

Blue Jean Nation "Things heard on the outside"

Posted on Sep 13, Posted by [Mike McCabe, Blue Jean Nation](#) Category [Wisconsin](#)



Most people living in small towns or out in the country claim to be Republicans, but only because they seem to despise Democrats. Few actually seem to like the Republicans deep down.

ALTOONA, WI - My past work as a government watchdog led me to spend more time than I liked in the State Capitol. With seemingly each passing day, I found the place increasingly unpleasant. Just setting foot in the building had a way of dampening my spirits. It's a beautiful setting, but there's growing ugliness in what goes on inside.

Since joining with others from around the state to give birth to Blue Jean Nation about a year and a half ago, I've been in the Capitol only three times, and none of the visits was my idea. I've made a point of staying away from the Capitol and hitting the road instead.

On a few occasions my recent travels have taken me outside Wisconsin's borders. But for the most part, I've criss-crossed the countryside in my home state. Community events and gatherings from Argyle to Appleton to Ashland, from Waukesha to Waterloo to Wausau. Sometimes it's bigger towns like Eau Claire, Green Bay, Janesville or La Crosse. Other times small towns like Lake Mills, Darlington, Viroqua, Elkhorn and Owen. For every trip to Milwaukee there have been visits to Menasha and Menomonie, Hayward and Hudson, Brookfield and Baraboo, Portage and Prairie du Chien. And dozens of other locales. Plans have me heading soon to Tomah, Waupun and New Glarus, among other places.

I've met with local residents in churches, coffee shops, cafes, bowling alleys, libraries, taverns, barns, feed mills, town halls and community centers. I've been invited into high school classrooms and to college campuses. Everywhere I go, I talk politics with those I meet. What I hear varies from place to place but at the same time is strikingly similar. Distill all the stories

down and common themes emerge.

People are reluctant to talk politics, but you can tell they want to. Political discussions have been too painful lately.

The most commonly used word to describe both the economy and the political system has got to be "rigged." It amazes me how often that word is chosen.

Pessimism is rampant. People seem afraid of what the future holds. Many are beaten down. No matter how hard they work, they see themselves falling behind. They have a hard time imagining how that's going to change. This leads not only to intense frustration but also a strong suspicion that America's best days are behind her.

Optimism is dormant but not dead. People want to believe things can get better, and are on the lookout for signs we might be turning the corner. Leadership is craved.

Few see themselves being the ones able to satisfy the craving. Most see leadership coming from someone else.

Someone else isn't leading.

The word "Democrat" is toxic most everywhere outside of Madison and Milwaukee.

Most people living in small towns or out in the country are Republicans, but only because they despise Democrats. Few actually seem to like the Republicans deep down.

Most people can tell you what Republicans believe in, whether they agree with it or not. Most struggle to put into words what Democrats stand for. What they do say isn't flattering.

Young people are not nearly as apathetic as older people think they are. They know what's going on. They care. They may feel powerless, but that's different than not caring.

People of every age tell you who's to blame for the mess that's been made, but then they say something that hints at understanding of how all the resentment and scapegoating lead nowhere good.

These are things you never hear in the State Capitol. And doesn't that say something revealing about the Capitol?

— *Mike McCabe*

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