

Trump and the Revolt of the Rust Belt

 blogs.lse.ac.uk/usappblog/2016/11/11/23174/

11/11/2016

*Much has been made of the inaccuracy of exit polls and voting projections amidst Trump's shocking win this week. **Michael McQuarrie** argues, however, that to truly appreciate why Donald Trump was elected the 45th President of the United States we must look beyond distortionary exit polling and come to appreciate the thoroughly regional nature of his victory. Only this can explain Trump's win, which relied on the Rust Belt's rejection of Democrat candidate Hillary Clinton – and their resounding endorsement of Trump's anti-globalist rhetoric.*



The election is over and a potentially disastrous candidate has won. The damage to civil tolerance and multiculturalism is likely to be profound. A lot of people's lives will change. Naturally, people are asking the question: who could have voted Trump into office? Well, clearly white people. This isn't terribly surprising. White people have plenty to answer for in American history and show no particular energy about improving their record. Others blame people of color who didn't turn out for Clinton as they did for Obama, never mind that expecting black people to turn out for anyone other than Michelle Obama as much as they did for Barack Obama is entirely unrealistic. Latinos voted for Trump at a slightly higher rate than they did for Romney. As baffling as that is on the surface, pure block voting is simply not how voting works and Latinos still voted overwhelmingly for Clinton.

The problem for explanation is not that any of these factors are irrelevant as such, they aren't. They just don't have much to do with the actual reason why Trump won. The reason he won should be obvious to anyone who pays attention to the electoral map rather than exit polls. The Rust Belt revolted against the rolling out of a neoliberal New Economy and multicultural society. The fact of this economic transformation is nothing new, people have been talking about it for years. In fact, policy makers, politicians, and journalists had also *stopped* talking about it, probably because they were exhausted by the conversation. Democrats learned that they could win presidential contests handily with only marginal nods to the industrial Midwest (Clinton: "Trump ties are made in China!"). Some states would just be written off by Democrats. Coal-mining and unionized West Virginia, solidly Democratic since the New Deal, was flipped to the Republican column in 2000 by climate warrior Al Gore. No one much cared, even though a Democratic West Virginia would have prevented a Bush presidency. Other states, it was assumed, would participate just enough in the economic transition to fracture any conservative Old Economy majority that might emerge in the Rust Belt. And even if it didn't, there were enough black people and union workers to prevent a Republican victory in those states. Democrats were so confident of their support in Rust Belt states that they were part of Clinton's "blue wall" that, it was argued, would deliver her the presidency even if Trump won traditional swing states like Florida.

The cultural transformation from a tacitly white society to a more multicultural one is considerably newer and much more at the center of political discussion—a transformation that was supercharged by the Obama presidency. This isn't simple progress; it animated white supremacists, xenophobes, and homophobes as much as it did the tolerant. Such people are always around, there may even be more of them, but they don't deliver electoral majorities. But this conversation was also a heavily coastal phenomenon. The Rust Belt has a lot of black people, but few Latinos. When workers were in unions alongside others who had different color skin, holding together a viable multiracial working class coalition *was possible*. But unions have *been destroyed*, with the Democratic Party complicit, and stunning economic decline has made it easy for narratives of zero-sum competition between different social groups to take hold. Democrats have offered precious little to prevent people in the Rust Belt from feeling embattled and forgotten. More to the point, the Clintons are avatars of free trade, financialization, and identity politics, a triumvirate of characteristics that associates them pretty directly with what many people associate with the causes of Rust Belt decline and crisis. But it didn't matter that Democrats stood for these things when Republicans stood for most of them as well. When lines of political conflict were organized around abortion, guns, and taxes, as the Republican

operative Grover Norquist wanted, there was no room for a distinctively Rust Belt politics. Trump changed that particular calculus. It may have been cynical, but the message was clear: he would be a protectionist president. This is a part of the country that does things like [smash Japanese cars at civic events](#). Trump's message was likely to resonate, but probably only in the Rust Belt. People have been suspicious of the role of the white working class for a variety of suspect reasons: sure, Trump supporters were [on average affluent](#), but they are always Republican and aren't numerous enough to deliver the presidency (538 has [changed their view](#) in the wake of the election result). Some point out that looking at support by income doesn't show [much distinctive support](#) for Trump among the "poor", but that's beside the point too, as it submerges a regional phenomenon in a national average, just as exit polls do.

Trump had a losing hand against the Obama coalition. The number of solidly Democratic states was plenty to beat Trump, and Clinton showed signs of extending the map. Trump had two choices. First, he could peel off social groups that supported Obama. In the wake of their 2012 loss to Obama a group of prominent Republican strategists argued for a return to the George Bush coalition and an emphasis on [minority outreach](#). Bush had added a large number of minority, and particularly Latino votes, to the usual white support for Republicans. But Trump's whole campaign can be read as performative contempt for that strategy.

His other option was to crack states that had voted Democrat for decades, in some cases, since Reagan's landslide in 1984, a strategy that pundits, analysts, and operatives all thought was laughable. During the primaries, some commentators were noting that Trump was revealing a New Economy vs. Old Economy split that could be electorally exploited. The Rust Belt had been effectively ignored for decades, so there were plenty of votes to be had there. When Trump's former campaign manager Paul Manafort laid out a strategy that included Pennsylvania, most treated it with contempt. When [commentators](#) like [Michael Moore](#) and [Thomas Frank](#) pointed out that there was possibility for Trump in the Rust Belt they were mostly ignored or, even more improbably, accused of being apologists for racism and misogyny. But that is what Trump did, and he won. Moreover, he won with an amateurish campaign against a well-funded and politically sophisticated opponent simply because he planted his flag where others wouldn't.

Because of the obsession with exit polls, post-election analysis has not come to grips with the regional nature of the Trump phenomenon. Exit polls divide the general electorate based on individual attributes: race, gender, income, education, and so on, making regional distinctions invisible. Moreover, America doesn't decide the presidential election that way. It decides it based on the electoral college, which potentially makes the characteristics of individual states decisive. We should be looking at maps, not exit polls for the explanation. Low black turnout in California or high Latino turnout in Texas do not matter in the slightest in determining the election, but exit polls don't help us see that. Exit polls deliver a bunch of non-explanatory facts, in this election more than other recent ones.

Trump won Ohio, Indiana, and West Virginia, more or less as expected, but he also won Pennsylvania, Michigan, and Wisconsin. He nearly won Minnesota. Trump cracked the Democratic coalition and he did so decisively. The votes that switched were in the Rust Belt. Depressed Democratic turnout *did* matter, but this wasn't indifference or apathy alone. It was also because Clinton was a terrible candidate for the Rust Belt, a region with a lot of people who were particularly likely to remember Bill Clinton's move to free trade and abandonment of manufacturing as well as Hillary Clinton's advocacy for TPP and defense of Wall Street. Trump, on the other hand, had *higher* turnout than Romney in some of these states. Indeed, to the extent that there was Trump "enthusiasm" anywhere, it was in the Rust Belt.

The Rust Belt states that delivered the presidency to Trump—Pennsylvania, Wisconsin, and Michigan—were extremely close. On one hand this means that any number of factors can be said to be a "cause" for the outcome. Slightly lower black turnout, third-party candidates, and depressed Democratic turnout generally will all be cited as such factors. But none of that addresses the fact that to shift Michigan, say, from +10 for Obama to even *cannot* be explained by these factors. You still have to account for people who voted for Trump, many of which probably flipped from being Obama voters. Digging deeper into county results supports this.

Take Macomb County and Oakland County in Michigan. Macomb County is mostly white and has a median household income of around \$53,000. It is not particularly poor, but also not affluent. It is often characterized as “working class” and “socially conservative”. The county voted enthusiastically for Kennedy in 1960, Johnson in 1964, Nixon in 1972, and Reagan in 1984. It voted for Obama twice (+9 in 2008, +4 in 2012). Trump won Macomb by nine points. The number of voters was the same. Trump peeled off white working-class votes. In contrast, we have neighboring Oakland County, which is considerably more affluent (median income of \$66,000), has a university, and has more of a New Economy, advanced manufacturing economic base. It is more diverse as well. It is a traditionally conservative suburban community that has been drifting Democratic since 1996. Obama was the first presidential candidate to win a majority in the county since 1988. There, turnout for both candidates was down a bit, but the difference remained the exact same. Oakland was +8 Democrat in 2012 and +8 in 2016. Democratic support remained roughly the same in the more affluent, diverse, and educated county while shifting significantly in the traditionally working class community.

Or take Mahoning and Ashtabula Counties in Ohio. Mahoning is the Rustiest part of the Rust Belt, once at the heart of American steel production. The city was unionized, multiracial, and solidly Democratic. It was also ravaged by deindustrialization. As writer Sean Posey [points out](#), it was long represented in Congress by Jim Traficant, a proto-Trump who railed against the free trade policies until he ended up in jail on corruption charges (which had little impact on his popularity). The county is economically poor (median household income of \$23,000) and culturally as working class as it gets. It has been solidly Democrat in presidential elections for decades. Obama won the county decisively (+26 in 2008, +28 in 2012) and the county contributed much to his statewide majority. Hillary Clinton won Mahoning by three points. Ashtabula, by contrast, is overwhelmingly white, more exurban, and more affluent than Mahoning, but with average household incomes considerably lower than the national average (\$40,000 median family income). It has none of the knowledge economy trappings of Oakland County. People there once worked in auto plants and now work in hospitals. It has been solidly Democratic in presidential contests since 1988. Ashtabula decisively supported Obama in 2012 (+13) and decisively supported Trump in 2016 (+19).

This story can be told repeatedly across the Rust Belt. The electoral shift was highly concentrated in territorial terms and Rust Belt territories were ground zero. Trump [flipped a full third](#) of the counties that voted for Obama twice. Clinton flipped 6 of the 2200 counties that didn't vote for Obama. Many of the counties Trump flipped are Rust Belt communities in the Midwest. And those counties, in turn, flipped the electoral college votes of Iowa, Ohio, Michigan, Wisconsin, Pennsylvania, from Democrat to Republican. Obama's coalition managed to bridge the dying Rust Belt and the New Economy, but Clinton didn't and, given her baggage and her policies, could not. Trump snatched the Rust Belt from the Democrats. Trump is president because of a regional revolt.

Many important questions emerge from this. How do voters get from Obama to Trump? What role did racism and misogyny play in flipping people from the Democratic to Republican columns? These are important. But the character of the communities that flipped must be grappled with. These are communities that have been suffering from neglect and decline for decades. Families have gotten poorer and there are few opportunities for people who stay. The people who voted for Trump are very willing to overlook Trump's abuse of women, Muslims, and people of color, and that is to be condemned. Some percentage of these voters are ideological and practical racists and misogynists. But explaining the electoral shift from someone who stood for the opposite of those things to Trump is impossible without considering the communities where these voters reside and what the candidates offered them. White people generally didn't deliver the White House to Trump, however much they enabled him; the Rust Belt did. And unless we are attentive to the economic factors involved, as well as the social and attitudinal ones, we leave open the path for future demagogues to exploit the same set of circumstances in the name of securing political power.

Featured [image credit](#): [stu_spivack](#) (Flickr, [CC-BY-SA-2.0](#))

[Please read our comments policy before commenting.](#)

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of USAPP – American Politics and Policy, nor the

London School of Economics.

Shortened URL for this post: <http://bit.ly/2fqELEB>

About the authors

Michael McQuarrie – *LSE Sociology*

Michael McQuarrie is an Associate Professor in Sociology at the LSE. He is primarily interested in urban politics and culture, nonprofit organizations, and social movements. He has recently been awarded a Hellman Fellowship at the University of California and a Poiesis Fellowship at the Institute for Public Knowledge at New York University.



- CC BY-NC 3.0 2015 LSE USAPP