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“Making Idaho Great – And Sovereign – Again”:  
Investigating Reactionary Geographies and Discourses in the Gem State

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction  
of the requirements for the degree Master of Arts  
in Geography

by

Erik Hazard

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## ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Making Idaho Great – And Sovereign – Again:  
Investigating Reactionary Geographies and Discourses in the Gem State

by

Erik Hazard

Master of Arts in Geography

University of California, Los Angeles, 2024

Professor Shaina S. Potts, Chair

Since the ascendance of Donald Trump in the Republican Party, much analysis has primarily examined US reactionary populism from the national level. However, this thesis contends that reactionary populism has become firmly embedded at different political scales via the Republican Party, taking on the shape of local contexts in particular ways. To support this claim, this paper uses the case of Northern Idaho to examine different socio-spatial and discursive mechanisms undergirding reactionary populism's composition, logic, and viability at different political scales. These findings ultimately highlight how and why national reactionary populist politics have become co-constituted through regional, state, county, and municipal levels. This paper concludes that these processes make up a reactionary populist project that seeks to reterritorialize power at the state level, further straining political legitimacy in the US.

The thesis of Erik Hazard is approved.

Adam D. Moore

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2024

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## **Introduction**

When Sarah Palin ran as John McCain's running mate in 2008, it reflected the ascendant position of the reactionary populist wing of the national Republican Party. Yet, it also showed that the reactionary wing of the party was still subordinate to the mainstream, traditional conservative wing of the party. In the ensuing years, reaction took place in response to the Democratic wave of 2008 in the context of the economic recession and the Tea Party insurgency, culminating in Donald Trump winning the 2016 election. The reactionary populist wing of the party was triumphant. Trump's reactionary ideology of restoring America's idealized past and his populist style of politics captured the imaginary of millions of voters and effectively reshaped much of the party into Trump's party. But this reactionary turn didn't happen in a vacuum. It was co-constituted at the state and local level as seen by the success of state legislatures controlled by the reactionary wing of the party. In the same spirit, reactionary populism should be seen as existing beyond Trump and the national Republican Party. These politics are co-constituted at the regional, state, and local scales. Trump's rightwing populism at the national level may absorb much of the oxygen in the media and popular discourse, but it is equally, albeit unevenly, co-constituted by these different political scales across space and place. By understanding how rightwing populism works across space, we can garner a better understanding of how these politics adapt and thrive in different contexts. This examination will help also shed light on how reactionary populism, or Trumpism, can continue without Trump due to its embeddedness in the country's political geographies at multiple scales.

The case of Idaho helps illustrate how and why US reactionary populism is constituted through regional, state, and local dynamics that are often overlooked. Through these different scales, politics of place and reterritorialization of power play an important role in shaping the terrain of political struggle. By looking at the case of Northern Idaho, this paper examines three different mechanisms undergirding how this process takes its shape. First, Northern Idaho's shift towards reactionary populism is partly structured by interstate migration that centers political and spatial imaginaries composed of both a politics of resentment and redemption that are built upon socio-spatial "Othering" and idealizing of place. Second, another critical element of the way reactionary populism and place intersect is the method through which political actors and constituents produce and use an urban/west coast vs. "heartland" imaginary. Third, reactionary populists are reshaping local politics by strategically centering the built environment as a central mobilizing tool and battleground for social and cultural values. Ultimately, these processes amount to a reactionary populist project of reterritorializing power at the state level in the context of looming political crisis in a polarized federal system in the United States.

This paper demonstrates these arguments through multiple steps. First, it provides the context of the different processes and conditions in Idaho that are shaping the geographies and discourses of its reactionary populism at different scales. This is followed by a review of the literature examining the constitution and explanatory value of reactionary populism in the United States more broadly, reflecting on its relationship to specific socio-spatial processes. Next, I examine the specific role played by politicized interstate migration in Idaho, highlighting its relationship to the reactionary populist imaginary, discourse, and geography in Idaho. This section specifically details the way components of rightwing populism, such as the politics of



resentment, redemption, Othering, and idealization of place come together in the discourses of important political actors and constituents at the grassroots in Idaho. Following this, I demonstrate how the us versus them dichotomy in reactionary populist politics and discourses take their shape in the regional, state, county, and local contexts. At the state level, I look at the way the populist conception of the heartland is produced in reactionary imaginary and discourse in its antagonism to California as an idea and threatening, corruptive force. I continue to examine this process at the county and local municipal level, where cities themselves are treated as similar corruptive forces undermining Idaho's reactionary politics and culture in numerous ways. This is seen in the analysis of discourses from political candidates and aggrieved constituents battling over development, community, and place. This section conceptually reflects on the ways populism intersects with the idealization of place and the built environment. Throughout my analysis of these scales, I reflect on the way anti-urbanism functions in the rightwing populist imaginary in the case of Idaho. Finally, I synthesize these socio-spatial processes by examining the way in which territorialization and sovereignty, critical elements of national populism, map onto subnational scales and the reactionary populist imaginary in Idaho. Here, the politics of resentment and redemption, two critical elements of rightwing populism, are conjoined to a broader states' rights project and reterritorialization of power at the state level.

This research is empirically supported by discursive themes collected through a variety of mediums. The first section uses migration data from the secretary of state, political statements and op-eds from the Idaho Republican GOP, think tank publications and websites, political candidate interviews and platform websites, newspapers, social media, and information derived from field interviews. For the second section, I use archived footage of county planning

commission and city council minutes covering issues around urban planning and development. Additionally, I use political statements and recorded footage from radio interviews, debates, and campaign websites in this section. For the final section, I use discourses from political statements, political documents, and archived footage from city council meetings over decisions to receive American Rescue Plan Act federal funds.

## **Chapter 1 - Growth, development, and change in Idaho in the regional context**

Idaho has been one of the fastest growing states in the country and has brought with it a changing physical and political landscape (Census Bureau, 2023). As many people in the region continue to exit the heavily populated West Coast states, both southern and northern Idaho continue to expand. This migration has spurred a glut of capital, accelerating development and increasing real estate values throughout the state. This experience is often felt sharpest in the North where country and city meet, and density is already highest (Snow, 2023). Within Kootenai County in the North, those wanting to make their new homes in more remote areas alongside scenic lakes, rivers, forests, and mountains can continue to have access to municipal life while also enjoying the peri-urban lifestyle. Just as California had once symbolized an escape for many in the Midwest and the South to procure a better life, Idaho now represents something similar for many now leaving the western states. Ironically though, urban development driven by interstate migration is upsetting the ideal of Idaho for many newcomers, creating significant political tension. Many newcomers, resentful of the changes in their former homes in liberal states and cities, view Idaho and particularly the North as an ideal space and place that embodies their own rightwing politics and values.

This migration to Idaho has made the state a bastion for reactionary politics, which is perhaps now sharpest in the North of the state. While nothing is necessarily unusual about interstate migration, in the case of Idaho over the last thirty years, it has ultimately taken a special place in the socio-cultural and political imaginary throughout Idaho. While there are many factors that drive migration, from jobs, cost of living, amenities, and more, a central driving force for many people in the public imagination and discourse is politics.

The shift in politics in Idaho, partially driven by migration from California, runs contrary to conventional wisdom. Since the 1970s, Idahoans have long vocalized concerns around in-migration causing “Californization” of the state, particularly their effects on culture and cost of living (Accola, 1979). In 2014, those born in California remaking their homes in Idaho tripled, while Idaho was struggling to keep its own native born population from moving to other states in the region (Aisch et al., 2014). Instead of becoming bluer, the state has become much redder except for Boise, and those Northern counties that were once consistently Democratic have become the biggest supporters of the far right in the Republican Party in the state. This process of change is a central focus in local and state politics, often loudest from the reactionary wing of the Republican Party. “Californication”, in the form of urbanization and liberal social, cultural, and political change, continue to loom large in the political imaginary and discourse in the state. It is being discursively emphasized as part of the broader cultural war from the reactionary right of the party, intensely animating recent emigres the most, especially in Kootenai county. Ever since this county, historically aligned with the Democratic Party, lost its union density due to economic restructuring, right-to-work laws, and a successful transition to tourism, it has allured many wanting to leave the West Coast. Many who have come since the late 1980s onwards have played a pivotal role in shaping the political trajectory of the North, making the North a base for

the reactionary populist wing of the Republican Party. But what is particular about North Idaho and its place identity, historically and presently, that has made it an alluring place for many resentful, politicized migrants?

The Northern Panhandle consisting of five counties (locals refer to it as “North Idaho”, not “Northern”) itself has long held a distinct place identity in Idaho when compared to the South. This specific identity and its place in the broader public imaginary has formed under the pressures of distance, climate, political economy, politics, and culture. Populated areas are incredibly sparse along the entire single highway stretching from Boise to the Panhandle as it winds its way up through the mountains. Harsh winters have historically interrupted this flow, geographically bifurcating the North and the South for large portions of the year. The North, historically dependent on resource extraction in mining and timber, was integrated into national and global circuits of capital accumulation via Spokane to the West rather than the South, in part due to the area’s interconnected waterways which facilitated easier transportation. Unlike the South of Idaho, the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century saw radical labor union militancy in mining and timber sectors, which culminated electorally in Coeur d’Alene’s first and only socialist mayor, John T. Wood, in 1911. John T. Wood would later become a stalwart reactionary in Idahoan politics (Stapilus 2009, p.29). The region would overall remain a labor-oriented, Democratic stronghold (with some occasional shifts in Kootenai County) in an otherwise Republican-dominated state from the South rooted in agriculture and business. In addition to the ebbs and flow of the local economy, the remoteness of the area, its scenic beauty, and its autonomy lured many to the area over the years, producing a specific socio-cultural formation that was suspicious of and even hostile to the South politically and culturally (Stapilus 2009,

p.27). The South represented urban, political control (despite its own low density in reality) while the North, with its geographical terrain and low population density at the time, represented a cultural imaginary where freedom and a live-and-let-live lifestyle and attitude flourished in an idyllic landscape. As one man put it, “I consider this part of paradise separate from the rest of the state and certainly from the Kingdom of Ada (Boise)” (Oliveria, 2011). This general attitude around North Idaho identity is further exemplified by the bumper sticker, “North Idaho is a state of mind; Southern Idaho is a mindless state” (Stapilus 2009, p.27; Olivera 2011).

But this particular social and spatial composition also attracted a flow of conservatives and reactionaries over time despite the region’s overall progressive and Democratic party history, slowly shifting the identity of the North, albeit unevenly. A slow, but steady trickle of conservative retirees moved to the region as far back as the 1940s. This trickled turned into a flood by the 1970s in the wake of timber’s slow decline and the transformation of the area into a tourism-amenity economy by developer and local media mogul, Duane Hagadone (Carlton 1992). Many of these new retirees were Orange County “individualists who despised government and taxes” (Stapilus 2009, p.70). Younger Orange County conservatives also came along, some of whom had a political mission that aimed to transform the North into the conservative ideal they were chasing. One of these conservative actors, Ron Rankin, who had once considered Ronald Regan ‘too liberal’, helped begin the transformation of the region (from Kootenai County) into a base for anti-tax initiatives similar to that of California’s proposition 13 (Fisher 1996). Rankin stated that the desire for a “quieter life” drove him to Kootenai County (Crane-Murdoch 2013). He claimed that his story and others reflected not so much a “white flight”, a term he didn’t like, but rather a “sort of cultural flight. Back in California, there is a

constant hassle in the clashing of other cultures” (Benjamin 2009, p.88). But beyond this socio-cultural white or “cultural flight”, Rankin also stated that some wealthy Southern Californians had installed eight field organizers in the West to ‘reshape the Republican Party from the bottom up along arch-conservative lines’ (*Ron Rankin as cited in Crane-Murdoch 2013*). Rankin would go on to attempt a recall of the progressive Senator Frank Church, along with various other rightwing initiatives over the years such as attempting to make Idaho’s official language English. Rankin was the earliest major reactionary populist in the region. He possessed his own publication called *Vox Pop* (“voice of the people”) which was also inscribed on his car’s license plate (Benjamin 2009, p.87). Rankin helped set the tone for the county and region’s future, while reshaping the political and social conditions in the region (not without a struggle) that would serve as the future bedrock of reactionary migration and reactionary politics in the state.

Another more notorious and pernicious individual and group also arrived on the scene in the 1970s – the Aryan Nations and its founder, Richard Butler. As Evelyn Schlatter has argued, the Mountain West and the North of Idaho in particular represented an American past in the present, offering large swaths space, forests, low population density, and ultimately a “land into which dreams are sown” (Schlatter 2006, p.167). Rugged individualism and an escape from disharmony were imbued in the landscape in the cultural imaginary of both Idahoans of many different political stripes, but also for the reactionary Right. Butler founded his compound for the Aryan Nations just outside of Hayden near Coeur d’Alene. Butler was a former aerospace worker in Southern California and resented demographic, political, and social changes emerging from migration and struggles by different minorities and the New Left in the Golden State. Inspired by the low population density of Northern Idaho, its comparatively cheap land, rural

character, and its overwhelmingly white racial composition, he began his movement to produce a white supremacist, segregated homeland. Butler emphasized a rural ideology that centered agriculture, homesteading and farmers, advocating small property-owner ethos in an antimodernist fashion during the economic and social upheaval that marked the beginning of the neoliberal period and end of civil rights (Schlatter 2006). However, this brand of reactionary politics never sat well with the community in the area or the state generally. Very few locals gravitated towards the group, while community members organized the Kootenai County Task Force on Human Relations to legally undermine and eventually bankrupt the organization, receiving a Federal Civil Rights Award recognition for their efforts (Singletary 2019). This story reflects the political and social complexity of the county and region, as the most extreme reactionary politics were disavowed. Yet, the county and region's turn toward reactionary politics would continue, slowly crystalizing through changes in demographics and local political institutions as dynamics shifted in the broader western region and California's fate became increasingly tied to that of North Idaho. The slow trickle of politicized interstate migration would explode in the 1990s and not slow down.

At the scale of the state, North Idaho's identity was formed in relational contrast to that of Boise and Southern Idaho. Zooming outward to the broader regional scale of the western United States, North Idaho's place identity has become reproduced in the reactionary imaginary as a cultural and political homeland of sorts. Its cultural homogeneity is linked with its small-town community feeling, security, traditional values, and sense of freedom. In effect, it represents a place where America's idealized past still lives and breathes for many newcomers, while offering a respite from the ills of a failed multicultural urbanization that marks liberal states in the reactionary imaginary.

This dichotomy is also projected onto the Gem State's own geography by some migrants. One informant, who is a well-known reactionary émigré from Southern California, told me that, "Southern Idaho is really Southern California in many regards. In general, it is more woke and compliant", while North Idaho is more resistant and freedom-minded [...] Big government versus little government[...] We don't want high density, we don't want smart cities, we don't want surveillance... and then we are always made to look like whackos" (Informant interview 2023). The bumper sticker's "North Idaho is a state of mind; Southern Idaho is a mindless state" continues to loom large presently, but in the context of reactionary political discursive form and content coming from newcomer migrants rather than longtime locals.

As stated earlier, this shift in the region's political and cultural identity began to occur in the 70s, and accelerated in the 90s as thousands more interstate migrants flowed in from California and elsewhere. The Rodney King riots and the general economic struggles in California led thousands to flee towards Idaho. Between 1993 and 1994, over 250,000 more people left the state than migrated in, completely reversing in-migration trends from the previous decades (Johnson 1995). Idaho was the fifth leading state of domestic out-migration according to DMV estimates during this period (Johnson 1995). Between 1991 and 1993, 28,202 Californians made it Idaho, and nearly 5,315 went to Kootenai county, around 40% of its incoming population (Johnson 1995). Thousands of police officers fled to the area, with some referring to themselves as "refugees" fleeing "racial strife" (Hull 1995). For them, and many others chasing their own version of "Shangri-la" away from a multi-racial, urbanized California, Idaho represented "what America used to be about" (Hull 1995). This flow from the 90s to present has continued to be



driven by politicized people looking to escape to an imagined conservative haven, and in the process, have indeed played a central role in transforming the area's place identity into one known for its reactionary politics and culture in addition to its beauty. The politics that this flow has generated over time are not libertarian, but rather reactionary, looking to the government at different scales to "Make America Great Again" in Idaho and beyond. In the present conditions, these politics reflect a reactionary populism that sees elites, undesirable Others, and generalized corruption emanating from liberal coastal and urban areas opposing the interests of "the people" of North Idaho and Kootenai County.

This dichotomy is reflective of the broader political polarization occurring throughout the United States that maps onto, albeit imperfectly, to a corrupt urban versus rural "heartland" imaginary. This imaginary is particularly prominent in reactionary populist discourse at the national level, even if in reality most rightwing voters in absolute numbers are also located in urbanized, suburbanized, and exurbanized areas throughout the country, as that is where the bulk of the population really lives. National politicians from Donald Trump to JD Vance to Marjorie Taylor Green, Ron DeSantis, and more have verbally attacked cities controlled by liberal Democrats as dysfunctional, chaotic, crime-filled zones that have been enabled by corrupt elites (Reed 2016; Trump 2023; DeSantis 2023; Pegnelly 2023). Even urban areas in Republican-dominated red state are typically controlled by Democrats. This has led to growing political and cultural clashes between large municipalities run by Democrats and their hinterlands that are represented by Republican state legislatures in places from Tennessee to Texas and more. In the case of Idaho, this dynamic is seen discursively in the North vs South/Boise imaginary, while on a broader regional level, it can also be seen in the inland Northwest (the populist heartland of "the people") versus the liberal, urban, and coastal western states imaginary. These dichotomies

are integral to reactionary populist imaginaries and discourses. But this process must be understood not merely as a reflection of national political discourses, but rather the way in which reactionary populist politics is co-constituted at different scales and takes on the common sense logic of constituents and actors in different contexts.

## **Chapter 2 - US reactionary populism and its subnational constitution**

In the aftermath of 2016, much analysis has understandably been spent examining populism from a national perspective (Lowndes 2017; Grevin 2016), with Donald Trump as the focus following his electoral victory and influence over the party. He ran successfully on a reactionary platform of restoring an idealized vision of America, represented by his slogan, “Make America Great Again.” His populist style focused on the “enemies of the people” in the form of socio-spatial antagonisms (Loffmann 2022). Globalization, China, immigrants, and elites, both domestic and international, were blamed for the nation’s struggles and its insecurity. But what does “Make America Great Again” look like at the different scales within the Republican Party and its base?

Reactionary populist politics exists beyond Trump in the context of cultural war politics and significant political polarization along geographical lines in the US. The increasing crisis of representation and deterioration of legitimacy in political and social institutions far exceeds the federal “deep” state bureaucracy. Reactionary populist politics is increasingly looking inward at threats to the social fabric and mobilizing the various anxieties and resentments of its base at regional and local levels. Although threats domestically are intertwined with these same scalar

narratives about globalization and outsiders, different scales of abstraction become necessary to fully delineate this intensifying domestic political contestation occurring throughout different parts of the US. Much research is still needed to understand the reactionary populist wing of the Republican Party beyond the national scale.

The reactionary populist politics that currently dominate the Republican Party, especially since post 2008 Great Recession, has its roots in the 1930s anti-New Deal politics and assault against the federal administrative state (Olmstead 2010). Until the late 1980s and early 1990s, the reactionary wing of the party played a subsidiary role to the mainstream Republican Party. The mainstream wing of the party mainly focused on narrow economic issues and sidelined cultural and social ones that were important to the Reactionary wing (Hertel-Fernandez 2019, p.). Over time though, the reactionary wing has successfully asserted its agenda of social and cultural reaction along with the broader anti-New Deal, anti-administrative state project since the 1930s.

Perhaps two main qualities separate the traditional conservative from the reactionary. The conservative may be okay with working within the status quo. The Reactionary however, in the words of the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC) co-founder Paul Weyrich, is “no longer working to preserve the status quo. We are radicals, working to overturn the present power structure in this country” (Paul Weyrich in Hertel-Fernandez, p. 35). Secondly, its opposition to the crisis-ridden present of liberalism is anchored not geared towards the future or maintaining the present. Instead, its politics aim for an idealized and mythologized past (Eagleton 2023). The constant destabilization of social relations and its naturalized hierarchies brought about capitalist modernity and its co-constituted socio-political struggles are abstracted

from structural problems and displaced onto cultural and social change. This cultural and social change is viewed as the cause of deterioration and therefore must be reversed with a reassertion of hierarchical norms from the past.

Currently, this reactionary project is facilitated through rightwing populist politics, perhaps the dominant form of politics in an age where liberalism is in crisis, institutions have been hollowed out, mass politics have been stifled, and constituencies have become increasingly fragmented. Because it is geared towards procuring political power, it makes sense to see populism mainly as a strategic mechanism for gaining power by opportunistic political entrepreneurs (Weyland 2001, 2017 2021). But another common way of viewing the nature of populist politics is through an ideational lens, as a formulation or view of politics – a “thin-centered ideology” – rooted in the notion of a “pure” people vs. “corrupt” elite (Mudde 2004). Other approaches mainly view populism not in ideological terms but as a discourse (Hawkins 2009; Pauwels 2011; Stavrakakis and Katsambekis 2014; Gidron and Bonikowski 2013).

Building off the discursive approach, Gidron and Bonikowski look to Kazin’s analysis of the American history of populism. Kazin argues that in this case, populism is absent of any specific core beliefs of political actors that can be properly defined; rather, it is the political style and rhetoric of us vs them that is selectively utilized regardless of ideology, which defines populism. It is an “impulse” rather than an ideology, too “elastic and promiscuous” to exist as an solidified ideology rather than tropes, themes, and slogans (Kazin 1998, p.3). They argue that there are important empirical ramifications between discursive and “ideational” approaches, as the former avoids a rigid essentialization that gets stuck with using political attributes from

documents, statements, or platforms which must be deciphered narrowly as either populist or not. In a similar vein, Moffitt builds on different notions of populism and views it as a style and performance “made to audiences to create and navigate the fields of power that comprise the political, stretching from the domain of government through to everyday life” (Moffitt 2016, p.6).

However, Brubaker’s expansive and defining characteristic of populism as a discourse and style consisting of a repertoire of elements best captures the way in which the populist style of politics works (Brubaker 2017). These elements in the populist repertoire consist of two core elements. The first being the “people”, however defined, against the elite, otherwise known as the “vertical opposition”. The second core element is the horizontal opposition, such as the people against those non-elites who are still seen as “Others” outside of and threatening to the “people”. Following these core elements are five more important sub-elements. The first is the repoliticization of different parts of life that are seen as having been depoliticized. A second element is protectionism, which can be economic, cultural, and securitarian protection in an unstable world (Brubaker 2017). The third is a dogged anti-institutionalism followed by an adherence to majoritarianism. The last element is the discursive style of speech that differs from the conventional style of politicians, as seen in the indirectness, lack of decorum, impoliteness, and emotionalism common to populists (Brubaker 2017). Brubaker notes that these qualities don’t exist in a vacuum, but necessarily accompany contextual features such as a sense of crisis in the political and social sphere (Brubaker 2017). As noted by many scholars of populism, the populist style of politics can be attached to either a Right or Left ideological and political

program. But there are significant defining features of the rightwing or reactionary variant of populist politics.

These characteristics in their rightwing variant, are deeply rooted in feelings and emotions (Laclau 2005) – structured by a politics of resentment where social problems, insecurities, or generalized anger are offset onto the social, or even abstract or concrete geographical “Other”. (Betz 1994, 2005; Cramer 2016; Agnew and Shin 2019; Norris and Inglehart 2016; Cohen 2019; Ostiguy and Casullo 2017). The centrality of the horizontal opposition and the manner of protectionism are central to the reactionary populist style and imaginary. More specifically, this can take the form of fear and insecurity around identity; alienation and displacement; and disappointment and distrust with existing politics and its institutions (Betz 1994; Salmela and Scheve 2017; Scheff 2000; Guibernau, 2013). This resentment is ultimately tethered to the Right’s own form of identitarianism rooted in an hierarchical, anti-pluralist, and exclusionary form of a politics of recognition (Fraser 2019; Muller 2016 ). In a world of intensifying hybridity and pluralism, this resentment drives a righting variant of a recognition struggle towards exclusionary and spatially separatist ways (Fraser 2000). But as da Silva and Vieira note, this resentment embedded in rightwing populism contains a dialectical character, represented in a form of redemption – the return of control, the restoration of something lost, and “the promise of a future better world” (da Silva and Vieira 2018, p.11). This redemption is a central theme in Trump’s discourse (retribution in his words) as well as different political actors and interstate migrants at various scales, while expressing an important territorial and place-based component (Trump 2023). It is through the exit or escape to Idaho, rooted in traditional values of a perceived better and harmonic past, that promises some

sense of redemption and solution for sources resentment in the reactionary imagination. Thus, the populist arcs of resentment and redemption have both a social *and* spatial composition.

Both right and left populists have worked to recenter and reconceptualize sovereignty and the nation-state as a bulwark to provide security and renewed social, economic, and cultural vitality. Reterritorialization of power, or “taking back control”, is seen as needing to occur primarily at the level of the nation-state to usher back the idealized post-war prosperity years (Kallis 2018). But these projects throughout Europe, the US, and elsewhere can look very different not only because of differences in left and right political ideologies and platforms, but also due to geographical and political context. In the US, the federal government remains consistently paralyzed with gridlock, with neither political party able to build an effective coalition to wield power at the federal level. Thus, power and politics become increasingly and primarily reterritorialized at the state and local level in these conditions. Additionally, states’ rights dominate the strategies, discourses, and ideologies of the reactionary American Right. “Taking back control” in this case occurs primarily at the state level, which has already been the central (and most successful) terrain of struggle for the Right in the US since the late 1970s (Hertel Fernandez 2019).

If rightwing populists are geared towards different forms of territorialization, what does that look like in practice? Populists have a tendency to construct imaginaries such as “idealized communities”, also known as “heartlands” (Taggart 2001; Fitzgerald 2018; Chou et al., 2022). The heartland, or the idealized community of people, can function simultaneously at different scales. Identification to a community can at once, and sometimes contradictorily, exist in tension

at local, county, state, regional and national level. The heartland is also imbued with certain essential values from the past that are under threat from corruption (Taggart 2001). States in the reactionary populist imaginary, in the absence of control or due to their ideological antagonism to the federal government, serve as the territorialized form of the heartland. Thus, an idealized sense of place, at both the state and local level, become central to the reactionary populist imaginary (Fitzgerald 2018).

We can call this idealized sense of a place a fundamentally reactionary sense of place - the inverse of Doreen Massey's progressive sense of place (Massey, 2012). The inherent, unbounded interconnections that inevitably make places what they are in a global world are rejected by reactionaries who desire place, like society, to be tightly bounded, idealized, unchanged, non-relational and untainted by corruption. This heartland imaginary is ultimately interwoven with a spatial imaginary that seeks to maintain a place in the face of the very real disharmony of modernity, where global capitalism turns "all that is solid into air" (Marx and Engels, 2019).

This heartland and its antagonists have regional, state, and local representations. At the regional and state level, it is expressed in the way that rightwing populists transform populist tropes around fears and threats of globalization, immigration, and nefarious elites into ones that also resonate in local political and social contexts. California is synonymous to elitism and corruption, consisting of vague forces and actors, like globalization and leftists, which are seen as threatening the people of Idaho. Leftists are seen as looming threats within institutions and are viewed as antithetical to the majority at the state, county and local levels. Interstate migration is



viewed in contradictory terms, as it simultaneously becomes a source of pride due to the influx of rightwing “refugees,” while also producing a source of fear that the wrong (liberal and leftist) ones may undermine the values and politics of the state. At the local level, populism exists in the form of an “infrastructural populism”, as the terrain of struggle over ideologies, value, and morals are etched onto the fights over the built environment (Beveridge et al. 2023; Fainstein and Novy 2023; Fillion 2011). These different ways that populism works geographically are ultimately embedded in a larger reactionary struggle.

For the reactionary wing of the party in Idaho, the struggle is “making Idaho Great – and Sovereign – Again”, returning the state to a mythical past. It is a contradictory process within a federalized nation-state, but also central to the decades-long struggles of reactionaries across the nation. For many individual interstate migrants, like those reactionary emigres who have fled for the United States in the wake of communist and left-wing revolutions in their countries, Idaho is seen as a redoubt and territorialized form of redemption. It is an antidote to resentment, serving as a myth – a collective dream – for many politicized migrants who also want to Make America Great Again, at least in Idaho if all else fails.

Thus, the geography and political imaginary of reactionary populist politics in the US can only be gleaned empirically and analytically by examining it at different scales. It is a process that has been decades in the making by the reactionary Right via various institutions and organizations as a power-building strategy. This social, cultural, and political migration nexus further consolidates that project, which can be understood by examining the discourses and styles of reactionaries from above and below in the case of Idaho. Following in the footsteps of others,

it is clearly insufficient to reduce populism to the national level and ultimately fall into forms of methodological nationalism (Shin and Agnew 2029, p.14; Lamour 2020; Richardson 2020; Yerly 2022; Chou et al., 2022; Biancalana, et al., 2023.) Instead, rightwing populism needs to be viewed as a complex spatial process co-constituted at multiples scales in the imaginary, discourses, and practices of political actors and constituents.

### **Chapter 3 - “It can’t happen here?”: Highlighting the intersection of “right flight”, reactionary politics of resentment, and redemption in Idaho.**

In this section, I argue that Idaho’s reactionary populism is constituted by a politicized migration both materially and discursively. The discourse of politicized migration from political actors and the narratives used by interstate migrants themselves serve as an important mobilizing tool, political appeal, and form of legitimization for the reactionary wing of the Idaho GOP. I argue that this migration is also composed of significant elements of populism such as resentment, redemption, Othering, and idealization of community and place, which all play a prominent role in the imaginary of the Right in the state. Examining this discourse also conveys the relationship between the “heartland” and its socio-spatial antagonists, which will be further elucidated in the next section. I show these processes empirically by examining discourses from different mediums. This section uses political speeches, statements, radio, podcast and Youtube interviews, newspapers, slogans, think-tank websites, campaign websites of political candidates, and political platforms to support the centrality of interstate migration in the discourse and imaginary of the reactionary right in the state from above and below. By examining this socio-

spatial process, we can view the complex ways that rightwing populism's geography is constituted at different scales.

Late in 2023, the Idaho GOP's chairwoman, Dorothy Moon, wrote to the people of Idaho about the threats facing Idaho and its republic. Dorothy Moon represents the reactionary, anti-establishment populist wing of the Republican Party and has ties to the militia movement (Allam and Urquhart 2020). She stated that Idaho was "the next target for the totalitarian left" and the people must get involved and "not take their freedoms for granted" (Moon 2023). She spoke of the "thousands of people moving to Idaho because they believe we are a conservative state" that protects conservative values and "stands up to the national, state, and local political establishment," emphasizing that these "values could quickly disappear if nobody stands up to protect them". She continued:

*Don't think it can't happen here. Your new neighbors will tell you that they once thought it couldn't happen in California, in Oregon, or in Colorado, but it did. Those beautiful states, full of people who loved the same liberties we cherish in Idaho, fell to the anti-American ideas of woke leftism. Preventing the same thing from happening here requires action on your part — don't assume someone else will take care of it (Moon 2023).*

In her populist appeal to the people, Moon spoke to the resentment and sense of loss felt by many fleeing to the Gem state. She also invokes anti-institutionalist and anti-establishment language, highlighting the corruption embedded in multiple scales of governance that these migrants are fleeing and opposing. The conservative redoubt and heartland are carved out as a

space of populist redemption in this statement, which is simultaneously spoken of as under threat of becoming like these other places that once represented Americanness too. The vague forces of leftism that undermined these same places were conspiring against the heartland. The memory of once “great” conservative places, such as California, the home of the New Right and Reagan, is seen as the precursor of things to come in Idaho if the people don’t act. They were once also filled with the true American “people” – lovers of freedom and liberty – but ultimately undone by the Others with their “anti-American” ideals. As a place or heartland, Idaho is represented as an idealized conservative haven and beacon for Rightwing migration. Idaho in the imaginary serves as a protector of conservative values politically, socially, and culturally by challenging the elites at all levels of government. Reactionary populist politics here ties resentment, redemption, and migration discursively and stylistically.

Moon’s passage illuminates the importance of the migration nexus between Idaho and the western states in the reactionary Right’s imaginary. The large migration flows provide legitimacy and credence to their project, reinforcing Idaho’s *raison d’etre* as a conservative bastion and place for redemption for conservatives from the fallen angels of the West - states like California, Oregon, and Washington. Discursively, the migration flow is being politicized, and ostensibly is seen as a crucial constituency for the reactionary right in the state.

While the migration flow is being politically utilized discursively by political actors, how materially significant is this politicized movement of people sorting themselves spatially, and what narratives and motivations do some of them share?

## **Section 1: Is there a “right flight?”: Verifying reactionary discourses around interstate migration**

In 2009, Bill Bishop made the argument that America was becoming more geographically and politically polarized due to a form of self-segregation where people migrated to places within the US that were like-minded politically, ideologically, socially and culturally (Bishop 2009). He then concluded that this was pernicious for the United States, as it foreclosed possibilities of interacting with people of different viewpoints, thus only intensifying political extremes and ideologies. This macro argument and its methodology has been critiqued for its overreliance on presidential election data at the county level at the expense of voter registration and down ballot elections (Abrams and Fiorina 2012). The importance of down ballot elections contradicting Bishop remains salient today, as several conservative “red” states who overwhelmingly voted for Trump have also voted to enshrine protections for abortion, from Ohio to Kansas. Even in the case of ever-reddening Idaho, there was a successful vote to expand Medicaid access in 2018 despite going for Trump by nearly 64%. Thus, political sorting as a concept is flawed. Yet, recent voter registration data along with other evidence does reflect that at least in the case of Idaho, the second fastest growing state in the US, political sorting is occurring, thus undergirding the rightwing politicization of interstate migration.

The Idaho Secretary of State office recently released a data set with visualization that maps interstate migrants flocking to the Gem state alongside their voter registration in their previous residence (McGrane 2023). Overwhelmingly, the data shows overtime since 2004 that out of 118,702 tracked voters that have migrated, 77,136 (65%) are Republican, with 24,906 (21%) unaffiliated and only 14,711 (12%) registered as Democrats. Additionally, 39,558 voters

came from California with 75% registered Republican, 9,178 from Oregon with 65% Republican registration, and 20,199 came from Washington, with 62% registered Republican.

In Kootenai County, the main county examined in this paper, 12,331 (71%) of the migrants were registered Republican compared to 1,471 (8%) registered as Democrats and 3,239 (19%) unaffiliated. Other northern counties that make up the Idaho Panhandle have similar numbers. Only Ada County with the Boise metropolitan area had more migrants migrate to its area compared to Kootenai county and Bonner County in the North. Over half of these new residents came from California, Oregon, and Washington, with residents coming from California totaling 4,986. 71% of these residents were registered as Republicans.

This data reflects two key findings. While there has long been a narrative of the “Californization” of Idaho marked by a fear over new migrants smuggling in liberal politics and values, the opposite is the case. It is overwhelmingly conservative voters flocking to the state over the past decade or more. Secondly, it does provide a good proxy for representing the validity of claims that many new, conservative interstate migrants are coming from liberal states. Some type of political sorting is indeed occurring. According to different types of evidence collected, this process does play a role in shifting local political arenas in the state. Some type of “voting with their feet” is occurring among conservatives leaving for the Gem state as part of a broader politics of resentment that is at the heart of reactionary populism in the US, and in particular, the Western US.

## **Section 2: The important role of politicized migration and reactionary politics in Idaho**

Whether one calls it a renewed “white flight” or “right flight” of resentment, many politically and culturally aggrieved individuals have chosen to leave their places for one that feels more representative of their politics, culture and values. Idaho as a space, place, and territory represents a future that is based on a restoration of an idealized America. While most migrants move to chase a better future for themselves in any context, in this case, a better future is dependent on a place embodying conservative values and politics. The politically oriented interstate migration does not happen in a vacuum of course, and is conditioned by economics, making this political and cultural movement of possible over the decades. Homeowners looking to expand their lifestyles with the equity from highly valued homes in western states; former public sector employees with generous pensions and retirees looking for a cheaper place to live; business owners looking for lower taxes and regulations; and people chasing after scenery and amenities make up many of the reasons to move to Idaho. But in terms of how people present or rationalize their decisions to move, politics and culture are at the forefront within the context of culture wars and hyperpolarization in the US. Various reasons to move can exist in tandem with one another.

Many affluent Republicans have flocked to growing exurban settlements across the country over decades for various reasons. These exurbs straddle the line of suburban and rural, rich in both beauty, amenities, and living space. But it is clear many conservatives are leaving for

the Gem state to escape a sense of liberal political decay, social corruption, and decline in living standards. In Mike Davis' words, this movement of migrants (or refugees in their words) from failing metro areas resembles "Blade Runner's Off World," producing effects such as renewed racial and political segregation (Davis, 1998; Davis, 2020). This trend of in-migration to Idaho and its political narratives are symptomatic of several different features of the rapidly entrenching political and geographical polarization in the western United States. It also reflects changes in the far-right populist wing of the Republican Party.

Beyond Chairwoman Dorothy Moon's words, the relationship between migration, place, resentment and redemption is demonstrated by looking at the discourses of other important political institutions, actors, and numerous individuals.

The first is the Idaho Freedom Foundation (IFF). The IFF is a think tank and lobbying organization whose stated mission on its website is to "defeat Marxism and socialism by building a culture of liberty around America so that Idaho can prosper." (IFF, n.d). The IFF advances conservative principles of limited government, self-reliance, and free markets. It also demarcates Idaho as a territory and haven that represents an important place in the rightwing ideology and political imagination. It asks what if "Idaho were the single best state in the nation to live, raise a family, start a business, hold a job, and go to school", while also asking what if Idaho could "lead our country back to prosperity [...]?" (Idaho Freedom Foundation, n.d.) Using populist rhetoric, they promote themselves as speaking for the voiceless and "the people who don't have time to take on special interests" such as those in unions, bureaucracy at all levels, Washington DC, and more. They imagine an Idaho that has the least regulation, lowest taxes, and least dependency on



the federal government of any state, advocating for public lands (over 2/3 of Idaho is in federal control) to be in control of “local people”

A prominent part of the IFF’s website is dedicated to those flocking to the state as part of a movement to engage in this state-wide political project. Dedicated particularly to “refugees” of California and other liberal areas, the webpage is titled “New to Idaho, True to Idaho” (Idaho Freedom Foundation, n.d.). It asks:

*Are you a refugee from California, or some other liberal playground? Did you move to Idaho to escape the craziness? You are one of the New Idahoans. The people who came to the Gem State seeking a home that reflects their values: small government and a freer life (Idaho Freedom Foundation, .n.d.).*

The webpage goes onto to discuss the anti-California bias in Idaho:

*Are you a refugee from California, or some other liberal playground? Did you move to Idaho to escape the craziness? You are one of the new Idahoans. The people who came to the Gem state seeking a home that reflects their values: small government and freer life. Let’s be real. There’s anti-California sentiment in Idaho. But those complaints aren’t directed at you. It’s an attitude born from fear: fear that Idaho is changing too fast, that higher taxes, government bloat, and corrupt special interests will creep out of California and twist our state. But maybe you (and thousands of new Idahoans) moved here to live in a place where government doesn’t constantly have its fingers in your wallet. Maybe*

*you seek a home that respects your right to make choices for your family and your life. You are a champion for independence, hard work, and freedom. You embrace Idaho values. You are new to Idaho, true to Idaho* (Idaho Freedom Foundation, .n.d.).

This feature on the IFF website reveals several key points. First, the IFF has played a critical role in shaping Idaho politics according to both supporters and critics in the state. It is revealing that a central political actor for the entire state, particularly its reactionary wing, has a webpage dedicated to ex-California migrants and their experiences. The webpage shows how important this right flight imaginary is for the reactionary political class and different segments of its coalition. The Idaho-boosting statement also reveals how newcomers are seen as a prominent piece of the reactionary base. It is often the case that native Idahoans who are concerned about changes (particularly economic) brought about by large-scale migration are more ambivalent and less ideologically inclined to see these Idahoans in the same positive light.

The IFF's use of the term "refugee", extreme but also intentional. Refugee is a loaded, politicized term and is further reflection of how migration is used discursively as a populist stylistic mechanism. It is also used somewhat consistently by individual interstate migrants who share their feelings of anger, disappointment, pessimism, insecurity, and powerlessness. California in this statement is also Othered as an antagonistic, corrupting force that is out-of-control and threatening. This Othering is part of a discursive intersection between idealization of place, community, and migrants themselves, invoked in the statement "new to Idaho, true to Idaho". This language not only serves as an iteration of resentment, but also a spatialized redemption in the form of Idaho. Escape to Idaho is the solution to the loss experienced in former

conservative states. Given that the IFF is part of a much bigger reactionary project of the State Policy Network, it is evidence that this boosterism serves to politicize migration to further legitimize the growing reactionary politics in the state.

In the same breath, the IFF page also plays the critical role of Othering California in the process, the antagonism of Idaho's political and cultural identity. It is not ex-California migrants that bring negative change, but the tentacles of the nefarious west coast that threaten to corrupt the idealized rightwing heartland in the west. This migration from below and this institution's position in further politicizing and discursively boosting the migration process reinforce one another. The IFF's discourse ultimately reflects the important role of migration in shifting the ideological and political terrain in the state, especially in the North where rightwing populism and migration is felt most disproportionately.

Moving from the state level to Kootenai County in Northern Idaho, we have Brent Regan. Brent Regan is IFF's chair of the Board of Directors and also Board Executive of the most powerful institution in local politics in the North, the Kootenai County Republican Central Committee (KCRCC).

Brent Regan and KCRCC represent an important way that populism, resentment, and migration come together through different scales. In 1999, Brent Regan moved to Coeur d'Alene in Northern Idaho, citing the election of Gray Davis and the beauty of Northern Idaho for his move (Peterson, 2017). Beginning his political career in 2009 in the burgeoning Tea Party movement, he took over the KCRCC in 2016, spearheading support for local and statewide

elections, attacking urban renewal districts, and engaging in takeovers of institutions like the North Idaho College (Regan, n.d.). One interviewee I spoke with noted how Regan “saw an easy opportunity here” and “rode the wave of the Tea Party” after seeing very real “frustration at the time,” “cutting all the heads off of the moderates in the Kootenai County GOP” (informant interview 2023). It is unclear whether this transformation was purely a top-down affair driven by Regan, or if it was a combination of his machinations along with significant in-migration of much more radical voters. But the man who is consistently referred to locally as a key driver of politics in both the North and the state has continued to play a central role in tapping into the resentment of those like him arrived as political and cultural refugees.

Regan and KCRCC have helped produce and solidify a reactionary enclave spatially. Regan, who is a traditionalist Catholic – a reactionary anti-papist sect of Catholicism that has made a home in Northern Idaho – has centered culture war issues by working to dismantle the accreditation of North Idaho College. He has gone on the record to invite Kyle Rittenhouse to move to Kootenai County following his trial, while also openly and defiantly endorsing the notoriously racist John Birch Society (KCRCC, n.d.).

Regan’s KCRCC represents rightwing populist politics and discourse functions at the county level. The idea of the county best representing the people is elicited, while being combined with anti-institutionalism and anti-elitism. In a commercial from 2023, KCRCC indicted the federal government for no longer being for or of the people. It insisted though that it, the KCRCC, with its 73 elected representatives, represented every square inch of Kootenai County and the “people” (KCRCC, 2023). The commercial stated that the KCRCC and all the

other county central committees were most connected to the people, and therefore in a privileged position to reshape politics in the Idaho GOP and the state. In the KCRCC's caption to the video, they said, "Big things are happening in Idaho. If we want to take back our country, it starts with taking back our local government." What's happening, or who they are supposed to be taking back local government from in an already red state and red county is left unsaid. But the discourse is clearly a populist one, tethered to a reactionary politics and ideology from an organization run by an aggrieved, ex-Californian who has helped produce a space and political project for populist redemption in North Idaho and beyond. The IFF, Brent Regan, the KCRCC's roles in local politics, and how they utilize "right flight" reflect how the reactionary strain of populism is not limited to the national scale and becomes embedded at different scales in the United States.

The role of migration, reactionary populism and resentment are further elucidated by looking at political actors at the local level Coeur d'Alene in Kootenai County. Political candidates running for local elections made their individual stories around migration and place a centerpiece in their campaign discourse. These candidates were all endorsed by the KCRCC.

Bruce Mattare, originally from Virginia and elected county commissioner in 2022, told an audience that he "saw what was going on in the nation and [this] was part of the reason I relocated to a much more conservative, much more gun-friendly part of the country". In an interview, he spoke of his hometown, Washington DC, no longer being recognizable and becoming a bad place to raise his children due to cultural issues like gun rights. Idaho here is

seen a place of refuge, security, and redemption from a nation perceived as spinning out of control.

In the most recent local election in 2023, KCRCC endorsed several candidates for local city council in Coeur d’Alene (CDA) and Hayden in Kootenai County, who emphasized their politically oriented migration and its underlying resentment in their political discourse. One of these candidates, Brian Winkler, was a California native from the Bay Area. The second was Clark Albritton, a longtime resident of California before coming to Coeur d’Alene. Winkler cited his experiences both in the Bay and Seattle area, where he witnessed “the erosion of San Francisco and Seattle firsthand, [and was determined] to prevent CDA from going in that direction” (Winkler 2023). Once his job went completely remote, he left in 2021, became involved in conservative radio “interviewing local patriots”, and decided to run for city council because “socialists have dominated the ranks of local governments” (Winkler 2023). His main message at the top of the website stated that he had “seen how leftist policies have ruined cities and turned them woke,” and that he was “committed to preserving Coeur d’Alene’s natural beauty, conservative character, and family values”. His main point was to put local government back on track because it was “on the same path of becoming like all the same places I escaped,” and “to influence local government to maintain the charm which is why I moved here, and not let it become something that we are all going to want to move away from” (Winkler and Bejarana, 2023).

Clark Albritton, who ran against another sitting city councilor, expressed a similar life story and discourse in his campaign. On his campaign website, Albritton shares how he moved to

Coeur d'Alene to raise his two children in 1999 after “recognizing that California, politically, was in steep decline and could not be saved” (Albritton 2023). Albritton claimed he needed an “exit strategy” in the midst of a felt deterioration of the San Francisco Bay Area, which he considered “lovely” once upon a time (Albritton and Bejarana, 2023). Both candidates centered their message on saving Coeur d'Alene from becoming just like failed places in California and Washington, as the same “forces” that undermined them are seen as encroaching upon the otherwise idyllic Northern Idaho enclave (Winkler, 2023).

These two examples represent the resentment in the form of disappointment, alienation, and fear undergirding their migration path and decisions to engage in politics. The Othering of their former cities is expressed by blaming leftists and their policies for why those places became so alien to them. Coeur d'Alene on the other hand, represents an absence of these problems and a place embodying conservatism and harmony. Here we see the way in which rightwing populism idealizes the local community and place in its discourse, while also focusing on vague, corrupting and external forces threatening the essential qualities of their new place (Fitzgerald 2018; Chou et al 2022). These other places are beyond saving, and Coeur d'Alene represents somewhere that remains traditional and uncorrupted.

The narrative of resentment, redemption and politically oriented migration goes beyond the political class and is reflected in at least one conservative radio and podcast show located in Coeur d'Alene. For Ed Bejarana, a central part of his radio show is to promote conservative views and connect voters to the most conservative politicians in the state. Each episode begins with a very dramatic tone, stating that “liberal media and progressive activists are working hard

to change Idaho into the next California or New York,” ending with an appeal to “Keep Idaho, Idaho” (Bejarana, 2023). His deep interlinkages with the more populist sector of the Republican party in Idaho is reflected in Brian Winkler’s reference to his own work with Bejarana. Winkler’s work with Bejarana was the main reason for running against the incumbents in the city council race. Bejarana himself is a migrant from California, who only wishes he came directly to Idaho instead of stopping in Oregon first. Bejarana discusses the so-called Californization of Idaho, but insists that “in order to stop people from changing what Idaho is, we have to have good people put their name in the hat and run for seats [like city council]” (Bejarana, 2023).

Bejarana’s own personal story reflects how these narratives around politicized migration, resentment, Othering, and idealization of place become promulgated in the cultural imaginary of the Right. Bejarana has an episode discussing the “Californication” of Idaho, where he explains why he and others move to Idaho (Bejarana, 2021). He asks, “who could fault someone for selling their run-down home in Santa Cruz and paying in cash for a four-bedroom, three bathroom house on a lake” (Bejarana, 2021). He only briefly mentions the effect this has on affordability in the area for longtime locals before rationalizing it by saying “no sense of crying over spilt milk”. He focuses instead on the need to “convince immigrants to leave their failed, crappy political ideas where they left them” (Bejarana, 2021). There was a reason why they left. He discusses his own life story, how the orchards and dirt roads were so common, when San Jose was a good place. After returning from the military, San Jose to him “was destroyed.” “Federal disaster relief money poured into the state and things really changed” (Bejarana, 2021). But Republicans could still win in the state, until the earthquake changed the political winds permanently in the Democratic direction. He notes to listeners how he himself had ran for



governor the year Arnold Schwarzenegger won. He blamed cash pouring into state as a cause for “citizens becoming complacent on governance.” He was angry over Californian politicians for taking “God out of schools as well as parents”. Bejarana was relieved to feel comfortable again when praying in a restaurant, something he allegedly couldn’t do in California. In Idaho he says, “the waitress joined in with prayer [...] In California, Christians have to hide their opinion, or have to worry about someone calling CPS when open prayer is seen” (Bejarana, 2021).

Bejarana’s discourse is revealing. His idealization of place is reflected in his use of “Keep Idaho, Idaho”, and his sense of loss over what California was once. California was once blissful and country, similar to Idaho until government elites ruined it. His part of California became urbanized, culturally foreign, and antagonistic to his conservatism and religion, unlike Idaho. The federal government and state government of California, the elites, are blamed for transforming the traditionalism of his former place of San Jose. Traditional values are implicitly connected to its rural charm. Sense of loss is consistently centered in his messaging, only to be found again in a place like Idaho, where God and country come together. Something of the past in California remains in Idaho, always under threat as reflected in the opening statements of his show.

Aligning with a similar logic as Bejarana is the notorious far-right political activist, populist, and interstate migrant, Ammon Bundy. Bundy engaged in armed standoffs in both Nevada and Oregon against the federal government, specifically the Bureau of Land Management. Having moved to Idaho around 2015, Bundy would start the far-right “People’s Rights Network”, a large-scale neighborhood watch system which arose in the tumult of the

COVID-19 pandemic and Black Lives Matters protests. Bundy alluded to Idaho's "rural culture" as his impetus for migration. But Bundy's political aspirations equally affected his decision to move. Bundy saw the "political dynamic in Idaho [as] completely different than it's even been before, which makes it where I have a huge opportunity [...] and chance of actually obtaining the Republican nomination [for governor]" (Grossarth, 2021). He was under the impression that Idaho was the "right place to run, the climate is right. Once we correct the narrative, we will have the majority of Idahoans on our side" (Villegas, 2021). Running as a far right alternative to "moderate" Republicans represented by those like Idaho governor Brad Little, Bundy saw himself as a true Republican separate from the mainstream of the Republican party. He would run as an Independent in the gubernatorial election in 2022, with most of his support coming from Northern Idaho. Bundy's populist style included his critique of the Republican Party and his allusion to a "majority", as well as a strict territorial aspiration. Idaho was the place for redemption and to make things right. Like Bejarana, idealization of Idaho was a central part of his messaging. It was a central part of his campaign platform and political program.

Bundy's "Keep Idaho, Idaho" plan also reveals the way populists idealize place (Fitzgerald 2018; Chou et al. 2022). His vision of Idaho's better future meant retaining its past and present political and cultural essence. Idaho simply needed to be protected from the forces that would undo it. Bundy's idealization of Idaho is attached to the idealization of America's past. It is about building America's past within the borders of the state. Bundy's Idaho and its essence in the political imagination of far-right figures like himself represents a project that could "bring about a culture of liberty and property that will rival early America", and ultimately procure "freedom and happiness for the people of Idaho" (Bundy 2022). Bundy only received

around 100,000 votes in the state but received nearly 20% of the vote in Kootenai County in the gubernatorial election. Bundy significantly deviated from parts of the Republican party. But his project aligned in many ways with growing far right of the Republican party reflected in political actors like the IFF, Brent Regan, and his friend, Dorothy Moon.

Beyond these political actors described thus far, there exists a spectrum of politicized reactionary migrants that illustrate politics of resentment and redemption. These people include those who make up the American Redoubt “movement” and other individuals who see Idaho as a place embodying safety, freedom, and appropriate values.

The American Redoubt “Movement” represents the most extreme iteration of the reactionary politicized migration to Idaho. Started by survivalist and author James Wesley Rawles in 2011 in the wake of the financial crisis, Rawles wrote on his blog to urge “folks Get out of Dodge for political reasons – not just for the family preparedness issues...” (Rawles 2011). Citing sociologist Albert O. Hirschman’s seminal *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty*, Rawles argues for Christians in particular to continue the libertarian trend of using exit strategies to escape to safe haven states. People who yearn for liberty and security can find it by exiting to the more remote Mountain states in Idaho, Montana, Wyoming, and the eastern portions of Washington and Oregon. Rawles includes eastern Washington and Oregon due to their conservative values and low population density, anticipating a secession away from the populous cities who dictate their politics. Ironically, he axes rural Colorado from the list due to ex-Californians overwhelming their large cities and dictating their politics as well. What is most important to Rawles is low population density and already existing propensity for conservative politics and

values. The overwhelming goal is to bring “people with the same outlook to move to the Redoubt States [and] effect a demographic solidification. We’re already a majority here. I’d just like to see an even stronger majority” (Rawles 2011). Effectively, the redoubt would become a sort of Christian Zion. Rawles’ rhetoric is extreme in his apocalyptic survivalism, but ultimately overlaps and conforms to discourses of Bundy, Bejarana, Moon and others. Migration is part of a broader political project rooted in feelings of loss, alienation, and insecurity. A sense of crisis is central to his messaging. Building a political project is territorialized in the imaginary and in practice with calls for “demographic solidification” to constitute a political and cultural majority. Beyond the Redoubt movement, this discourse is also found elsewhere.

Since 2011, real estate companies have emerged to cater to those who have discovered that “North Idaho is an ideal location to escape to”, whether it is for climate or a place “to go to in the event of any type of civil disorder [...]” (Walsh, n.d.). Idaho’s conservative politics and its particular emphasis on protecting both the second amendment and property rights is referred to as a reason why people come. The founder and broker of Revolutionary Realty, Chris Walsh, emphasizes freedom and the rife corruption at every level of government as political reasons for escaping to the Redoubt. He expresses a nostalgia for the past, particularly the 1950s United States, whose values, ethics, and morals were the “strongest that the world has ever seen,” yet ultimately denigrated by the left over the years (Walsh, n.d.). While leaning libertarian, he expresses the importance of Northern Idaho’s political culture of “limited government” rather than “no government” (Walsh, n.d.). He resents “overbearing regulation” but believes in the necessary protection of things like water and property rights. Most importantly though is his

commodification of the desire to escape from a sense of little control, crisis, and insecurity felt in other parts of the country, particularly in liberal states and cities.

On the webpage, there are numerous testimonials citing similar reasons for exiting to the Redoubt. One testimonial conveys the reasoning for their exit was due to their “disappoint[ment] with the state of our government and economy,” desiring instead to move “toward a state that offered more freedom and individual liberty” (Walsh, n.d.). Another stated that at the top of their goals “was to plan our ‘escape’ from Colorado since the state is rapidly following California in the race to the bottom” (Walsh, n.d.). Another cites how they “longed for years to build a life that was ‘positively’ reflective of the times we all find ourselves in [...],” while hoping to build a lifestyle that was robust and resilient to the multitude of forces undermining a sensible, sustainable, and ethical existence” (Walsh, n.d.). A married couple convey a desire “for a new retreat location in North Idaho,” while another discuss the need to find a “retreat” due to their being “awakened to the many different ways that could cause us to be unsafe in our home in the city (Walsh, n.d.).

This section has reflected on the ways that Idaho’s reactionary populism is constituted by a politicized migration both materially and discursively. The discourse of politicized migration from political actors and the narratives used by interstate migrants themselves serve as an important mobilizing tool, political appeal, and form of legitimization for Idaho’s GOP reactionary project. This migration represents a regional version of the cultural backlash and reaction to multi-culturalism and cosmopolitanism at the heart of Trumpism at the national level (Agnew and Shin 2019; Norris and Inglehart 2019). While many Republicans in one 2020 survey

“agreed that the traditional way American way of life is disappearing so fast that they may have to use force to save it,” perhaps just as many in this case have opted for retreating to conservative redoubts from places they feel that cannot be saved in order to make their last stand (Bartels 2020, p.22752). Resentment has driven the various actors in this section towards Idaho, a place for their redemption and solution to said resentment. I have demonstrated how the idealization of community and place is intertwined with the Othering of their former places. The discourses at the heart of the political exit of migrants from liberal states and cities in the Western United States to Idaho sheds light on the imaginary of the political Right and its reactionary populism in a more concrete manner beyond the national level. While the geopolitical imagination of the populist Right in the US is bound up with threats of globalization and foreign immigrants, there also exists fears and threats on the domestic level at different scales that are being centered politically and discursively.

Furthermore, as the next section will demonstrate, Idaho represents the “heartland”, or the place in the imaginary to rally around and escape corruption to for many of these politicized migrants, as Moon contended earlier. (Taggart 2001). It is the geographical expression of the “us vs them”, the “pure people” versus the “corrupt elite” politics at the regional, state, and local levels that make up populist politics (Mudde 2004). Part of this geopolitical imagination is deeply imbricated with the spatial and political polarization ongoing in the US. Social antagonisms become spatially fetishized into geographical ones, as places become symbols of social and cultural rot as well as threats. Both places for the populist Right become idealized. California and the western states symbolize spaces of resentment and corruption, while Idaho represents spaces of redemption. Idaho becomes idealized as a place that embodies conservative

values, stability, political and social harmony, and lack of corruption. It possesses essential values from the past that are projected onto the present, yet always under threat (Taggart 2001). California, Washington, and Oregon and their major cities represent profligacy filled with crime, instability, and dangerous bureaucratic centralization among other forms of corruption. Thus, despite its real flaws analytically, the common conception of rightwing populists in rural or semi-rural places opposed to cosmopolitan liberal cities does take on a central antagonism in the geopolitical imagination of the rightwing migrants as well as the populists operating in Northern Idaho.

#### **Chapter 4 - Producing the heartland through spatial antagonisms: How reactionary populists politically and discursively utilize space and the built environment at different scales.**

While the previous section primarily emphasized how migration is politicized in the reactionary imaginary via a politics of resentment and redemption, this section articulates how that process becomes spatialized discursively by political actors and migrants. I argue that a central feature of reactionary populism at subnational scales is the way politics of place and populism intersect, where both political entrepreneurs and interstate migrants produce an imaginary, urban/west coast versus “heartland” dichotomy. California, the west coast, and the urbanized built environment serve as “Others” for which to define one’s own place or heartland more concretely. These specific types of places represent different forms of corruption that threaten the ideal community of people enclosed in Idaho’s borders. Beyond explicit discourses that reflect this dichotomy from various actors, this process also takes its shape when reactionary populists from above and below orient local politics along these lines by centering the built

environment. Recent migrants whose very arrival necessitates development are most adamant about keeping Kootenai County and Coeur d'Alene aligned with their idealized visions of it as a specific type of place. As very recent scholarship has also highlighted, infrastructure can become a site of struggle over values, morals, and ideologies (Beveridge et al 2024). I demonstrate support for my arguments by examining discourse from Dorothy Moon's political op-eds, political commercials from KCRCC, debates and platforms from local political candidates, and county commission and city council meeting minutes over issues of development planning.

With the most recent wave of intensified globalization, beginning in the 1970s, place-oriented politics have taken center-stage. Whether through the alter-globalization movements across the global south resisting new waves of capitalist domination or its more reactionary versions in the form of ethnic and cultural nationalisms, place has become a central locus for political action and reaction. It is this latter version that concerns us, as the "reawakening of place-bound politics clearly has its ugly side", where "stereotyping" of other places through the media or political rhetoric plays a critical role in defining one's own place (Harvey 1996, p. 325). As Harvey has argued, militant particularisms in the form of populist reactions to capitalism's time-space compression consistently occur throughout history (Harvey 1996).

The loss or feeling of loss of security can be used by either the Right or the Left. For populists, hostility to "the social Other" becomes the central object animating their politics, and this loss of security, culturally or economically, is placed onto different groups (Ostiguy and Casullo 2017). This can be distant elites in cosmopolitan places or the various groups of people that make up those places, such as immigrants, the poor, the homeless, and more. But social



Othering necessarily has its spatial component – the groups outside of the proper “people” exist in space and place. Moral panic revolving around the city (as well as liberal states like California presently) is not necessarily new, particularly for the political Right (Macek 2006; Dietz 2008). But in times of crisis, coupled with perceived social and urban decay in a context of intense geographical and political polarization, place has been reinvigorated discursively by reactionary populists.

Metropolitan areas, often controlled by the local Democratic Party, serve as convenient scapegoats or negative examples for the Republican Party, particularly its reactionary wing. Cities are consistently caricatured in the geopolitical imaginary of the Right. They are representative of everything that is wrong with modern America and are places to be avoided. They are blights on the socio-spatial landscape that are the products of the so-called “radical left” or liberal policies rather than capitalist forces. And they represent forces themselves that are potentially dangerous to conservative values and the social fabric of conservative life. In the case of Idaho, a primarily low-density, rural state, this anti-urban impulse has come from the bottom up, with many conservative migrants fleeing states with much higher urban density. But discourses that center urban political, economic, social cultural life as the antithesis of their own local community are strategically implemented from a variety of politicians and institutional actors.

At different scales, the reactionary populist wing of the Republican Party tethers their values and politics to geography in order to relate to their base’s common sense. While this is happening at the national scale, in part due to the very real fact that the party’s victories are

rooted in rural, exurban, and outer suburban areas, it also reflects how reactionary populist styles and politics have become embedded in local politics at the subnational level. For these populists, Idaho represents an idealized city on the hill, the territorialized heartland for the broader conservative community fending off corruptive threats like encroaching urbanization, growth, federal oppression, and leftism. As Katherine Cramer has argued, “place matters because it functions as a lens through which people make sense of politics [...]” (Cramer 2016, 13).

Place is a critical lynchpin for the discourses produced by the populist Right’s geopolitical imaginary. The Othering of different places serves as a form of “horizontal opposition”, supporting the discursive and territorialized construction of the idealized conservative community, or “heartland” (Brubaker 2017; Taggart 2001). As Taggart argues about populism, they tend to “identify themselves with a ‘heartland’ that represents an idealized conception of the community” that serves as a “territory of the imagination that populists construct ‘the people’ [...]” for their political project (Taggart 2001, p. 67). This “heartland” is no utopia (hence it is always under threat), but it does represent the overall absence of corruption and the epitome of the “good life” once felt throughout United States and Republican-dominated states in the past (Taggart 2001, p. 68).

Chairwoman Dorothy Moon typifies this discursive mechanism of contrasting the heartland with its socio-spatial antagonism. On July 7, 2023, in the wake of California governor Gavin Newsom’s trip to Boise, ID, Moon claimed that the “ideological chaos that has consumed California and other coastal liberal states is steadily creeping inward” (Moon 2023). Moon called on Idahoans to “rally together, fortify our defenses, and take proactive measures to preserve our

values, freedoms, and the Idaho way of life,” and to ensure Idaho remains a bastion of freedom, common sense, and traditional values”, as politicians like Newsom represented a “leftism infiltrating Idaho” that would turn the state into a “hellscape” (Moon 2023). Moon urged Idahoans to put aside differences and “come together as a community”, produce a “united front”, and halt “out-of-state leftists” (Moon 2023).

While the international scale is a central aspect to the national rightwing populism of the Trump wing of the Republican party, these politics have become embedded at the subnational level, shedding light on how populist politics and styles take their shape in local conditions. Populist politics, style and discourses can be applied to a range of scales and contexts. The geopolitical imaginary and discourse remain significant but take on a different form as California represents all that is antagonistic to Idaho’s identity. Idaho’s community becomes idealized as one organic, conservative whole in this discourse. Very real political and social differences that exist in the state regionally and locally are flattened. Liberal states represent a corruption of the idyllic “heartland” that is Idaho, and a threat or force that somehow has the power to alter Idaho’s political landscape, therefore threatening its sovereignty. How this threatening process could occur is never explained. As shown in the previous section on rightwing migration, this narrative was central to many individuals who flocked to the Gem state. These same narratives that idealized Idaho and geopolitically Othered different places are also central for the state’s populist right, producing an aggressive and antagonistic form of domestic politics. However, it is not just liberal states that become the focal point of populist discourse, but also densely urban cities. Cities have long been negative symbols of moral, cultural, and political disorder in the reactionary imaginary (Dietz 2008; Cox 2016; Conn 2016).

## **Section 1 - Cities against the people and the heartland: How urban spaces represent the socio-spatial “Other”**

In the imaginary that Moon elicits, Idaho as a place of redemption and escape from the causes of resentment connects to Neil Smith’s notion of urban revanchism, as noted by Robert Samet. (Smith 1996; Samet 2023). In Smith’s case, gentrification as a state policy by urban elites meant taking back control over the streets of the urban city. However, in this case, the elites have now failed, and Idaho represents the new expression of taking back control by being a place of law and order in a sea of chaos. In populist fashion, this control also implicates the elites of these cities as well as the Others seen as degenerates. The elites and their failure are viewed with hostility. In the geopolitical imaginary, cities such as San Francisco, Los Angeles, Seattle, and Portland come to represent failed Democratic and “Leftist” social policy. The “dangerous streets” of these cities, purportedly driven by policies such as clean needle programs, soft-on-homeless policies, and sanctuary city statutes, represent chaos and disorder. Idaho is represented as the embodiment of a “love of law and order” ... free of the dysfunction and the pathologies that have come to define so many of the places where Leftist ideology dominates [and the] growing gap between the mega rich and ordinary Americans define everyday life” (Moon2023). The city here is indicative of both inequality and social decay, rooted in “leftist” policy. These places are “proof of what happens when leftist ideology is implemented” (Moon 2023). Moon’s Idaho is the new space for the “revanchist city” project discussed by Smith.

Within the same document, these qualities are contrasted with those of the “red state”, represented by Idaho – the “state” on a shining hill to play on Reagan’s famous words. A red

state “should be a place where families are supported and strengthened; where entrepreneurship and small businesses can thrive; and where citizens can live safe from persecution and free from violence” (Moon 2023). And it is the Idaho Republican Party platform, at least its populist version, that makes a red state actualized and possible – “individual liberty; equality before the law; government of limited and enumerated powers; and a commitment to religious liberty and freedom of conscience” (Moon 2023). According to the Idaho GOP chairperson, it is these principles that stave off the chaos and failures of the urbanity. However, it isn’t only the region and state scales that are used in the rightwing populist imaginary as antagonists. Cities and their inherent qualities, such as density and plurality, become enemies of the people.

The Idaho GOP has even rhetorically attacked its own state’s capital, Boise, criticizing the local mayor’s “commitment to the failed policies pushed by her big city colleagues in Portland, Seattle and Los Angeles,” such as promoting a “radical plan” to transform Boise into a high-density, “urban jungle.” Urban planners were cited as “radical”, attempting to empower the local government as “landlord” (Moon 2023). Examples of radical city planners’ agenda are “affordability incentives”, upzoning, and Obama-era fair housing initiatives that represent Democrats’ “radical equity plan to transform suburbs into tenement cities” (Moon 2023). Such a policy is portrayed as a steppingstone towards “government-run projects like Chicago and Detroit.” The resentment of planners is shown in the way they are described as radical, enabling elites on the city council to harm the people by enabling all sorts of undesirables to live in the city with affordable housing initiatives. Hostility to urban planners has been documented as a key trait of populists at the local level in municipal settings (Fainstein and Novvy 2023).

The emphasis on upzoning reveals the way reactionary populists politics intertwines with the local scale. Upzoning would allow for multi-story units to be placed next to single family homes, similar to what is occurring throughout the state of California, from San Francisco to Los Angeles. The zoning laws that were once used to prevent density are now being used to do the opposite, allowing for the “massive low-income apartment buildings” to increase density in a neighborhood near you, “destroying your property value” in the process (Moon 2023). Here, both socio-cultural anxieties over neighborhood change and lifestyle change are invoked alongside critical economic interests such as maintenance of property values. Cosmopolitanism and pluralism are distinct features of most cities, and also are viewed with hostility by rightwing populists.

The inclusion of Boise in the geopolitical discourse from the reactionary populist portion of the Idaho GOP expresses a broader pattern of viewing cities in the US populist imagination as somehow at odds with the broader polity of “the people”. Generally, they are perceived as the home of liberal elites as well as the lower classes and leftists who are corrupting traditional values and virtues of the conservative community. Particularly, they are part of the outside forces and agenda undermining Idaho’s sovereignty. While by no means is anti-urbanism inherently a part of populism proper, as seen in the European case of Italy for instance, it does play a special role for the Right in the US. (Rossi 2018; Horgan 2004; Conn 2014; Thompson 2009). For the American Right, the centrality of individualism and property ownership are threatened by the nature of urban life, where home ownership is far more limited. The original 2012 national Republican Platform, explicitly declaring urban life a threat to the American way of life as embodied in the suburb, buttresses this point (RNC 2012 platform). Homeownership, cars, and

living space are the ideal. The threat to this way of life from cities is reiterated by Moon who explains that urban planners and city government are working to make home ownership “a thing of the past,” replaced by a mass renter society where the landlords are “hedge funds like Black Rock” (Moon 2023). Cities as spaces represent this future with their density and affordable housing, unlike single-family home neighborhoods. In addition to the fact that metro areas are more likely to be controlled by the opposition, cities represent something far deeper and more pernicious in the reactionary imagination.

## **Section 2 - The case of Ammon Bundy: Anti-density and reactionary populism**

The use of urban density opposed to rural or suburban home ownership was also used by far right populist Ammon Bundy. Bundy argues in one gubernatorial campaign speech that cities and density are antagonistic to conservatism. He argued that two different ways to absorb larger population growth led to different political outcomes. Bundy said, “[...] as demonstrated by history and human nature, if we build up, create dense and congested populated cities, we will lose our conservative, traditional values. It’s just what happens,” (Bundy 2021). Bundy goes on to list examples of other western US states, all once conservative, that became liberal due to significant urbanization. The only counter to this process to “keep Idaho, Idaho”, is to build out, give “land to the people,” and make them small property owners (Bundy 2021).

Cities here are spatially fetishized from the social and economic forces that created them. They alone blamed for creating undesirable political and social change in liberal states. Bundy expresses a core ideological point of reactionary politics that seeks to halt cultural change as

everything that is solid begins to melt in the air, best represented in their imaginary in the form of the city. While of course lifestyle issues like traffic, pollution, and congestion are mentioned here and by many others citing their concerns for urbanized growth, it is also entangled in the culture war politics currently animating the populist Right from above and below. While Bundy was deeply unpopular overall, he did receive significant support in Idaho's North, where the reactionary wing of the party is the strongest. But his politics and discourse overlap with those such as Moon, the IFF, and local politicians on the ground, indicating that there is a consistent appeal to Othering of not only states, but urban areas. These urban areas, as expressed by Moon, are also represented by Bundy as being a force that threatens to upend the social fabric and "nature" of Idaho.

Beyond these broader imaginaries is also a growing battlefield at the local level over urban infrastructure, culminating in a what recent scholarship has called, "infrastructural populism" (Beveridge et al. 2024). Within the context of the broader regional fight of heartland vs urban elites, urban infrastructure becomes a moral and ideological struggle for reactionary populists. This struggle can take the shape of suburbanites versus the urban core, such as the cases of rightwing populism in Toronto (Filion 2011; Siliver et al. 2020). Aligning with arguments from (Fainstein and Novy 2023), I demonstrate that this case goes beyond the NIMBY label which has long been attributed to suburban homeowners refusing development due to concerns over race and home values. Instead, this situation takes on a new form as resistance to local development such as density, affordable housing, transit and more, structured by populist style and discourses adapted to local contexts. This has been an ongoing trend since the rise of the Tea Party, where disruption of urban planning initiatives have taken on extreme



conspiratorial elements and rigid anti-urban views, even when places that are by no means rural or non-urban (Conn 2014; Wilson 2016). Importantly, these struggles at the local level show how embedded reactionary populism has become in different political scales and how it has come to co-constitute populist politics in general.

### **Section 3 - Tracing how reactionary populism embeds itself in municipal politics using the built environment**

The reactionary populist struggle over the built environment as part of the greater struggle between heartland and western states continues on a smaller scale in the North. Northern Idaho is no stranger to waves of contentious politics over development and growth. Periods of large influxes of interstate migrants to the area have triggered strong reactions from locals and recent newcomers at different times. Vehemently anti-growth politics in the late 70s would challenge the waves of explosive development and arrival of wealthier in-migrants, many of whom were from places like Orange County in Southern California (Stapilus 1988, p.66). Many people resisted run-away rural gentrification as the area became steadily transformed into a tourist haven throughout the 1980s with the decline of mining and timber in the area. One of my informants' father spearheaded efforts to stop forms of enclosure of public lake areas. What occurred was a compromise of sorts, as tourist development came with agreements to keep popular local areas open to the public and free from development (interview). Although many conservatives came from places like California in a type of "cultural flight" from rapid material, political, and sociocultural changes sweeping California, they inevitably brought more growth and development with them, changing the landscape of their idyllic haven. Now, this anxiety, particularly from newcomers, has taken on a rightwing populist discourse that channels

resentment over urbanism and encroaching “Californiazation”. As shown by others who have examined the role of rightwing populism and infrastructural development, populist discourse’ emptiness is effective at this level due its ability to adapt to the context and maintain an affective pull toward restoring a lost or threatened ideal of the past (Beveridge et al. 2023; Anderson and Secor 2022).

The populist appeal to a vanishing ideal of the past and its adaptability to local context over the built environment is conveyed by the KCRCC. A commercial sponsored by the Kootenai County Republican Central Committee (KCRCC) in Northern Idaho placed a sensationalized political ad just ahead of the 2022 national, state, county and local elections. The montage begins with a repetition of “Idaho is the fastest growing state in the country” three times, intertwined with flashing scenes stating, “Don’t Let Idaho Become California”. “Growth can be a scary thing for Idahoans, afraid that their state will turn into another California, and the beloved Gem State lifestyle will vanish like the Wolly Mammoth”. After repeating growth again and again, the commercial quickly shifts into myriad social problems: opioid addiction, overdose deaths; visibility of transgender rights; stand-offs against would-be looters during the Black Lives Matter protests and Occupy Wall Street. After an older white man states, “Things sure have changed since 1960,” a barrage of chaotic and violent scenes in urban areas are flashed across screen. The commercial ends with a dramatic crescendo of “Don’t Let Idaho become California” (KCRCC 2022).

Real problems such as the outcome of growth and the county’s limited infrastructure in managing it are channeled through a reactionary populist discourse that mirrors resentments over

lack of control and the looming threat of the Idaho “lifestyle vanishing like the Woolly Mammoth”. Demographic growth driven by migration in the commercial is attributed to Idaho’s very real problems of increasing drug addiction. It is linked with cultural changes such as increasing visibility of LGBTQI people and their supporters in the state. Armed vigilantes are shown protecting their communities from looters, and a person is heard resenting how “things sure have changed since 1960” (KCRCC 2022). Unsurprisingly, the year 1960 is used because it preceded the pinnacle of the New Left, anti-war movements, and the Civil Rights movement. The modern social and cultural reactionary movement arose out of California in reaction to those movements. The chaos felt post-1960 is continued through the modern scenes of general urban chaos and decay that are consistently portrayed as something that is on the horizon. The “heartland” as the idealized vision of a community or “people” tied to an idealized vision of the past, central to rightwing populists, becomes spatialized and is shown under threat from forces all around (Taggart 2001). California as a place as well as urban space, ends up representing the threats of the social “Other”.

These sentiments from the powerful county political institution of the KCRCC are expressed municipally through its support of local city council candidates running to unseat incumbents in Coeur d’Alene in the most recent election in 2023.

KCRCC-endorsed Brian Winkler’s campaign discourse demonstrates how rightwing populism has embedded itself at the local level, turning the built environment into a battle over morals and ideologies as a part of a larger populist fight to defend the heartland (Beveridge et al. 2023). Winkler’s campaign also reflects how populist aversion to global institutions can be

elicited at any scale. Density, slow growth, and its underlying causes are framed in a populist style, while anchoring it to a politics of resentment. Density itself is cited as the one of the main processes undoing conservative community values (Winkler debate 2023). In his discourse, conspiracy theories around the role of supranational actors like the UN, via “Agenda 2030”, are blamed for reshaping local areas in the US into environmentally friendly urban zones (cite – debate). This is not just a fringe take from the candidate, as his fight against “forced” or planned urbanization from above is echoed on KCRCC’s social media feed. This fight against Agenda 2030 is also a central campaign for the reactionary John Birch Society, openly supported by KCRCC. His policy of “slow growth” and anti-density, the main messages of his campaign, are tethered to vague proposals to “authentically engage with the community” and disincentivizing “unwanted influence from non-local institutions and outside corporate capital, which can manipulate markets and undermine natural character of our neighborhoods” (Winkler 2023). These will ensure that the area doesn’t end up “sleepwalking into a high-density nightmare”, prevent the same type of “erosion” of places like San Francisco and Seattle, and preserve the “conservative character and family values” of Coeur d’Alene (Winkler 2023).

Furthermore, in a debate over population growth, density, and low-income housing, Winkler conveys how certain types of development contradict conservative values. The development that he opposes of course would potentially house those who are not considered the authentic people or community. Winkler proposed ending the construction of multi-family units and sought to prioritize single family homes, as it was “important for people to have land”. He again advocated for more “authentic” engagement with the people of the community (which presumably excludes poorer, working class people) and argued against taking advice from “some

global NGO” like CDA 2030. CDA 2030 is the name of the comprehensive plan for organizing urban planning for the city. He again reiterated his message, that CDA 2030 lines perfectly with the UN’s Agenda 2030. He ended his portion of the debate discussing the dangerous time we’re living, and that the move towards “centralization” was a pernicious sign of moving towards San Francisco and Seattle. After living in the area for 24 months, he could “see the warning signs”. Winkler’s debate and campaign ultimately ties together local politics with a populist style with indelible marks of resentment over places, whose social and physical fabric are viewed as antagonistic to Northern Idaho’s identity.

The second KCRCC endorsed candidate, Clark Albritton, also exhibits similar qualities as Winkler. Albritton fashions himself as the “voice for the people” (Albritton 2023). One of his three issue areas was “Defend Coeur d’Alene”, where he claims that the “outcome of American cities” is rooted in “globalist liberal policies” that “should alarm anyone” (Albritton 2023). His argument for slow and low growth is ultimately about ensuring that Coeur d’Alene does not go the same way as the cities that many, like himself, “have come here to escape from” (Albritton 2023). Albritton, warned of “dark clouds on the horizon” threatening the city, blaming it on the role of outside, “remote planners” like CDA 2030 orchestrating their “globalist utopian vision” for the city with no “local review”. Ultimately, a restoration of values, another major pillar of his campaign, required wresting back control from a city government that was seen as separate from the people, “hijacked by a radical agenda”, and a promoter of “chaos”. For Albritton, clearing the dark clouds on the horizon required shutting down development.

In a city council election debate over growth and density, Albritton conveyed how populist politics was embedded at the local scale. He criticized the current incumbents for driving growth via planning instead of letting market forces do their work. He claimed that growth and density should not be “inflicted upon the community by some state or national or world economic forum plan”, looking to any other scale than the local for the cause of the city’s problems (Albritton debate 2023). Albritton argued this was part of a broader plan to “relocate classes of poverty around the US[...] and plug them into government housing” (Albritton debate 2023). Essentially, Albritton erroneously claimed that Kootenai County and Coeur d’Alene was “growing by purposely importing poverty.” The heartland exists without poor people in Albritton’s mind, and it’s the elite who are responsible for importing it. Albritton ended his part in the debate by stating how “the future is dangerous, and we have danger signs about what is going to happen in this city going forward with growth and planning issues, and we need representation of the city’s citizens in this community”. Crisis of representation, resentment, and Othering were cornerstones of Albritton’s discourse in his local political campaign.

A third candidate endorsed by the KCRCC, Roger Garlock, followed a similar pattern as the previous two candidates. Garlock moved to the area twenty years ago and introduced himself to the crowd by jokingly saying he had the “Idaho mentality long before I moved here [...] and now have two natural born Idahoans.” He spoke to the people, asking that they get directly involved and end the hierarchy and stranglehold on local politics, while claiming that negative forces have “been trickling into our city for a long time” (Garlock 2023). He echoed the other two candidates’ resentment towards the city council and prospects of low-income housing, while also stating that these comprehensive plans such as CDA 2030 are driving the “homogenization

of our cities and destroy[ing] our culture. They want us to look like some city in France... it's globalization." Garlock again intertwines the built environment with ideology and demonstrates again the idealization of place as something that must remain static. He also illustrates how the anti-elitism of the populist discourse is used by the Right at the local level.

All three of these candidates were themselves inter-state migrants. They would go on to ultimately lose their elections to the incumbents. Their vote share ceilings were each hovering around 40% of the vote. Their messaging was certainly to the Right of the other candidates and matched the discourses of many other migrants who shared similar experiences, stories, and ideologies as these candidates during meetings over urban planning at the county and local level. Like Dorothy Moon, the IFF, and KCRCC, they were reflecting the resentment of recent migrants, emphasizing anti-elitism, and stoking hostility towards both the liberal west and urban life in their pursuit to protect their idealized sense of place.

#### **Section 4 - Reactionary populism at the grassroots over infrastructure and development**

Thus far, political actors have been the focus of this section. But resentment over development is a central issue for different portions of the electorate, particularly from recent newcomers. While resistance to development projects in the city of Coeur d'Alene and Kootenai county when public space was under threat has long existed among locals, this opposition is now often channeled through reactionary populist discourse. County planning commission and local city council meetings related to urban planning and development have become one of the main political battlegrounds within the heartland versus urban west coast dichotomy. It reflects the

way in which reactionary populism interacts with place and the local. The built environment becomes representative of conservatives' values and the fight against elites, corruption, and undesirable Others (Beveridge 2024). The underlying logic guiding these opponents is that the more Coeur d'Alene resembles the places these migrants left, the more it will take on the social features they came to resent. The refuge and haven of Northern Idaho, their populist redemption from the loss they experienced, is viewed as under threat.

One man, decrying city council and urban planners' "desire" to make Coeur d'Alene into the image of California, Portland, and Minneapolis, argued that many "people move from all over to North Idaho" to "get away from these places that are a bureaucratic nightmare." (Planning Commission 2022). Another person, vehemently opposing various development plans such as rail lines, low-income housing, and homeless support centers, referred to herself as a "refugee from California" who "lived through this already." This same person went on to state that she "moved here because I come from conservative family values that were completely ignored from where I came from." Wanting to preserve these values that were perceived as under threat, this same individual claimed that every person she talks to "who have moved here for the same reasons" did not see these values being enshrined in development and growth planning.

Another person at the meeting claimed:

*I'm assuming that you on this council have lived here a very long time. But most of us in this room [have] not. We've come from California, Oregon, Washington, and we have watched what has happened to our beloved home state, starting to*



*happen here. That's why everyone is getting riled up.* (Planning Commission 2022).

After a passionate speech regarding the threats of urbanization, this same person ended her speech to both the council and the room with a rallying cry, “Don’t let North Idaho become California, Washington, or Oregon” (County Commission Meeting 2022).

Another man who once lived in Portland and Seattle, echoed a similar sentiment about urbanization plans coming to threaten the local community like these other places. And one other, originally from Oregon, felt that Coeur d’Alene, due to a potential light rail installation, was becoming more like the place he had left.

In another meeting, this time a city council meeting to approve of a comprehensive plan over the future of development in the city, contained people who expressed similar narratives as those above. A former police officer who moved to the area was concerned over Coeur d’Alene losing its small town charm, as implementation of low income housing would spur similar crime waves as those experienced in his last town of Truckee. Another man who came to the area in 1999 echoed similar concerns with public housing. One woman discussed how she had left San Diego, “which was terrible”, mentioning how many people she talked to were moving to Coeur d’Alene for similar reasons. She rhetorically asked, “do we want to be California?” (City Council 2022).

One woman originally from Seattle asked the city council to think of the children, who didn't want "high density or transit", which was associated with gangs. Another man said "he had seen this all before" growing up in South Central [presumably California], which had "turned into a complete warzone" due to "uncontrolled growth". He continued, stating that he saw similar trends in Orange County and Puget Sound.

Another migrant declared to the city council:

*Coeur d'Alene sets a trajectory for the rest of the county. People have moved here for the natural beauty, small town feel, and enjoy the vestige of freedom and liberty that was once across our country. If there's an issue of out-of-towners causing problems, lets look at where these companies are from. Lists off where the consulting companies are from: MIG is from Berkeley, Denver, Fullerton, Pasadena, Sacramento, Seattle, San Antonio, Sonoma... Only place that looks similar to Coeur d'alene is perhaps Sonoma. The other companies such as Bridge come from Portland. Portland is not somewhere any of us want to live. The consultants driving this plan forward are all out-of-towners. It isn't the out-of-towners moving here that are the problem, but these companies bringing in their form of development that are the problem. There are out-of-state entities with no stake or specific long-term understanding of North Idaho. They have no intention to live here long-term. Equity is a word these three companies use. Equity is concerned with equal outcomes rather than equal opportunity. Equity does not bring about the utopia the we are striving for (City Council 2022).*

Another woman told the city council she had moved here from California when she was five years old, and that her parents were scared:

*They came up here for a quiet life without being concerned about what may be happening. I used to leave my car doors here unlocked. I know growth is inevitable, but we need responsible growth. Many ppl supporting this plan are Leftists. Mocking others for talking about white supremacy. I guess I'm rightwing, not an extremist. But. I am an extremist for freedom and protecting my family. I've put in time and money building this community. And so many of them are being pushed out. We don't need more coming in. We need responsible growth. Not density. Developers are lining their pockets, then they are out of here. The money doesn't stay here. it needs to be put back into the community instead of leaving with the developers and us dealing with the repercussions of all this (City Council 2022).*

Many aggrieved residents openly expressed that they were newcomers, and they outnumbered those who were longtime residents. However, concerns over the future of the county and city were mixed for residents born in Idaho, or had lived for at least several decades in the area. One woman was saddened by the fact that this city used to be blue-collar, changing since the tourist resort came in during the 1980s. Since then, it has become an “elite area”, and nobody “can afford to live here anymore”. Another person, stating they were fifth generation Idahoan, claimed that the city council was responsible for producing a “leftist dystopian nightmare”, and that CDA 2030 (the non-profit planning organization), was designed for one “nefarious cause – to influence our local government” (City Council 2022).

Despite this, it is clear from multiple meetings that it was recent newcomers who most often expressed reactionary attitudes towards anything that disrupted their ideal of their new home. Multiple people criticized the reactions of newcomers. One lifelong resident criticized idealization of the area, as if they knew what it meant to be “maintaining values” of the “community”. She spoke out against those who were stoking the “resentment” of these same people. These people were criticized by others for conceptualizing the community as somehow absent of homegrown poverty and homelessness, or for thinking that a focus on single-family zoning wouldn’t just fall in the same trap (ironically) as California.

As shown earlier, it was these resentments from many interstate migrants that were echoed by various political actors. Conspiratorial concerns of supranational entities and leftists influencing local politics beyond the desires of the people or community were central features of the discourse. Newcomers’ fears of influxes in poverty, crime, and homelessness due to density were reiterated by the candidates in debates, radio show appearances, social media, and campaign websites. Density was intertwined with the loss of conservative values. Anti-west coast sentiment and the fears of becoming like the corrupted places they left were consistently invoked both from these recent migrants and the KCRCC candidates as well. Consistent forms of idealizing both social and geographical characteristics of the area, particularly in a bounded way that sought to close it off from the outside, were central themes for reactionary populists at the top and bottom. Social antagonisms were consistently intertwined and fetishized in geographical terms at different scalar discourses around urbanity, state, national, or supranational level.

In this section, I have argued that reactionary populism is co-constituted at different scales. I have demonstrated this by showing how populist styles and elements of resentment, Othering, and idealization of place intersect with the struggles over the built environment. I have shown how this takes place within a wider struggle and imaginary that pits the rightwing populist “heartland” against the West and urban places that is also tied to interstate migration. This dichotomy ultimately helps define one’s own place in the process. I have conveyed this process by examining the discourses of political actors at different scales, such as the state, county, and local level in Northern Idaho. While there was some overlap with national level discourses, ultimately these discourses were oriented around social and geographical concerns germane to regional, state, and local understandings and experiences. In the final section, I will argue that this reactionary populist geography explored thus far is embedded in a broader political project of reterritorializing power oriented around taking back control.

### **Chapter 5 - “Making Idaho great – and sovereign – again”: Reactionary populists, redemption, and the reterritorialization of power at the state level**

In this section, I argue the case of Idaho and the processes hitherto analyzed in this paper amount to a reactionary populist project of reterritorializing of power at the state level as part of a broader trend of political polarization, anti-federalism, and anti-globalism. Discursively, political actors and institutions in Idaho are also performing a defensive posture of reterritorializing sovereignty (Kallis 2018), but at the state level rather than the national level. Many migrants, leaving the west coast enmasse due to a broader social and cultural backlash

resulting in a politics of resentment (Norris and Inglehart 2019; Agnew and Shin 2019, 85), manifests the co-constitution of the national reactionary populist politics. They too, like the Christian nationalist and Redoubt movement figure Wesley Rawles, see Idaho as a territorial haven to regain power from the elites, escape undesirable Others, and obtain that populist desire for redemption. While this section is conceptually tying other arguments within this paper, I will also demonstrate the way the idea of sovereignty and reterritorialization of power at the state level occurs in the imaginary of reactionary populists in Idaho. I show this by examining discourse from political statements by Dorothy Moon, political documents from the KCRCC, and city council meetings debating the acceptance of American Rescue Plant Act.

A central feature of populism in the period of hyperglobalization, particularly since the disastrous 2008 Great Recession, has been the concept of territorial sovereignty. One central aspect of populism is its political agent, “the people,” however defined in any specific context, but usually constrained to a national context. The people can be the “99%” or it can be a much more specific group of people who are seen as representing the national body politic. But the notion of the people is also central to modern democratic politics of the nation-state, which is rooted in the “claim to territorial sovereignty [that] gives spatial form to ‘the idea of a democratically self-regulating people, one in which the subjects of law are also its authors (Agnew and Shin 2019, p. 9). The nation-state and its relationship to the people is a way of imagining politics and giving specific rights and claims to a people tied to a state over space (Agnew and Shin 2019, p. 8-9). Thus, territory has been essential in demarcating specific sets of rights and claims to a specific people. But populism, which is a political logic necessitating antagonism, produces a connection to sovereignty “particularly by reclaiming it from foreign

influences and external contamination” (Agnew and Shin 2019, 9). The solution to “the people’s” problems or their redemption necessitates a return to power territorially. As Kallis argues, taking back power for the people requires the performance of a defensive posture that reterritorializes power behind the borders of the nation-state (Kallis 2018). Right wing populists elicit law-and-order rhetoric and center the roles of the supranational elite, parasitic outsiders, and other types of nefarious forces to justify a return to national sovereignty (Biancalana et al. 2023).

This defensive territorialization also been the case in the United States, particularly since the election of Donald Trump in 2016. But in the US, there exists a contradictory, internal tension within rightwing populism. The focus on returning territorial empowerment is belied by a vehemently anti-federalist stance at the heart of its political practices and ideology. The most recent example is reflected in the crisis at the southern border, where Texas challenged the nation-state’s monopoly of power regarding the United States’ own border security. Preceding, the challenge of covid-19 led to significant resistance at the state level to the federal government’s national health policies even with Trump in power. Increasingly, the federal government continues to be paralyzed while red and blue states become further consolidated by one-party rule, leading to intensive political, social, and cultural polarization in the US. As the political Right continues to center an intransigent politics rooted in states’ right and power, the notion of popular sovereignty is devolving to the state level.

This is perhaps the organic process of a much larger and older political project since the 1970s by the political Right via the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC) and State Policy Network (SPN) to build power at the state level, in part to undermine the federal

government (Fertel-Hernandez 2019). SPN is the umbrella organization that supports IFF, one of the main institutional actors centering rightwing migration and facilitating the rise of the far Right in Idaho. This idea of state sovereignty and resisting federal power, coupled with regaining control and returning power to the people in this subnational, territorial fashion, is a core discursive feature of both reactionary populists from above and below. These elements represent a clear delineation between the concept of populist redemption – the restoration of power and status – and the role of territorialization in the reactionary populist imaginary and discourse.

Dorothy Moon’s discourse best represents this desire for populist redemption through reterritorialization of power by reasserting state-level sovereignty. In early January 2023, Dorothy Moon in her regular op-ed for the Idaho GOP stated that the country was in a “rough place right now, perhaps worst since the Civil War”. With Congress paralyzed with the “open” border and “unable (or unwilling) to rein in the deep state swamp,” she asked what can be done to save the country? After reflecting on and rebuking the strategy of a Convention of States, she finished by bemoaning that the country was not “what it was at its founding” (Moon 2023). Sovereign states were no longer guiding the federal government. She asked:

*[...]where were the modern Madisons to stand for the rights of the states and the people? States are no longer sovereign, but tightly bound to the federal bureaucracy [...] Our government does not follow the Constitution we have, and adding more amendments won't change that fundamental fact. Right now we should focus on cleaning our own house and making Idaho great — and sovereign — again (Moon 2023).*



At the county level, the KCRCC, the voice of Kootenai County and the “heart and soul” of North Idaho, also centers the issue of state sovereignty in their political platform:

*We believe the State of Idaho should strongly assert its sovereignty under the 10th amendment to the U. S. Constitution. It has now come about that the accumulated usurpations by the Federal Government of Idaho’s state sovereignty has reached a point of complete intolerance. The Idaho Republican Party hereby recommends that the Idaho Legislature and Governor nullify any and all existing and future unconstitutional federal mandates, federal court opinions, and laws, funded or unfunded, that infringe on Idaho’s 10th Amendment sovereignty. We also recommend that the State of Idaho continue to request funding and assistance from the Federal Government, which complies with the Constitutional provision of the 10th Amendment, and recommend that the State of Idaho resist the withholding of federal funds as a means of forced compliance with the unconstitutional federal mandates and laws (Idaho Republican Party 2022).*

This amendment has been used over the years in different ways. It has been used progressively in the example of sanctuary cities or regressively, in the example of undermining federal protection for voting rights nationally. However, in this case, it exhibits the centrality of states’ rights orientation for the populist Right.

The State Policy Network, which again is the flagship of the IFF, launched a new initiative in 2023 aimed at “revitalizing America’s federalist system of government.” By no means do they wish to completely eradicate the federal government, but to greatly reduce the

power of the federal government in ways that impede on the Right's power except when it is beneficial to them. They call this project "pro-federalism" reform (SPN 2023). However, it practically amounts to nothing more than anti-federalist federalism (Agnew 2020) and completes the erosion of the federal administrative state built up since Reconstruction and the New Deal.

The anti-federalist sentiment and invocations of sovereignty can be seen in city council meetings in Coeur d'Alene, often from interstate migrants. The debate over the acceptance of American Rescue Plan Act funds from the Federal government in 2021 exhibited these sentiments. One ex-California migrant I interviewed had attended both the urban planning meetings shown earlier in this paper and the ARPA city council meeting. She decried the funding as a "trojan horse," stating that adherence to federal mandates around vaccines and masks were contrary to Idaho's values" (City Council 2022). She asked, are "we going to let DC tell us what to do with our kids?" Implicit in this was the idea that federal funding would undermine the state's sovereignty as well as its values. She would eventually speak one more time, saying "that most of us moved from south of Boise, from California, and we saw our state sink. We don't want our new home state to sink. You guys can protect us and need to protect us" (City Council 2022).

Another woman stated they were new to Idaho and happy here, saying "hope[d] that it stays that way". She claimed the acceptance of funds "was compromising the integrity of the people here", and that this was a bigger issue of the "globalist agenda", "Agenda 2030". She compared this funding and the mask mandates she perceived it would force upon them to the "Nuremburg codes," claiming this was ultimately about "freedom and humanity" (City Council

2022).

One man who had moved from Oregon 16 months ago to the county stated that Oregon used to be a red state, but was transformed “due to unfair elections since 1998” due to the implementation of mail-in voting and “liberal polices forced on the people”. He linked this with the federal government and asked to “not let them interfere” here either, since “[he] moved here for freedom”. He finished by telling them to not “sell our sovereignty for dump trucks and trinkets” (City Council 2022). The connection to the history of native Americans losing their sovereignty for small goods like trinkets at the end must have been an intentional, if ironic, statement.

Multiple other people decried threats to their sovereignty. One woman began their speech with MLK quote and subsequently asked the city council:

*Are you willing to sell out the sovereignty of our city and the people for 156 dollars per person? The city is willing to accept this trojan horse of money and regulation. Bonner county has said no to ARPA money. They believe in state sovereignty. Keep Washington DC out of our homes, our bodies, and off our faces. Let Idaho invest its surplus in Idaho (City Council 2022).*

Another woman, citing Ronald Reagan, said:

*Nine most terrifying words in the English language are ‘I am from the government and I am here to help.’ That sums its up. Money has strings attached. Who decides who the*

*underserved is in our community? Please keep the Sovereignty of our city and those around us (as someone mentioned earlier, what happens here matters to other cities (City Council 2022).*

One man, Tom Shafer also brought up sovereignty and resentment towards the federal government. A man who fled from a progressive metropolis (Seattle) and ended up being endorsed by the KCRCC for Hayden city council (in Kootenai County) on a near-identical platform to Winkler and others, asked:

*Who is against this funding? Federal subsidies always come with strings attached. Money you'll receive is monopoly money. Sells our local and state sovereignty away. People are stirred up already, I am not stirring them up (conflict with mayor). These are legitimate emotions. I've been under the thumb of the federal government for two years now (City Council 2022).*

Others spoke of sovereignty, but less explicitly. One resident, who moved from Boise, stated the centrality of autonomy, while linking the issues of federal power and its effects to California and other liberal places:

*Moved from Boise. Local is important. Being a state is not subject to federal government, the federal government is subject to us. The chains when you take money from the federal government are huge. We need to be non-compliant. We take government into our own hands and we either make it on our own or we don't. We need to examine what is*

*happening in our government. What strings rules are we going to have to comply with. WE need to stand up once and for all and be non-compliant. We are autonomous, we are our own city, county, and state. Look at California and other cities and states, and look what is happening in those areas, and look what is happening in our state and own city. We are autonomous, and autonomy comes with ability to stand up and do what is right (City Council 2022).*

Yet another resident did something similar:

*I am also a transplant or escapee from a coastal state. It isn't just the scenery it is the people. It is a part of America where you can pass people and they smile. You don't get that in a lot of places. Have you seen what is going on in California? New York? Chicago. We are expecting that you don't have your own interest, but the community interest when you are thinking about this decision. We don't want you to fold. With money comes from the strong arm of the government, that is quid pro quo. It isn't right. It isn't really legal. CDC had 70 reports that masks weren't effective. Government wants to control everything we are doing. Idaho is free. We want and expect you to keep it free (City Council 2022).*

A veteran, who stated they were new to the area, asked, “what did they fight for, [such as] freedoms [...] if you are just going to give it away to big brother? (City Council 2022).

One recent interstate migrant briefly spoke, sharing, “no one wants this money. [...] I moved from So Cal to be free, and I don’t want to be under the chains of the federal government (City Council 2022).

One woman alluded to the Constitutional Sheriffs in neighboring counties such as Bronner, Shoshone, and Boundary. The far-right Constitutional Sheriff movement is known for believing in the supremacy of the county and the belief that the federal government does not have legitimate jurisdiction over their territories.

And finally, one woman shared her concern that the acceptance of federal funds was tied to giving up sovereignty to the United Nations, a conspiratorial trope that was also repeated in urban planning meetings.

In populist politics, the nation-state is viewed as a bulwark against the destabilizing forces of globalization. It is also viewed as an expression and realization of democracy for populist politics. However, in the deeply polarized and federalized US, the states are also working in a similar manner in the reactionary populist imagination. In addition to being a shelter from global forces, it also serves to shield the population from the federal government, liberal cosmopolitanism, and leftism of the west coast. For many on the reactionary right in Idaho, the space serves ultimately as a territorial rendering of the heartland and source of redemption. It represents a space absent of external corruptive forces contaminating its society and politics, while also containing the restored values and norms absent from other parts of the country, especially liberal states. The state level, already viewed as the central agent for politics

by conservatives and reactionaries, serves as a reterritorialization of power and is a critical aspect of the way rightwing populism in the US is currently constituted.

As I have argued in this section, the discourse surrounding the concept of sovereignty at the state, county and local levels encompasses core features of reactionary populist resentment and idealization of place. In this case, resentment towards the federal government and the fetters it places on freedom are expressed by both political actors and constituents alike. Moon expresses resentment over the fact the country no longer politically or ideologically resembles the past founders' ideals. Multiple constituents stated how their resentments of their former places were connected to a loss of sovereignty to the federal government. Idaho for these people and political actors is perceived as an ideal place for freedom and unencumbered by Washington DC. The federal government is viewed as an entity wholly separate and outside of Idaho. But most importantly, the notion of making Idaho great and sovereign again is the discursive expression of Idaho as a space for redemption.

Furthermore, I have also argued in this section that populists look to regain something lost, particularly a sense of power, through the promise of redemption. Reactionary populists often center a restoration of the past in their discourses, which pairs with the politics of resentment that is a reaction to a present that is found to be unacceptable. Idaho is the spatial, territorialized representation of that restored past for many who have flocked there as refugees fleeing the sources of their resentment. Idaho represents a restoration of values and politics that have since been abandoned or destroyed elsewhere. Making Idaho sovereign as part of a states' rights project is the mechanism of insulating the state from forces that seek to undermine the

heartland. Just as the nation-state are meant to be a source of defensive protection and power in the face of globalization, reactionary populists in the US in the case of Idaho view the state as a project for regaining power, restoring the past, and opposing outside forces from corrupting its own version of the heartland. Making Idaho great and sovereign again is the encapsulation of the different ways that rightwing populist politics have become embedded in political life across different scales and geographies. Thus, reactionary populism becomes far more legible once we view it as a process co-constituted at different scales of governance beyond the national level.

## **Conclusion**

Idaho's own reactionary geography expresses the co-constitution of reactionary populism that has been occurring at the national level. Rightwing populism far exceeds the national scope and has become embedded at different levels of government across varying political scales. Just as in Europe, understanding rightwing populist discourse and its imaginaries requires a multi-scalar perspective that shows how such a politics adapt to different contexts traversing the political terrain across space and place. Because populism is a style and discourse, its adaptability can function in numerous contexts. It has become the style of politics taken up earnestly by the reactionary right as part of their struggle to produce a politics of resentment rooted in the desire to restore America's idealized past. But as the paper has shown, that project of Making America Great Again is being produced at regional, state, county, and local levels. In the case of Idaho, reactionary populists are working to make America great and sovereign again at the state, county and local levels.



The ongoing reactionary populist politics and its underlying geography has been demonstrated in this paper by examining different political concepts and scales in the case of Idaho. The politics of resentment that are central to reactionary populism in the United States revolve around flows of interstate migration. Many of these migrants over decades left their former homes as a reaction to the changes in liberal states that are perceived to have undermined their political and cultural representation. They have mobilized that resentment to reshape the political terrain throughout the state of Idaho. Political actors, some of whom are migrants themselves, coupled with important institutions, have further stoked resentment and centered interstate migration as a mobilizing tool and political appeal. Socio-spatial Othering of urban spaces and liberal states have played an integral part in identifying enemies of the people while also helping to define Idaho and its different places in idealized ways. The role of the built environment has been an essential terrain of struggle of defining the community and its values against those that threaten to corrupt it. These different aspects of this rightwing populist geography and discourses culminate in a political and ideological project that views Idaho as the source of their redemption.

This redemption comes in the spatial form of Idaho, serving as a defensive reterritorialization that promises to restore both power and an idealized past. Such a redemption is the answer to their resentment. Idaho at different scales in reactionary populist discourse represents in geographical terms the “people” against different types of elites, along with those who are considered undesirable, corruptive, or politically dangerous. It also serves discursively as a place for different types of protectionism. Idaho is a territorial space that challenges the political establishment and the federal deep state at all levels of government in the political imaginary of the Right. It is a space and place to construct and sustain the heartland by

rebuilding sovereignty in the face of corruptive threats within a wider crisis of institutional legitimacy and representation in the United States.

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