

# Nick Hollman: Michels and the era of resentment

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The Aug. 9 primary results sealed Tim Michels' GOP candidacy for Wisconsin's gubernatorial election. The Republican gubernatorial primary made for a highly competitive, and often times heated, race between Michels and former Lieutenant Governor Rebecca Kleefisch.

The race was largely symbolic of two looming GOP forces in Wisconsin's recent memory: Former Governor Scott Walker and Former President Trump. Kleefisch was a Walker-endorsed establishment GOP candidate and Michels was a Trump-endorsed political outsider. It was, as some put it, the old GOP vs the new GOP. And Republican voters decided, by a 5 point margin, they want out with the old and in with the new.

Naturally, Michels' victory promptly raised fundamental questions for Wisconsin politics. Daniel Bice of the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel [asked Twitter](#): "Is this the end of the Scott Walker era in Wisconsin politics?" and Ruth Conniff of the Wisconsin Examiner gave insightful election analysis in [her article](#): "How Trumpy are we, Wisconsin?" Similar questions were raised in local and national coverage of the election.

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Analysis from previous and equally surprising election results in Wisconsin may shed light on answering these questions. In her book, "The Politics of Resentment: Rural Consciousness in Wisconsin and the Rise of Scott Walker," Kathy Cramer, professor of political science at UW-Madison, writes about her direct engagement

with rural Wisconsin voters to unveil their stories, concerns, and relationships (or lack thereof) with their representatives. Although the argument is centered around the rise of Scott Walker in 2011, its insights are just as applicable to Trump's victory in [Wisconsin in 2016](#) and, as I argue, the results of the Aug. 9 election.

The role and politics of resentment, as Cramer understands it, arises from a feeling of not getting one's fair share of political power, economic resources, and a fair representation of one's concerns in government. From this perspective of rural Wisconsinites, wealth and political attention are concentrated in the cities far from rural communities. The urban elites control the decision-making power and simply do not share the same priorities and, deliberately or not, ostracize them through rhetoric and policy. What rural voters want is a political outsider who shares their values and, ultimately, their social identity.

Trump was notorious for recognizing this feeling and developing it into a political strategy in and outside of Wisconsin in 2016. He was able to appeal to the interests of those who felt left behind while creating scapegoats—immigrants, China, elites—for the concerns they expressed. Michels followed suit.

Undoubtedly, Trump's endorsement of Michels gave him a boost in this regard. Despite creating some distance between himself and Trump in policy, most notably in election integrity, Michels ran as an outsider, created similar appeals to those who felt their voices were continually ignored, and adapted Trump rhetoric to his political goals by proposing to “drain the Madison Swamp” as a [top campaign priority](#).

Michels' messaging and background secured his overwhelming levels of support in rural areas across the state and kept him unusually competitive in the Milwaukee suburbs. Kleefisch, despite having nearly identical policy positions, lacked the same appeal to Republican voters and couldn't escape the establishment, insider, old GOP label. So long as resentment is at play, a Trump candidate is always favored over a Walker one. And in this case, Michels filled that mold.

Of course, no-one is claiming that resentment is the only factor at work here, but rather one among many. It's hard to ignore, for instance, Michels' [multi-million dollar contribution](#) to his own campaign that financed TV ads to promote name recognition. But resentment certainly comes off as a factor worth paying attention to and, in particular, one that appears undervalued in recent election analysis and our characterization of political “eras” in Wisconsin. Looking ahead, it deserves

more discussion in the November race against Evers and, for that matter, 2024 with the return of Trump or Trump-esque candidates.

We may have seen the end of the Walker era in Wisconsin politics on Aug. 9, but the era of resentment—[stretching back far before Walker](#)—will likely continue to play an insidious role in future elections at the local, state, and national level.

– *Nick Hollman is a Madison native and currently resides in Arlington, VA.*