

OPINION
GUEST ESSAY

Democrats Have Needed Someone Like Tim Walz for Decades

Aug. 7, 2024



Abbie Parr/Associated Press

By [Sarah Smarsh](#)

Ms. Smarsh is a journalist and the author of the forthcoming book “Bone of the Bone: Essays on America by a Daughter of the Working Class.”

Sometimes on our farm a nice car would roll up the gravel driveway and a man in a slick suit would get out. He would either be trying to sell us something overpriced that we’d never buy, because of our limited means and common sense, or trying to buy something we’d never sell — namely land, about which my grandfather said, “You don’t get rid of it, because they don’t make any more of it.”

This man would shake our hands before driving off.

“Better count your fingers,” Grandpa Arnie would tell us and laugh.

I’ve shared the story before to explain the gulf I’ve long felt between the essence of the rural white working poor who raised me — honest, flawed people who would welcome just about anyone into our home but a liar — and the red-hatted-fool avatar they’ve been assigned in national discourse.

What a relief, then, to see emerge on the national stage the Minnesota governor and Democratic vice-presidential candidate Tim Walz, who embodies the earnest, humane, rural people who shaped me and the prairie populism that shaped the progressive foundations of the Great Plains.

Mr. Walz went to a state college, taught public high school and went into government — more than a couple class rungs above my grandfather, who in the 1940s left school after sixth grade to work the Kansas wheat fields with his German American dad.

But when Mr. Walz smiles and his eyes disappear into a good-natured squint — say, while holding a piglet like a baby at a state fair — I see Grandpa Arnie.

With due respect to political statistics, which convey real and important trends, the rural white working class is not a monolith. Among them remains a large and consequential minority of sensible people who even in their vulnerable economic state remain unmoved by charlatans blaming immigrants while amassing corporate wealth.

In recent decades, the Democratic Party has made little direct appeal to them, such that Mr. Walz’s rural background seems downright transgressive on the top ticket. As evidence, some (often coastal) pundits now struggle to find a word for a vice-presidential pick raised in small-town Nebraska beyond “folksy,” since their language about his place of origin has for so long reflected geographic and class biases. “Trump country.” “One of the square states in the middle.”

My grandfather died while I was a first-generation college student, but my grandma — a Bernie Sanders supporter who went on to vote for Hillary Clinton and Joe Biden — has commented more than once about how Donald Trump would’ve turned Grandpa Arnie’s stomach.

Imagine if the type of person you most loathe became the symbol for your people and place. It has been, for me and so many others, excruciating.

I winced when political spin and coastal media coverage made cruel words that my people would never speak and big trucks that they could never afford the dominant image of rural, working-class and poor whites. Meanwhile, as a journalist with a national platform who resides in rural Kansas, I repeatedly declined invitations to explain the Trump movement. I sensed the problematic ratings-driven fixation of television news networks, and my own family contains no more Trump voters than those of my friends who live in New York City and Los Angeles. Over the years, I did [my best](#) to offer another vision through my writing.

Along the way, I occasionally engaged with the Democratic Party about rural issues in unpaid and unofficial ways. I offered guidance to a U.S. senator on rural policy, sat on a panel about rural issues for the House Democrats' annual conference and was strongly urged to run for the U.S. Senate myself in 2018 after the publication of my memoir about my rural, working-poor upbringing in the heartland.

I cannot say I left these experiences hopeful that the Democratic establishment would ever wake up and endeavor to speak to my demographic or even region.

By selecting as her running mate Mr. Walz — who as a member of the U.S. House of Representatives rightly [criticized](#) the party for its coastal bias in naming the caucus's leadership — Vice President Kamala Harris has changed the course of her party and perhaps our country. At her side, a son of Midwestern farm country can confidently and authentically speak the truths that neither Mr. Trump nor his running mate, JD Vance, will tell you:

That for all the loud racism, homophobia and jingoism of today's Republican Party — which indeed has dominated elections outside metropolitan areas — the real rural America is diverse, full of immigrants, people of color, gay and transgender people and native peoples, and even straight white folks who happily work and live alongside them.

That reproductive rights, legal marijuana, public schools, paid medical and family leave, and background checks for gun purchases are supported by many voters across party lines, even in rural places that appear monochrome red on political maps.

That farmers, ranchers and land stewards have a critical stake in addressing climate change, even if they don't use the same language as environmental activists.

That people in small towns are often hopeful, cooperative folks who find creative solutions to local problems and are ruled by a sense of responsibility to community rather than by a fear of those outside it.

In conveying the dignity and reality of what is casually derided on the coasts as "flyover country," Mr. Walz speaks plainly yet eloquently in the parlance of my place and thereby fills a decades-long geographic messaging gap for Democrats. He is also, clearly, a likable guy. What a delight to see a man who exemplifies my home at Ms. Harris's side. What an absolute balm for my country heart.

Having watched the thrilling and joyous Philadelphia rally at which Mr. Walz spoke for the first time as Ms. Harris's running mate, I didn't hear either candidate use the terms "working class" or "poverty"; "middle class," the term beloved by Democratic politicians, seemed inaccurate and a missed opportunity in describing Mr. Walz's background involving a town of fewer than 300 people, farm work, military enlistment and college via the G.I. Bill. But "rural" — yes, they claimed it, and it was not hollow as on other political stages.

When news broke that Ms. Harris had picked Mr. Walz, my husband came inside covered in dirt from working on the tractor all morning. He saw a picture on my laptop of Mr. Walz in short sleeves. "Look at the color of his skin," he observed. "It's dark from being out in the sun."

Indeed there is a shade and texture to the forearms of my class that perhaps not even decades in elected office can undo. We both nodded approvingly. I think Grandpa would have nodded, too.

Sarah Smarsh is a journalist and the author of the forthcoming book "[Bone of the Bone: Essays on America by a Daughter of the Working Class](#)" and "[Heartland: A Memoir of Working Hard and Being Broke in the Richest Country on Earth.](#)"

<https://www.nytimes.com/2024/08/07/opinion/tim-walz-prairie-populist.html>

Sarah Smarsh

Recent and archived work by Sarah Smarsh for The New York Times

Latest

Aug. 7, 2024

GUEST ESSAY

Democrats Have Needed Someone Like Tim Walz for Decades

The Minnesota governor fills a decades-long geographic messaging gap for Democrats.

By SARAH SMARSH



Dec. 21, 2022

GUEST ESSAY

What Growing Up on a Farm Taught Me About Humility

Growing up on a farm in rural Kansas, I learned to see through the many false narratives of supremacy that govern our society.

By SARAH SMARSH



Aug. 3, 2022

GUEST ESSAY

Why the Defense of Abortion in Kansas Is So Powerful

In many ways, across state and even party lines, voters did it together.

By SARAH SMARSH



Aug. 7, 2021

What to Do With Our Covid Rage

We can start by being honest about our anger and where it comes from.

By SARAH SMARSH



Dec. 7, 2020

5 THINGS ABOUT YOUR BOOK

Dolly Parton and the Women Who Love Her

Sarah Smarsh talks about "She Come by It Natural," her book about Parton and the lives of her fans.

By JOHN WILLIAMS



March 6, 2020

I Am Burning With Fury and Grief Over Elizabeth Warren. And I Am Not Alone.

She might not be bound for the presidency, but she has lodged herself in another powerful place: the female psyche.

By SARAH SMARSH



Jan. 10, 2020

NONFICTION

Chronicling a Community, and a Country, in Economic Crisis

"Tightrope," by the Pulitzer Prize-winning authors Nicholas Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn, is a wrenching portrait of rural Yamhill, Ore., Kristof's hometown and a microcosm for America



Sept. 17, 2019

Something Special is Happening in Rural America

There is a "brain gain" afoot that suggests a national homecoming to less bustling spaces.

By SARAH SMARSH



Nov. 10, 2018

A Blue Wave in Kansas? Don't Be So Surprised

If the Electoral College is the barometer, this state is deep red. But it's the only one that has elected three female Democratic governors.

By SARAH SMARSH



Aug. 16, 2018

Our Blind Spots Often Hide the Truth About America

Responding to readers, the author of a recent Op-Ed about "Trump Country" says that we must remain vigilant against easy, reductive frameworks and labels.

By SARAH SMARSH



July 19, 2018

Liberal Blind Spots Are Hiding the Truth About 'Trump Country'

For one thing, it's not Trump country. Most struggling whites I know here live a life of quiet desperation, mad at their white bosses, not resentful toward their co-workers or neighbors of color.

By SARAH SMARSH



SARAH SMARSH

HOME BOOKS BOOK TOUR ABOUT CONTACT

ABOUT SARAH SMARSH



Sarah Smarsh is a journalist who has reported for the *New York Times*, *Harper's*, the *Guardian*, and many other publications. Her first book, *Heartland: A Memoir of Working Hard and Being Broke in the Richest Country on Earth*, was an instant *New York Times* bestseller, a finalist for the National Book Award and the Kirkus Prize, the winner of the Chicago Tribune Literary Prize, and a best-books-of-the-year selection by President Barack Obama. Her 2020 book *She Come by It Natural: Dolly Parton and the Women Who Loved Her Songs* was a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award.

Smarsh is a frequent political commentator and speaker on socioeconomic class. A former writing professor, Smarsh has served as a Shorenstein Fellow at Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government and a Pritzker Fellow at the University of Chicago Institute of Politics. She lives in rural Kansas.

Smarsh's next book, *Bone of the Bone: Essays on America from a Daughter of the Working Class*, 2012-2024, will be published by Scribner in 2024. She is currently at work on a book about the endangered tallgrass prairie ecosystem.

<https://sarahsmarsh.com/about>

Bone of the Bone Essays on America by a Daughter of the Working Class

COMING SEPTEMBER 2024
Now collected for the first time in one volume, the brilliant and provocative essays that established National Book Award finalist Sarah Smarsh as one of the most important commentators on socioeconomic class in America—featuring 19 previously unpublished essays and a new introduction. Read more...

PREORDER NOW

BOOKS AUDIO EBOOKS AUDIO



Heartland A Memoir of Working Hard and Being Broke in the Richest Country on Earth

Finalist for the National Book Award, Kirkus Prize and more
Recommended by President Barack Obama, Michelle Obama, Sarah Jessica Parker
and other critics around the world

A Memoir of Working Hard and Being Broke in the Richest Country on Earth
By Sarah Smarsh

ORDER NOW
BOOKS AUDIO EBOOKS AUDIO

"This is the nation's class divide brought into sharp relief through personal history... *Heartland* is a thoughtful, heartened tale."
—The Washington Post