

To the Bottom of the Trump Vote in the Rural Midwest: Battleground Angst and How to Address It

Charles Bruner, July, 2017

As part of their efforts to regain seats in the 2018 election and to gear up for 2020, Democratic strategists certainly are focusing attention on better understanding the psyche of the white, working-class, rural, midwestern voters whose shift from Obama to Trump between 2012 and 2016 affected the outcome in the key electoral states of Ohio, Wisconsin, Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Iowa.

Where was the shift in voting between 2012 and 2016 the greatest?

Working America's *Bridging the Divide*, an analysis of the vote in five battleground states (North Carolina was included instead of Iowa) found the biggest shift between 2012 and 2016 in Presidential voting was among rural counties and their largely white and working-class voters. In most states, the changes were not due to a surge of new voters, but to changes in which party's candidate voters chose to support.

An analysis of Ohio's vote in terms of Presidential voting patterns between 2012 and 2016 by county population size shows that total voting remained remarkably steady across all counties, but the more rural counties became, the greater the shift in voting from Democrat to Republican candidate for President.

CHART ONE: OHIO VOTE FOR PRESIDENT IN 2012 AND 2016 BY COUNTY POPULATION

County Pop.	2012 Election			2016 Election			12-16
	% Romney	% Obama	Total Vote	% Trump	% Clinton	Total Vote	R Shift
750,000 +	36.4%	61.5%	1,674,768	34.2%	59.3%	1,628,241	0.1%
300-550,000	44.2%	52.8%	1,249,728	47.7%	45.8%	1,224,682	10.7%
160-230,000	52.9%	44.8%	986,866	56.4%	36.9%	1,000,050	11.4%
Under 150,000	56.6%	40.7%	1,749,608	64.7%	28.5%	1,754,218	20.4%
State Total	47.2%	50.2%	5,633,246	50.7%	42.7%	5,607,641	10.9%
Note: Vote turnout changes for the groups were -1.1% for 750K+, -2.0% for 300-55K, +1.4 for 160-230K, and +0.3 for Under 150K, for a total -0.5 statewide. There were more third party candidate votes in 2016 than 2012, and, except for the 750K counties, Trump's vote went up less than Clinton's vote went down as a result of the increased third party voting.							
Source: Ohio Secretary of State office. Author's further breakdown by county population.							

In the three largest counties (which include Cleveland, Cincinnati, and Columbus), there was virtually no shift in the margin of victory for the Democratic candidate for President (0.1 percent); but in the most rural counties, there was a shift of 20.4 percent, one in five voters. These rural communities did not have sudden influxes of different voters between 2012 and 2016; most of this shift was the result of people changing their choice for President from D to R.

A further look at states where the shift in voting was the greatest similarly shows mostly midwestern and rural states toward the top.

CHART TWO: STATE VOTE CHANGES IN R-D MARGINS IN THE PRESIDENTIAL RACE FROM 2012 TO 2016			
Top Twelve States in Size of Shift from Democrat to Republican			
North Dakota	16.1%	Ohio	10.9%
Iowa	15.2%	Hawaii	10.5%
West Virginia	14.9%	Michigan	9.8%
Maine	12.6%	Missouri	9.7%
Rhode Island	12.3%	Vermont	9.2%
South Dakota	11.8%	Indiana	8.8%
United States as a whole		2.8%	
Source: Election returns, analysis by author.			

Seven of the twelve clearly are midwestern states, and Main, Vermont, and West Virginia also are rural and small town states. Wisconsin (7.8 percent) and Pennsylvania (6.5 percent), while not among the top dozen states, had shifts more than twice the rate of shifting vote as for the country as a whole (2.8 percent).

What drove this voting shift among white, rural, working-class midwestern voters?

Clearly, the mood of these voters included dissatisfaction with government and a Washington perceived both to be in gridlock and out-of-touch with and insensitive to the needs of working, rural America. Several polls which have been conducted around these issues have provided further detail about the reasons behind the shifts, both the shift among white working-class voters and the shift among rural voters.

GBA Strategies and Center for American Progress Poll. A GBA Strategies and Center for American Progress post-election poll found that Trump voters, compared with Clinton voters, were much less likely to attribute their vote specifically to a policy agenda for the candidate and the candidate’s party. Although the way the question was framed does not provide for exact comparisons between voting reasons for Trump voters as compared with Clinton voters, , it shows, for Trump voters, that the desire to change the status quo rather than support for the policy agenda was cited as a primary reason for the vote.

CHART THREE: GBA STRATEGIES AND CENTER FOR AMERICAN PROGRESS POST-ELECTION POLL RESULTS	
Among these three reasons, which best expresses the reason you wanted to vote for Donald Trump?	
50%	I wanted to vote for Donald Trump and the chance to shake up the political establishment.
29%	I wanted to vote for the policy agenda of Donald Trump and the Republicans.
21%	I wanted to vote against Hillary Clinton and everything she stands for.
Among these three reasons, which best expresses the reason you wanted to vote for Hillary Clinton?	
44%	I wanted to vote for the policy agenda of Hillary Clinton and the Democrats.
35%	I wanted to vote against Donald Trump and everything he stands for.
20%	I wanted to vote for Hillary Clinton and the chance to support the first woman president.
Source: Gerstein Bocian Agne Strategies and Center for American Progress online survey of 2000 registered voters who indicated they voted in 2016, conducted November 9-16, 2016.	

Two additional questions showed Trump voters more likely than Clinton voters to have what the poll write-up characterized as “anti-establishment and anti-elite sentiments.” 50 percent of Trump voters, compared with 29 percent of Clinton voters, strongly agreed with the statement, “Ordinary people’s opinions are more honest and correct than those of experts in the politics and the media.” 57 percent of Clinton voters, compared 27 percent of Trump voters, strongly agreed with the statement, “ I am comfortable living in a more diverse America and being around people who come from different racial, ethnic, or religious backgrounds than me.”

This poll drew from a national sample and did not focus upon rural or working-class voters, but two other polls did focus on this demographic and included other questions that offered additional insights into the mood of this electorate and what might account for greater shifts in voting among them.

PRRI and The Atlantic poll. Based on a poll conducted just before and after the election, with a focus upon comparing white working-class voters with white college-educated and black and Hispanic Americans, PRRI and The Atlantic found that “fears about cultural displacement” and “economic fatalism” were reasons, in addition to “identification with the Republican party” and “support for deporting immigrants illegally in the country” for white working-class voters selecting Trump – while gender, age, religious affiliation, and degree of civic engagement were not (and economic hardship predicted a greater likelihood of white working class voters selecting Clinton). Moreover, while Trump scored slightly better than Clinton, the majority of white working-class voters did not believe either candidate “understands the problems facing your community.” For Trump, the responses of very well (16 percent) and somewhat well (26 percent) were well below one-half of white, working-class voters, although higher than for Clinton at very well (10 percent) and somewhat well (22 percent). The poll went further, however, in comparing working-class with college-educated voters on a number of questions more generally about society and social status. Some of these are shown in Chart Four.

CHART FOUR: PRRI-ATLANTIC SURVEY VIEWS ABOUT SOCIETY OF WHITE WORKING-CLASS VOTERS AND COLLEGE-EDUCATED VOTERS		
	White Working-Class	College-Educated
Do you believe America's best days are ahead of us and in the future or behind us and in the past?		
Ahead of us	37%	57%
Behind us	61%	43%
Do you think the American Dream – that if you work hard you'll get ahead – still holds true, never held true, or once held true but does not anymore?		
Still holds true	46%	62%
Never held true	48%	33%
Once held true, but not anymore	6%	5%
Today, would you say that a college education is a smart investment in the future or is it more of a gamble that may not pay off in the end?		
Smart investment	44%	63%
Gamble	54%	36%
Please tell me if you agree or disagree with the following: Things have changed so much that I often feel like a stranger in my own country.		
Agree	48%	26%
Disagree	51%	73%
Please tell me if you agree or disagree with the following: The American way of life needs to be protected from foreign influence.		
Agree	68%	44%
Disagree	29%	55%
Today, America is in danger of losing its culture and identity.		
Agree	68%	41%
Disagree	30%	57%
Source: PRRI-The Atlantic September 22-October 9, 2016 Survey of 3,043 likely voters, as reported in "Beyond Economics: Fears of Cultural Displacement Pushed the White Working Class to Trump" (Daniel Cox, Rachel Lienesch, Robert Jones, May 9, 2017).		

Clearly, compared with the college-educated voter, the white working-class voter is much less likely to feel optimistic about the country's future and feel greater anxiety about their own status and inclusion.

At least a share voted for Obama in 2008 and 2012 because of a belief that their vote represented one for change and hope while they voted for Trump in 2016 because of a belief in the need for someone or something that would disrupt and change the country's current direction. In fact, one of the strongest distinctions between white working-class and college-educated voters was on the question, "Have things gone so far off track that we need a strong leader who is willing to break the rules if that is what it takes to set things right?" – with 60 percent of white working-class voters but only 32 percent of college-educated voters agreeing.

Washington Post-Kaiser Permanente Survey. Another poll taken in April, 2017 by the Washington Post and Kaiser Permanente Fund focused specifically on comparing the perspectives of rural and small town voters (in counties with populations of 250,000 or less), suburban voters (250,000 to 1,000,000 counties), and urban voters (1,000,000+ counties) toward politics and society. While noting the large difference in voting for President between rural and small town voters and urban ones, the major emphasis on the poll was on how rural and small town voters perceived society and its response to their way of life:

Alongside a strong rural social identity, the survey shows that disagreements between rural and urban America ultimately center on fairness: Who wins and loses in the new American economy, who deserves the most help in society and whether the federal government shows preferential treatment to certain types of people.

While only 18 percent of urban voters felt that the values of people from rural and small town America were very different from theirs, 41 percent of rural voters felt that the values of people from cities were very different from theirs. Compared with urban voters, rural voters were much less likely to see their communities as having excellent or good job opportunities (30 percent compared to 50 percent), but more likely to score as excellent or good on safety, cost of living, quality of public schools, and a place to raise children. By a margin of 72 percent to 56 percent over urban voters, rural voters characterized their communities as good or excellent as "a place where people look out for each other."

Rural voters also were much more likely than urban voters to feel that "Christian values are under attack today" (59 percent compared to 44 percent) and that immigrants "are a burden on the country because they take our jobs, housing and health care" (42 percent to 16 percent), but a plurality still responded that "immigrants strengthen our country because of their hard work and talents" (48 percent for rural voters, 71 percent for urban ones).

Rural voters also were much more likely to say they would "encourage young people in your community to leave for more opportunity elsewhere rather than stay" (59 percent for rural voters compared with 41 percent for urban voters). On the question of who the federal government does more to help (people in rural and small towns, people in and around large cities, or both about equally), only four percent of either rural or urban voters indicated more help going to rural areas and small towns, but rural voters were more likely than urban voters to believe that more help went to people in and around cities (56 percent to 40 percent).

In short, the poll indicates that, while rural and small town voters are satisfied with many aspects of their lives (and, in fact, are more likely to consider themselves very happy or happy), they do not feel their way of life is recognized or valued by larger society and that changes to society are threatening it and making it less of an option in the future.

What messages and dialogue might reverse this voter shift?

Clearly, the status anxiety of the white working-class and the rural voter, as evidenced in these polls, can be exploited by calls for a certain type of nativism to protect (Christian) faith against attack and to look on those who are different as the other. Both the PRRI-Atlantic and Washington Post-Kaiser Permanente polls showed particular difference on the policy issues and debate around immigration – and immigration certainly became a significant “hot button” issue in the 2016 election. At the same time, however, when the WaPO-Kaiser poll asked rural and small town voters to identify “the biggest problem facing your local community,” only two percent volunteered “immigration,” with “jobs/unemployment” (21 percent), “drug abuse” (14 percent), the economy (eight percent), and a variety of other issues (“education/schools,” “poverty/hunger,” “cost of living,” and “state/local services/infrastructure,” all at four percent) were much more likely to be posed.

Selzer & Associates and Child and Family Policy Center Poll. This also conforms with a poll conducted by Selzer & Associates and the Child and Family Policy Center in the summer of 2015 in Iowa, in the midst of the Presidential primary season and Iowa’s role as the “First in the Nation” caucus. In terms of the designation of rural and small town voters by county population size, nearly all of Iowa (98 of the 99 counties and 86 percent of the population) fall into the category of being rural or small town, so the results do reflect what most people would characterize as the rural, midwestern (and white) voter. As there are very different subgroups within urban communities (from highly segregated and very poor inner-city neighborhoods to affluent and highly-educated and often gentrified and gated neighborhoods), this upper Midwest rural voter also is different from the Appalachian or Mississippi Delta or San Juaquin Valley or frontier Montana voter. It is generally older, whiter, educated at a satisfactory level for the 20th (but not 21st) century economy, and relatively economically secure (more in terms of assets than income). Since 1984, Iowa also has been one of the most evenly divided of all states when it comes to Presidential elections.

The Selzer-CFPC poll showed similar overall voter concerns about the future of society, including voter views on the challenges in raising the next generation. The first set of questions, however, simply asked voters to rank what they saw as the most important issues facing the country, first asking for the level of priority (high, medium, low, not sure) of eleven issues and then asking for selection of the top one or two from that list.

While “creating jobs and improving the economy” was at the top of the list in terms of being a high priority (81 percent of all voters), “improving the health, education, and well-being of children” was close behind (77 percent of all voters). It actually topped the list when voters identified their top priority (29 percent selected children, compared with 23 percent jobs and the economy). These results are shown in Chart Five.

CHART FIVE: IOWA VOTER ISSUE CONCERNS: 2015 SELZER & ASSOCIATES AND CHILD AND FAMILY POLICY CENTER POLL				
How important is it for the next President to address the following issues (rotated)? Which one or two are the most important?				
	High	Med.	Low	Highest
A. Creating jobs and improving the economy	81%	16%	2%	23%

B. Ensuring economic security for senior citizens	66%	29%	4%	13%
C. Improving the health, education, and wellbeing of children	77%	19%	4%	29%
D. Protecting the environment	56%	34%	11%	9%
E. Pursuing terrorists in the U.S. and abroad	71%	22%	7%	20%
F. Improving America’s standing in the world economy	55%	40%	3%	3%
G. Promoting moral values in our country	55%	24%	20%	10%
H. Reducing income inequality	42%	33%	19%	7%
I. Reducing the size and scope of the federal government	40%	36%	22%	9%
J. Balancing the federal budget and reducing the federal deficit	73%	23%	4%	20%
K. Reducing poverty	65%	27%	8%	9%
Source: Selzer& Associates and Child and Family Policy Center Poll of 501 Iowa likely voters, July 1-7, 2015.				

The poll then went onto probe more deeply into voters’ views on children and child policy, finding deep-seated concern over the future children face. On the question, “When thinking about the future, how confident are you that life for our children’s generation will be better than it has been for us?”, only seven percent were very confident and 28 percent were mostly confident, while 35 percent were mostly skeptical and 30 percent were very skeptical. When asked about specific threats to children’s security and opportunity for success, “lack of parental engagement” topped the list as a “major threat” (71 percent), followed by “the cost of higher education” (66 percent), “lack of proper role models” (65 percent), poverty (64 percent), and “moral decay in society” (62 percent). Below those were “inadequate K-12 education” (48 percent), “income inequality (48 percent), “racial discrimination (41 percent), and “lack of access to quality child care and preschool programs” (34 percent). Clearly, the concerns about child well-being include socio-economic concerns, but also relate to concerns about the fabric of society and community life.

Additional analysis suggests that children’s issues and concerns could be a place where Democrats could pick up support, particularly among Independents. First, both Democrats and Independents were much more likely to select children’s issues as one of their top two policy priorities and concerns (35 percent for Democrats, 33 percent for Independents, and 16 percent for Republicans). Moreover, when asked which party would do a better job in addressing child policy concerns, Independents gave the distinct nod to Democrats (51 percent indicating Democrats, 17 percent indicating Republicans, 19 percent equally or neither, and 14 percent not stated).

How much did children’s issues enter into the 2016 Presidential campaign?

The opportunity for issues to inform and influence elections remains just that – an opportunity. Candidates and the press, as well as advocates for different issues and the public at large, have an impact on what issues do become publicly salient.

Child and Family Policy Center Analysis of Presidential Debates. In addition to conducting the voter survey, the Child and Policy Center also did a content analysis of the 501 questions that panelists raised

in the first ten Presidential debates (six Republican and four Democratic), recognizing that this provided a good representation of the issues most publicly addressed during the campaign. Included among these were issues not related to policy but to the candidate’s own qualifications for office.

CHART SIX: PANELIST QUESTION TOPICS DURING FIRST TEND PRESIDENTIAL DEBATES (AUGUST, 2015 THROUGH JANUARY, 2016)		
Topic Area	No. of Questions	Percent
Foreign Policy, Terrorism, National Security	183	36 %
Candidate Qualifications, Character and Integrity, Electability, Faith	92	18 %
Budget, Debt, Entitlements, Economy, Business Regulation, Jobs	84	17 %
High Visibility Social Issues (guns, marijuana, LBGT, vaccines, PP, common core, etc.)	55	11 %
Immigration	29	6 %
Poverty, Inequality, and Discrimination	23	5 %
Environment and Global Warming	11	2 %
Health Care	10	2 %
Higher Education Affordability	8	2 %
General (three priorities, topics not discussed)	6	1 %
Child Health, Safety, School Readiness, and Educational Success	0	0 %
Total	501	100 %

Source: Child and Family Policy Center report. *The Presidential Election and America’s Future*. (2016).

Candidates sometimes raised children’s concerns in their opening remarks (particularly related to their own family and role as parents and/or grandparents) or offered comments related to children in questions to them on other topics, they were not asked by panelists to address any issues related to specifically to children.

As the field narrowed, while both Presidential candidates made mention of child policy issues in their acceptance speeches at their party’s conventions, the three general election Presidential debates similarly did not delve into children’s issues nor was there any indication that children’s issues entered into voters’ thinking as they made their votes.

While Hillary Clinton aired several ads on her record of involvement on children’s issues, Donald Trump proposed both family leave and child care improvements, and both expressed their concerns about ensuring children’s future in their acceptance speeches at their party’s conventions (see insert) – children’s issues and their health, education, and well-being did not really get on the electoral radar screen in 2016.



Presidential Candidates Agree



America needs every one of us to lend our energy, our talents, our ambition to making our nation better and stronger -- where you can get a good job and send your kids to a good school, no matter what zip code you live in, where all our children can dream, and those dreams are within reach.

When I am President, I will work to ensure that all of our kids are treated equally and protected equally. Every action I take, I will ask myself: Does this make life better for young Americans in Baltimore, in Chicago, in Detroit, in Ferguson who have in every way the same right to live out their dreams as any other child in America?



Text from Acceptance Speeches at National Party Conventions

What holds for the future and the white, rural, midwestern vote?

Over the last forty years, there have been shifts in partisan voting across the country, at the Presidential level with different states coming into play. The Republicans now have established a stronghold on most southern states, at the same time the Democrats have retained a stronghold on the industrial Northeast. Because of changing demographics, however, Florida and, recently, North Carolina and Virginia, have come into play. Similarly, New Mexico and Nevada and even Arizona have become within greater Democratic reach, with California now a strongly Democratic state. Ohio and Pennsylvania (and sometimes Iowa and New Hampshire) have been considered swing states over the last eight elections, but the 2016 election also brought Michigan and Wisconsin and even Minnesota into play for the Republicans.

For one looking to 2020 and where the battleground states are likely to be for Democrats to hold or regain electoral votes, Michigan and Wisconsin are likely to join Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Iowa (and/or Minnesota, depending on how far each has been perceived to have moved) as battleground states, along with North Carolina, Virginia, Florida, New Mexico, and Nevada.

It is here where there may be an intersect between good (from a progressive Democratic) policy and good (from a Democrat electoral advance) politics.

As stated earlier, for the first time in America's history, children face the likelihood, without corrective action, of growing up less healthy, living less long lives, and being less equipped to compete and lead in a world economy. On many health, education, and safety statistics, children and youth in America now lag and not lead in comparison with other advanced industrialized economies. Children are both the most diverse age group in society and the age group most likely to live in poverty. Race, place, and poverty often intersect to establish major barriers to success. Further, if children of color do not have the opportunity to become middle-class, there may not be much of one.

The conversations over coffee in small town cafes, at church meetings, or in line at the grain elevators in the Midwest certainly must have been very different in 2016 than they were in 2012 – but in neither instance was it likely that conversations of politics also were conversations of child policy. Certainly, if the major electoral emphasis in 2018 and 2020 is through hundreds of millions, if not billions, of campaign spending primarily directed to influencing the most disinterested voter through 30-second media buys, those policy issues are unlikely to be elevated.

If even a tiny share of that funding, however, were directed to raising child policy issues as a subject worthy of those conversations over coffee, not only might these affect electoral outcomes in terms of individual candidates, they might also better elevate those issues to the attention they need to be acted upon.

NOTE: More polling and focus groups certainly could be done to further explore the rural midwestern voter psyche and the potential use of children's issues as wedge issues. The latter has been the topic of select work in the past by First Focus, the Partnership for America's Children, Every Child Matters, the Children's Leadership Council, the Children's Defense Fund and other child policy organizations (including the Council for a Strong America, which has particular outreach to law enforcement, business, military, and even evangelical groups). A summary of such child policy issues and their relevance to federal policy is found in *Securing America's Future: Six Questions All Presidential Candidates Need to Address*, prepared for the 2016 election.