



## What's the Matter with Connecticut?

*Small-town Connecticut reacts to domestic terrorists, gay marriage, Sarah Palin, the economy, and Food Land.*

### 1.

Here, in North Branford's IGA, things are happening on a smaller scale. The grocery store's owner, Brian, says the economy is having an "extreme impact" on his customers; they're cutting back on "extras like chips and sodas," choosing "bare necessities and store brands." "Picnic-related products have really decreased." The residents of North Branford are also avoiding big purchases. Nancy, a reserved woman counting out yogurts in a 10-for-\$10 special, explains that she decided against even trying to get a car loan. Change has come even to the North Branford McDonald's, where posters for the chain's annual Monopoly game plug, not the million-dollar prize, but the \$50 gas cards.

North Branford is located in Connecticut, about ten miles east of New Haven, and that's why I'm here. In July, August, and September, pollsters asked Ohioans for their preferred president 29 times; in the same span, Connecticut was polled three times (and that's with a [national polling institute](#) in-state).

Now, this gap makes sense. Connecticut doesn't get polled because, as a state, it's already cast its ballot. But it also hints at a larger dilemma. Connecticut gets overlooked, which means Connecticut gets oversimplified.

More specifically, towns like North Branford get oversimplified. In un-swingable states, the only political data come from previous elections. Everything is retrospective. Even by this measure, though, North Branford is an electoral enigma: the town went to Bush 41 in 1992, Clinton in 1996, Gore in 2000, and Bush 43 in 2004. All this to suggest that true-blue states like Connecticut—and, just as much, their obverses like Kentucky—contain a variety of beliefs and worldviews. And this variety can offer the same insight as Ohio's, if we'll only take the time to listen.

### 2.

The hardest thing to get North Branfordians to talk about is North Branford. They slip behind platitudes like "good neighbors" and "good people," "patriotic," "community," and "country-like"; Brian describes it as simply "a great small town." While, initially, this was frustrating, I came to believe that the residents of North Branford—and I think this is true of most small towns, including the one where I grew up—use such platitudes deliberately. These adjectives

aren't descriptions as much as goals. It's like North Branford is tracing over a Norman Rockwell painting and glad when you remark on the resemblance.

And there is a resemblance. North Branford is a spacious, wooded town of about 15,000, with city limits as loose and baggy as a Dickens novel. There aren't a lot of very new or very old houses, and most people live in seventies-style ranches with short driveways and coordinating shutters. When the town changes from residential to commercial—and it never seems to do this entirely—the spacing remains the same, so that North Branford's businesses enjoy as much elbow room as its homes.

This means that, instead of a slow, shady Main Street, you get more of a Main Drag (that would be CT-80), with much of the traffic simply passing from A to C. You hear fewer curses and horns than in a city like New Haven, where I'm convinced the drivers aim for anticipatory honking, but you can't really walk around.

With so much sprawl, I needed to pick a home base: the North Branford Central Plaza. It's not a strip mall—that would imply too much forethought—but a loose cluster of buildings and businesses that sits at the intersection of CT-80 and CT-139. We have, from left to right, the North Branford Post Office, the Great Wall Chinese Restaurant, La Bella Hair Salon, the aforementioned IGA, and Village Warehouse Liquor. A Dairy Queen and the McDonalds sit on the periphery. Of the sixteen storefronts, six contain only "For Sale" signs, including what used to be Bishop, Edwards & Roberts—described to me by a hairdresser on smoke break as "a mortgage and financing place. They weren't here for very long."

### 3.

It's a fantastic October Saturday, the kind that leads road-side pumpkin stands to commit outrageous acts of capitalism. In the Central Plaza's parking lot, the North Branford High School Dance Team is putting on a carwash-slash-bake sale. The sun is *out*. It's not warm enough to help the Dairy Queen, but it is blindingly bright, with the glare only heightened by the number of freshly washed cars. I count eight motorcycles, a mix of Harley- and Goldwing-types. Everyone under 16 is wearing an athletic uniform.

Of the 30 or so people I interview, half are Republican, half Democrat. This doesn't surprise me; in the 2006 election, North Branford registered 1,723 Republicans, 1,898 Democrats, and 4,192 Independents.

What does surprise me, given [recent reports](#) from the campaign trail, is how contrite the Republicans sound. "I remember Dad saying, 'C'mon downtown, we're getting you registered as a Republican,'" says a young mom named Jennie. "But," she quickly adds, "I'm still torn on the issues."

This apologetic strain surfaces in even the most loyal voters. Geneva, an elderly woman who's never voted for a Democrat president, admits that "I'm not crazy about McCain. He's OK. I liked Bush, a born-again Christian." Again, there's a postscript: ". . . not that he's been perfect."

Another older woman, Mary Anne, opens with her confession. Her first words to me are, “Unfortunately, I voted for Bush. But I’m 100 percent behind Obama.” Mary Anne, who’s reading *Dreams of My Father*, has “a feeling of trust in the man,” and many in North Branford share her sense, especially when it comes to the economy. As Debbie puts it—and I hear this kind of comment again and again—“I sincerely believe Obama wants to help mainstream people.”

The McCain campaign, of course, argues that Obama’s past associations should undermine this trust, so I ask everyone about Obama’s pals. Joe, who owns a local business, gives one of his serially dry answers: “Well, Bill Ayers is not my favorite person.” (When I ask him if Obama is elitist, Joe replies, “Well, you don’t see any arugula in my cart.”)

I press Joe for a serious response. “At present, I think Ayers doesn’t influence Obama.” Well, will he influence your vote? “It’s in the back of my mind.”

But Joe’s is the strongest reaction I find to the emotion-by-association tactic. No one complains about Obama’s “judgment” or “pattern” or “difference.” Even Geneva shrugs off Obama’s relationships. “McCain shouldn’t bother with the Reverend Wright or any of that,” she says. “Let’s judge Obama on what he’s done as a Senator.”

#### 4.

Less than a mile from the Central Plaza sits North Branford’s Big Y, an upscale grocery self-styled as a “World Class Market.” You’ll pardon my sarcasm, as I’m openly rooting for the IGA. (Also, all this populism is contagious.)

The Big Y is, admittedly, a big deal. Only seven months ago, North Branford welcomed it with a newly widened road and its own traffic light. The IGA, locally owned for 17 years, is feeling the heat. Brian won’t mention Big Y by name, but acknowledges that “yes, Our Competitor has hurt convenience-based sales.” One can see the beginnings of a [Lamson Grocery/Food Land](#) relationship.

North Branford’s topic of choice, though, is neither Big Y nor Barack Obama. Instead, it’s Sarah Palin.

My favorite interview on this subject is a dual one, conducted Sarah-and-John style. I meet Toni and Dora at the IGA bakery, where each opts for a loaf of Italian bread. Both women, it turns out, have Vietnam vets for husbands. Both are Roman Catholic. Both have daughters who work at the North Branford IGA. (In fact, during our interview, Toni and Dora lay the groundwork for a shift swap that will free one girl to attend a rehearsal for her Confirmation.)

Toni likes to talk. She likes to think out loud, to the point where, though she calls herself a “strong” Obama supporter, she declares that “Obama says he’s not of Muslim descent, but he is.” From this, Toni launches into an uncertain but expansive tangent on the Book of Revelation and the *Left Behind* series—“This was all in the back of my mind, and then I got an email about it last week”—ending with the view that “Obama is an American, but not a John McCain American.”

This doesn't matter, though, because, in Toni's words, "this is a vice-presidential election." "Sarah Palin," she says, "has a black-and-white worldview. I can't see her negotiating with anyone." At this point, Dora speaks up. "Palin's a wack job. We've come so far in our choices as women, but Palin . . . Palin would be a plus maybe in 1940." Dora continues: "She presents herself as an everyday woman"—and here, Dora starts ticking off examples on her fingers: *Hockey Moms, Joe Sixpack, That Damn Winking*—"but I don't buy it."

This might be a vice-presidential election, but neither woman mentions Joe Biden until I do. It is the Palin roller coaster—the ups of the convention, the downs of Gibson and Couric, the corkscrews of the debate—that dominates my conversations, especially with women. When I chat with the hairdressers at La Bella, a client named Michelle walks over, still wrapped in towels and a plastic cape, her hair thick with chemicals and her forehead smeared with dye. "Palin," she blurts, "likes power and shoots from the hip."

I step back—I'm wearing a light gray sweater—and ask Michelle for some specifics. "At that debate," she says, "Palin was repetitive, she totally avoided questions, she was a little bit obnoxious."

If the other Palin answers lack this level of drama, they still tilt negative. People offer isolated compliments ("I go back and forth on her," says Nancy), but many women question Palin's ability to manage her workload, often in the context of their own roles as wives and professionals. Roberta, who's hurrying through her shopping list while her kids wait in the car, worries about Palin's son Trig: "Poor little fella, parading him around. Just go home and be with your young family."

## 5.

One of the oddest things about talking politics with the people of North Branford is their reference to personal connections. When I ask about the VP candidates, for example, Jenny notes that "I work with someone whose sister lives in Alaska, and she thought Palin was wonderful." On the economy, Debbie cites a friend who "knows people in Washington, and they say, 'We don't even have to come up with a budget.'" A twenty-something named Chris, who agrees to talk only if I follow him around the store, recalls that "my uncle served with McCain in the military, he flew with him, and he hated him."

Based on these references, I expected the town's local politics to center on things like personality, character, and morals. When I called North Branford's Town Hall, though, I got a different story. Anthony Esposito has lived in North Branford for 40 years. He currently holds the positions of Town Treasurer, Town Finance Director, and Deputy Chief of the Volunteer Fire Department. It seems I'm in good hands.

Esposito explains that a "good portion of North Branford's budget comes from state and federal grants," along with "declining slot machine revenues." Because of this, he says, "people are very interested in the trickle-down aspects of finance." He describes a town unconcerned with ethereal issues like the culture wars, a town with a firmly pragmatic attitude toward governance.

Of course, these are not easy times for pragmatism. In a rural town that is 96-percent white and 65-percent married, I anticipate the culture wars will be alive and well—not the least because, on Friday, the Connecticut Supreme Court decided to [legalize gay marriage](#). So, I ask Sue, a mother chaperoning the car wash, what’s your reaction to the Court’s decision? “It’s about time,” she replies.

Another mom, Pam, describes herself as a “family values voter.” “Still,” she says, “to each his own. The world’s changing.” Ralph, who’s wearing flip-style sunglasses and is almost certainly retired, also supports the decision: “Everybody has a right to be happy.” (Toni, of course, links the issue back to Palin: “God made us all in our own way. Palin wants to pray away the gay—you’re born gay, I’m sorry.”)

On Sunday, I stop back at the IGA to catch the after-church crowd. I find a few dissenters. Mary is extremely Catholic and extremely kind, volunteering her phone number in case I have more questions. “I’m not happy about it,” she tells me. “Marriage should be between a man and a woman.”

## 6.

I don’t want to exaggerate North Branford’s political landscape. The town’s Congresswoman, Rosa DeLauro, is a Democrat and a shoe-in. She’s traveling the country to [campaign for Obama](#)—in Michigan, in Pennsylvania, and, yes, in Ohio.

Still, North Branford doesn’t fit any ready mold. Its reaction to the state’s legalization of gay marriage doesn’t reflect Thomas Frank’s [influential idea](#)—that Republicans snooker rural voters through cultural or moral issues—so much as it reveals how, right now, swing voters worry more about the country’s economy than its morality. (In the same way, the people of North Branford rarely discussed abortion from either side, though I imagine it shapes Dora’s views on Palin.)

The town’s focus on the economy does hint at what will hamper either an Obama or McCain presidency—namely, if the economy continues to sour, many of these voters will waffle. Their support is only wallet-deep. This is true of the present, where, in the last six weeks, Joe and Ralph have lost 40 percent of their 401ks, and it may be even more true of the future. (According to the [official town literature](#), North Branford relies on almost twice as many manufacturing jobs as rest of the country.)

None of this is lost on the people of North Branford. So let me submit the first national political prediction in the town’s history. Based on demographics, economic trends, national issues, my own canvassing, and a sound knowledge of which way the wind blows, I say Obama takes North Branford by nine points.

But let me also suggest that this number will not match his margin in Connecticut as a whole.