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### Warren County Democrats: The Urban and Rural Divide

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Aidan Henrikson

Professor William Barndt

Building Political Parties

2/20/2022

### Warren County Democrats: The Urban and Rural Divide

Warren County Democrats is a local political party in upstate New York comprising the city of Glens Falls and the rural townships around Lake George in the Adirondacks. The Warren County Democrats' over emphasis on national and state politics, and overrepresentation of certain populations like the teacher's union, rather than their locality, leads it to neglect and alienate its rural communities and hence party support. I interviewed several people to write this paper and, upon their request, I will be anonymizing some of them.

The county comprises the rural townships of (Lake George village (which is about 3,500 people) and the city of Glens Falls (about 20,000) (United States Census Bureau). Given the more urban population in Glen Falls, only Glens Falls would occasionally have a Democratic mayor and City council (Blais). The Warren County Democratic Party was in the minority party with little support for most of its history. In an interview with Mayor Blais, the county was about "90% Republican in the 50's and 60's." This is best shown on a presidential level, Warren county voted for the Republican nominee from 1884-2004 with 2 exceptions: 1964, and 1996 (Leip). Even still, the Republican nominee in 1964 was Barry Goldwater, a segregationist, and did not win a single county in New York and only one in New England (Leip). Even still, Bill Clinton's victory in 1996 was due to a plurality, with 15% of the county voting for the independent, Reform Party candidate, Ross Perot (Atlas of U.S. Presidential Elections). There was a local saying in the village that the Democratic convention "was held in a phone booth because that is how many Democrats there are" (Blais). Hence, Warren County Democrats were the minority party with little popular support and

resulted in members being involved if they were already politically involved and the party not actively promoting itself.

The origins of Republican support from rural counties in upstate New York stems from feeling unrepresented on a state level and by extension the national level. The massive population of New York City pushes state politics far to the left. For example, since the 1930s every governor originates from the City and only recently was broken by Kathy Hochul from Erie County (who got the position from Cuomo's resignation). Underrepresentation extends on a national level, for instance, from 1971-2009 both of New York's senators were from the New York metropolitan area. The current senator, Kirsten Gillibrand, is from Albany (the capital), which is associated with state liberal leanings (United States Senate website). Hence, rural residents feel that authority flows out from Albany, and in some respects New York City, and do not feel represented on a national level.

Particularly, underrepresentation is exacerbated by interactions between Lake George Village locals and their downstate tourists. The town can reach a population of 25,000 due to an influx of tourists and international workers over the summer (Blais). Most of the tourists are from Albany, New York City, other north east metropolitan areas, and Canada (little international tourism in recent years due the COVID-19 pandemic (Leon)). The local workers feel disrespected and characterized these tourists as "rude", however, the villages' economy is built around them (Lake George Regional Chamber of Commerces & CVD). Katherine Walsh concept of rural consciousness, there are feelings that tourists are wasteful and their residents are hard working (and in some respects they feel as if they deserve their money more) (Walsh). For example, every August there is an old car show for tourists to participate and attend. Drivers will 'burnout', this is a process where the driver puts their foot on both the gas and the brake. Then, the wheels are stationary but tires spin, and then the driver takes their foot off the brake and the car goes flying and creates tire marks (Mulholland) (see image one). Burnout not only causes traffic, but is loud and steam coming

out of the vehicle but the city spends taxpayer dollars on repairing the street.

The locals are themselves too poor to live a tourist lifestyle. Tourist jobs are minimum wage, seasonal, and “necessitating hard work, not leisure” (Walas 526) and in Lake George many of the residents without jobs turn to alcoholism in the winter months. From my own personal experience working in Lake George village during summer 2020 and 2021, around September or October one of my co-workers came to work drunk one day, my manager explained that it was starting to be “that time of year” where there are less tourists, so people will drink out of boredom and economic depression. Most workers go on unemployment in the winter. In comparison, tourists seem “flashy” and “excessive.” Hence, the underrepresentation adds a personal element. Locals feel that tourists from downstate disrespect Lake George and their residents. As I was explained when working there, Residents in the village have a clear notation who is and is not a local: even people from Glens Falls, only twenty minutes away, and some of their work in the village, are not seen as local. A similar phenomenon was observed by Stephanie Muravchik and Jon Shields between how Elliott county, Kentucky, viewed itself in relation to Carter County and shows the limits of rural consciousness (Muravchik & Shield). Furthermore, people who live in Lake George only during the summer, but go to Florida in the winter, can lose their “localness.” Anger towards tourism and the efforts made by the town to cater to tourists rather than local people, blurs with personal resentments with political representation in Warren County. Hence, Lake George citizens view New York’s senators like Christian Gillabrad, from Albany, and Chuck Schumer, from New York City, as not only not representing their wants but also “on the side of” the people abusing their community.

The Warren Democratic Party’s promotion of national and state political leaders, instead of local concerns, alienates them from potential party support. As mentioned in *Trump’s Democrats*, the absence of protection from strong government institutions, coupled with residents feeling underrepresented, developed an honor culture. Honor cultures have a strong one-party government

with local leaders having long terms in power with strong personal connections with their community (Muravchik & Shields). In part due to the nationalization of local politics (Muravchik & Shields), the Warren Democratic Party was too associated with the state and national branches, which locals felt were neglecting them, to gain popular support. The promotion of national politics is clear on Warren Democratic Party Facebook page: most of the posts consist of Kathy Sheehan, the mayor of Albany, Matt Castelli, running for NY-21 district and especially Kathy Hochul, the governor of New York (in part because she is the first governor from upstate New York since the 1930s). There is even a post about Stacey Abrams running for Georgia governor again in 2022. While there is mention of Claudia Braymer, running for the 114th State Assembly district, and Diana Palmer, running for Glens Falls council seat, local politics gets drowned out.

Furthermore, the only mention of Lake George in the last six months is the ice castle tourist destination. Again, there is promotion of tourism and not the local issues like the tire marks, alcoholism, and the COVID-19 restrictions that affect local employment. Furthermore, the mayor of Lake George wanted to retire in 2020, but could not find a replacement, the Democratic party roots were not strong enough to send a replacement. The Facebook page feels more like political hobbyism, the obsession of politics without participating in it and not grounded in the local community (Hersh). Hence, the Warren Democratic Party has a clear emphasis on the Democratic success on the state and even a national level, rather than rooted in local concerns. Additionally, in my interview with a committee member of the Warren Democratic Party, I will call them “Sam”, I asked them what are the other activities of the Warren County Democrats *besides* winning elections, and they seemed also confused by my question: they responded “the purpose of the political party is to win elections.” Again, there was not an outreach campaign to get people to join *outside* elections or to create a legible set of goals for the local population, such as addressing winter unemployment. The origins of Warren County Democrats, rooted in attracting people who were already politically

minded, lead them to promotion of state and national success due to their little chance at winning local support, thereby distancing themselves from local issues. The mayor claims that only he can fix the problems of his community and that Glens Falls, the state, and the national government neglect his community does not seem out of place (Blais).

The party does not prioritize membership and members of the Democratic Party to join through already established political links. Curiously, it is not easy to register for the party. There is no option on the Facebook page nor on the website to register to vote. Moreover, the website has not been updated since 2019. This is in part due to the lack of internet access in rural regions in New York. Being a small minority party in most of its history, members would register if they were already involved in politics. For example, “Sam” first got involved through the teacher’s association, an already politically involved organization. It appears the teacher’s union is a channel to the Democratic party. Local political leaders can hold their positions for long periods of time, “Sam” has been a member on the party chair since 2011 and Blais has been mayor since 1971. Again, this represents an honor culture, a society developed as a result of a lack of formal state institutions so political party members accounted for power and connections over time (Muravchik & Shields). But, the emphasis of nationalization weakens these linkages, it is found in the party committee chair, “Sam”. They are originally from New Jersey, lived in Los Angeles, and moved to Glens Falls. They suffer a disadvantage: by not being originally from there she will face a challenge establishing connections to the community. However, because of the over emphasis on the national and state successes, the large support and party connections due to honor culture is not present.

The current issues of the party are most concerned with the pandemic vaccinations and school closing (or moving online), especially with students lacking internet access (“Sam”). Moreover, a recent inter-party dispute was whether to endorse raising property taxes in the county; raising property taxes raises school funding (“Sam”). The connection between the demands of the

teacher's union and political party is clear. Glens Falls City School District 2021-22 budget is around \$48 million with over 2,000 students with a graduation rate of 79 percent, New York state average around 86 percent. (Glens Falls City School District Annual Budget Document Proposed 2021-2022 Budget) (Wardle). However, school funding is not a major concern in Lake George, it gets its funding through property taxes, the houses on the coast of Lake George can cost 10 million generating money for the school, while the occupant of these houses are from New York City and typically treat it as only a vacation house and do not send their children to the local school. Lake George Central school district has 727 students and has a 2021-2022 school year budget of over 24 million, with a graduation rate over 90 percent (Lake George Central School District Proposed budget 2021-2022). Moreover, the pandemic forced business and school to move online during schools and thereby indirectly increasing internet service (Adirondack Almanack). Additionally, Lake George Central school district superintendent salary is over 158,074 and an additionally 52,606 in benefits, and 1,000 in "Other Remuneration" (Lake George Central School District Proposed budget 2021-2022, 7). School funding for staff appears to be plentiful. Given this, school funding is not a major concern in Warren County, compared to other local issues.

The major local concerns were shops closing due to COVID and the harsh economic consequences and tourist damage like the burnout marks on the street. Moreover, there is a notable increase of winter tourists this year because of ice castles that glow in the dark and have slides and tunnels and the mayor has been working to accommodate these new tourists (Lake George website). Hence, the Warren Democratic party is not simply a national and state divide, but also a rural and urban divide within the county. The concerns of the teacher's union overlooked the concerns within the rural community.

In recent years, there was a shift in political voting on the presidential level in favor of the Democratic nominee and more competitive elections. Obama won in 2008 and 2012 by about 2.5

percent more than the Republican candidate, and while Trump won in 2020, it was only by 52 votes. “Sam” contributes this to the end of one party rule. The dissolution with Republican support led to a rise in popularity in the Democratic Party. However, there is local distrust in political parties, Mayor Basis analyzes both on the national and the state level as money in politics. One reason why he never ran for a position above village mayor is because the higher up, “you sold your soul” to the party. He explained that when you take 5,000 dollars in donations from the National Rifle Association you no longer have your autonomy. Moreover, Blais identifies it more as a decline in party participation more generally, currently 51% identifies as Republican and only 23% of the county identifies as Democrat and third parties do well in national elections. In 2016, 8.2% of the Warren County population voted for third parties, in 1992 the county voted for Ross Perot 6 percent above the national average and almost double the national average in 1996 (US census bureau). This is in part because New York state laws for party registration are restrictive: one wants to vote in a party primary in June, they have to register six months in advance as a means to keep the party machine in place (Mayhew). Furthermore, all elected positions in Lake George are non-partisan (Blais), however noted by Barndt, even in formal non-partisan elections, party institutions can still be strong (Barndt in class on 2/17). Hence, even though rival party support dropped, the party did not have the organization to create opposition.

The Warren Democratic party has been a minority party for much of its history. As a consequence, most already politically active people seek to join the party and the party did not outreach to members of its community. In an area that feels neglected by the government, the party’s overemphasis on national and state politics instead of regional issues, leads to further alienation between the party and local populations. Furthermore, the party’s focus on the city needs and the teacher’s union leads to further neglect of these rural areas given the lack of attention to rural concerns. Even with the decline of Republican party support, this has shifted to third party support



and not the Warren Democrats. This party should refocus itself on local issues, in both Glens Falls and the Lake George area in order for it to achieve more electoral success. When the mayor of Lake George Village eventually retires after 50 years of service, will there be a robust political or government organization to represent the needs of the community?

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Image 2: Lake George Junior-Senior High school.

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