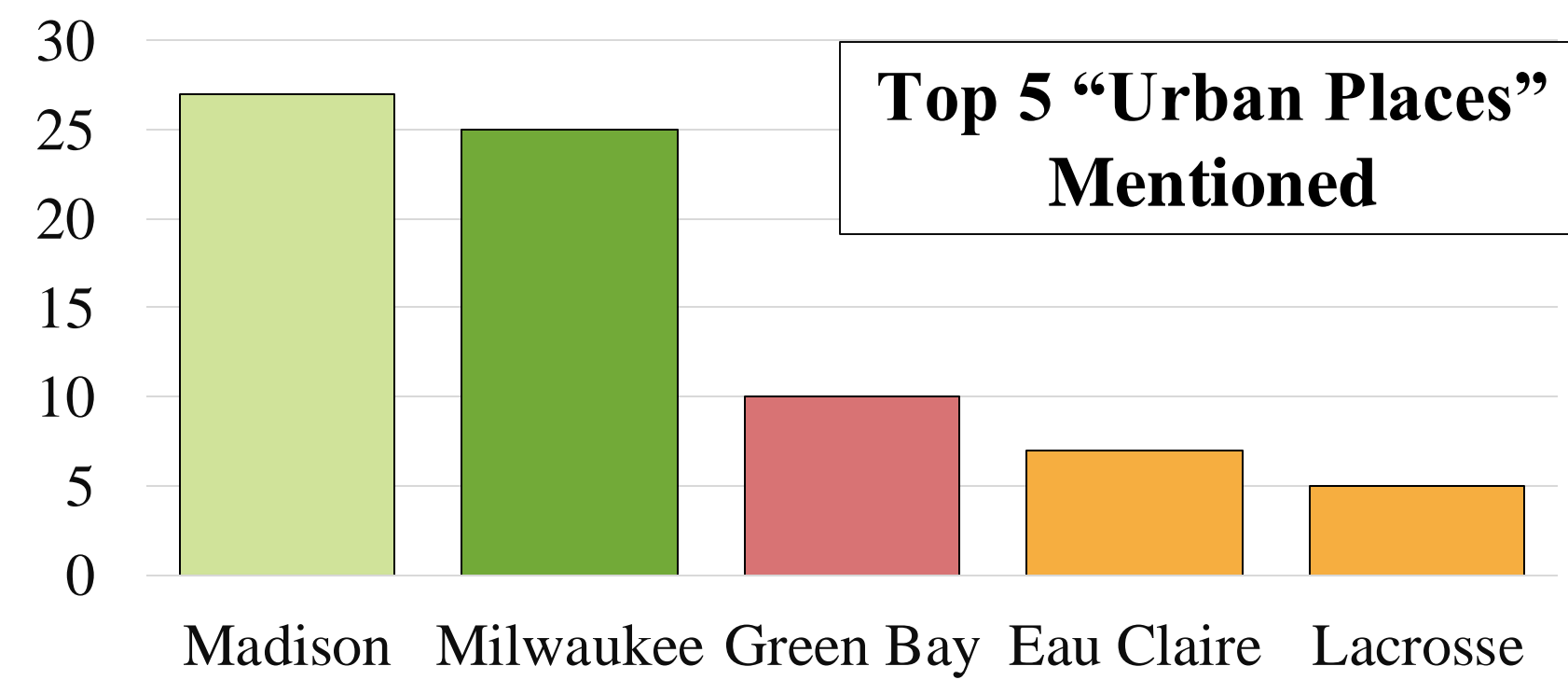
Interview Distribution by Region

- Northeast: 5
- Northern: 7
- Western: 6
- Southern: 8
- Southeast: 6



Results

Milwaukee is not the only place rural Wisconsinites associate with urbanity.



0/32 interviews was Milwaukee the *only* place associated with urbanity in Wisconsin.

Rural Wisconsinites believe there are representation disparities in both rural *and* urban places.

Western Region Participant:

"I would guess the urban areas of Milwaukee are probably underrepresented, similar to how rural places are, just because I think that's the dynamic of a lot of inner cities of really great size... most of the power probably lies more in suburban areas."

Southeast Region Participant:

I think finance - from purely dollars and cents - they have more money spent in an urban area by state government. I don't, and I don't think that's really in dispute. The question is, is it used effectively? ... Whether they get "better" (representation)... better is a subjective word, you know?

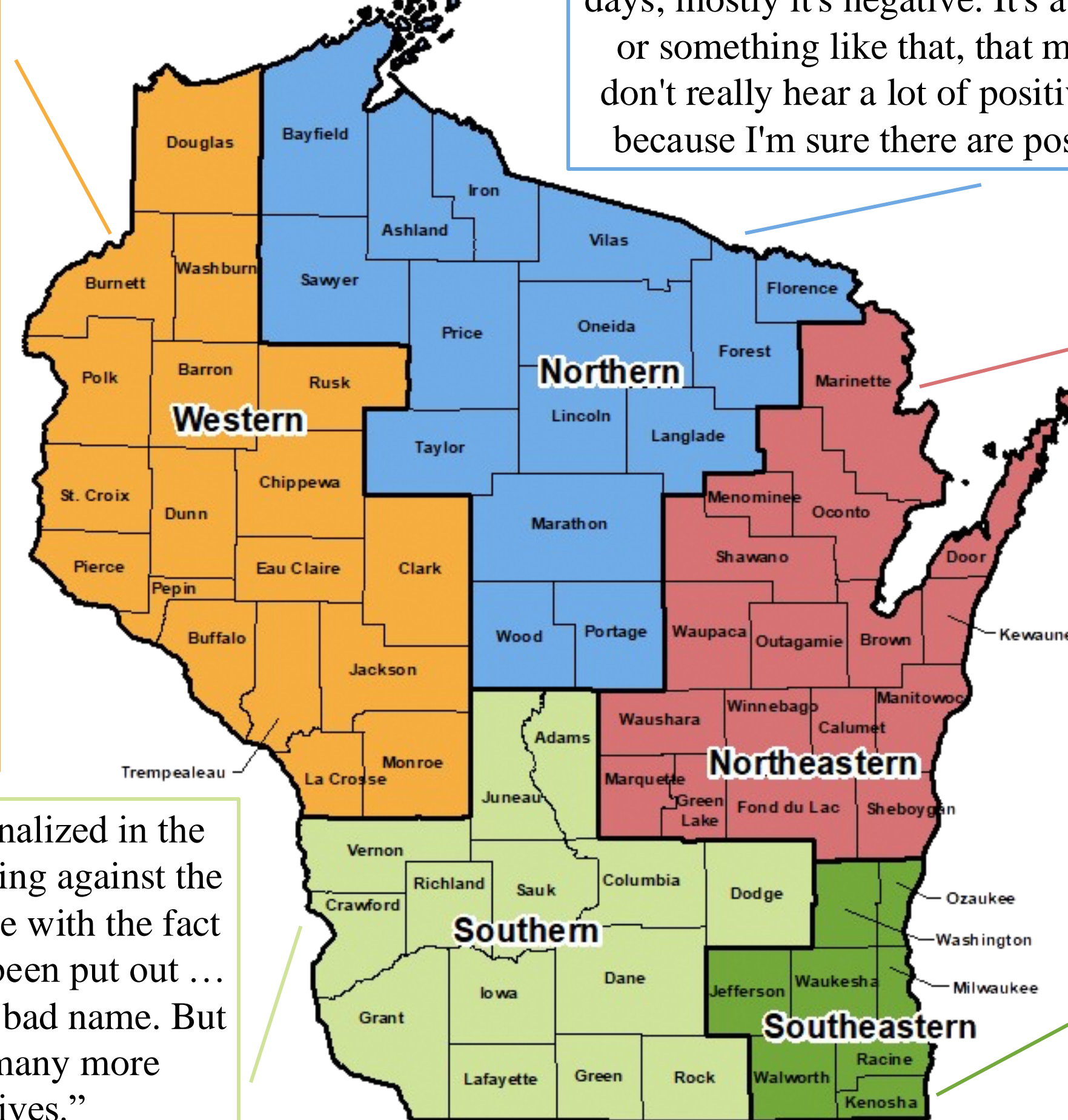
Northeast Region Participant:

"Yes, we (rural places) can have some influence, but I'm not particularly fond of politicians in general." ... "I think that they are influenced by money." ... "I suspect that people who live in the heart of Milwaukee and want better schools and need more help with people on the poverty level and unemployment do not see that they are getting the same representation that people who have a bit of money to wave around are getting."

Skepticism Around the Media's Negative Narrative of Milwaukee

"...I could see how many rural residents would think Milwaukee is going to hell in a handbasket, and I don't think that's necessarily the case. There's a lot of great things happening in Milwaukee... but that's not what's making the headlines. And what makes the headlines tend to be more sensational, and it also sparks fear and concern." ... "...we don't see enough positive for Milwaukee versus the negatives... and so the negatives get the attention..."

Map Source: Wisconsin Department of Health Services (2017)



"... I suppose on the national news, like all news, it seems these days, mostly it's negative. It's about, for example, (a) crime incident or something like that, that might happen in Milwaukee ... You don't really hear a lot of positive about Milwaukee, unfortunately, because I'm sure there are positive things going on down there."

"I don't think it's inaccurate, but I know, I know it's not going to give me anywhere close to a complete picture. I know there's a lot more to Milwaukee than just what you hear in the media."

"I think a lot of it's sensationalized in the news (or) media. I have nothing against the news (or) media. I don't agree with the fact that the negative is all that's been put out ... it kind of gives Milwaukee a bad name. But overall, there's, I think, many more positives than negatives."

"I don't think Milwaukee is nearly in as bad a position as some of the other large cities that I have worked with in the past. It tends to have a poorer than deserved reputation ... I see people, especially as you move into the rural areas, and to have some misconceptions about just what Milwaukee is, whether it comes from a lack of familiarity or media coverage or bias, you know might be all those."

Discussion

The data suggests that Milwaukee is not the only urban place in Wisconsin that influences the perceptions of urban places.

Further, what Wisconsinites most often hear about in the media regarding Milwaukee is not always believed without skepticism.

Rural Wisconsinites may also not believe that their representation disparities are caused at the hands of urban Wisconsin citizens themselves.

There is indication they see representation disparities in both rural and urban Wisconsin, possibly leading to the belief that quality representation does not have to be a zero-sum-game for rural and urban communities.

References:

