Why did some working class regions vote for Trump?

Eric London
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In the aftermath of Joe Biden's victory, the Democratic Party and the corporate media are attempting to portray the 71 million people who voted for Donald Trump as fascists and racists.

The media coverage is much the same as it was when Trump won election in 2016, even though this time Trump was defeated by an even larger majority of the popular vote.

Characteristic was an article by *Time* magazine that appeared the day after the election: "If Donald Trump wins a second term, blame white people." The author, feminist professor Brittney Cooper, declared that "his [Trump's] rise is a direct result of white people's collective rejection of the progress the Obama era signaled. And it is time to point fingers."

Such comments are a dime a dozen. The authors always neglect to mention that it was increased anti-Trump turnout among "white men," "white people" and "white people without college degrees" that flipped industrial battleground states such as Wisconsin, Michigan and Pennsylvania to Biden.

But beyond these factual inconveniences lies a more sinister attempt to blame many downtrodden and highly confused people for expressing their anger and opposition to the political establishment they hate by casting their vote for Trump.

Undoubtedly Trump has appealed to and won support from outright fascists like the Proud Boys and the 14 militia men arrested in early October for plotting to kill sitting governors. Although these fascists are not an insubstantial force, they make up a minority of Trump voters. There are not 71 million fascists in the United States.

The *World Socialist Web Site* has analyzed the 2020 election outcome, focusing primarily on the significance of the increase in turnout against Trump. But in some areas, Trump's support *increased* from 2016 to 2020. Explaining this with broad accusations of "racism" explains almost nothing. Fighting Trump requires understanding the social processes that led so many tens of millions of people to vote for him. This study reviews four areas in particular:

Deindustrialized Ohio steel towns: Mahoning and Jefferson counties

Donald Trump's victory in Ohio was due in part to increased support in the eastern area of the state that was once a center of steel production. In Mahoning County, home to Youngstown, Trump won 58,601 votes, up by more than 600 from his 2016 total. In nearby Jefferson County, where Steubenville is the county seat, Trump increased his vote total by over 1,000, from 21,117 in 2016 to 22,309 in 2020.

The Rio Grande Valley, Texas: Cameron, Hidalgo, Zapata and Starr counties

The impoverished Rio Grande Valley lies at the southern tip of Texas, across the US-Mexico border from the Mexican city of Matamoros, a center of sweatshop maquiladora production and the center of a massive wildcat strike wave in early 2019. In 2020, Trump saw a staggering increase in his vote total, at least doubling his 2016 result.

In Cameron County, home to Brownsville, Trump won 48,834 votes in 2020, up from 29,472 in 2016. In Hidalgo County, home to McAllen, Trump won 89,991 votes, nearly double his 2016 total of 48,642. In the more rural Zapata County, Trump won 2,032 votes and carried the county, doubling his vote from 1,029 in 2016. Trump almost quadrupled his vote in Starr County, winning 8,224 votes versus 2,224 in 2016.

Former coal country, West Virginia: Wyoming, McDowell and Mingo counties

Support for Trump in West Virginia is no secret, but it is notable that in the southern portion of this low turnout state, increased numbers of voters supported Trump in 2020. In Wyoming County, Trump increased his vote from 6,547 to 7,254, in McDowell from 4,629 to 5,125, and in Mingo from 7,911 to 8,521. The Democratic vote remained the same in these counties.

Rural auto production: Howard County, Indiana

Howard's county seat is Kokomo, home to several auto plants, including the massive Kokomo Transmission Plant operated by Fiat-Chrysler. Kokomo is a mid-sized industrial town dominated by deep poverty and extreme exploitation, and it traditionally supports Republican candidates for national office. In 2020, 26,400 Howard County residents voted for Trump—in a record turnout in the county—compared to 13,270 for Biden.

These regions are demographically different, and therefore neither race nor the urban/rural divide can explain the shift toward Trump.

The counties in West Virginia as well as Jefferson County, Ohio and Howard County, Ohio are predominantly white, while the Rio Grande Valley counties are majority Hispanic. Youngstown, Ohio, in Mahoning County, is roughly half white and half black, though the county as a whole is majority white.

The West Virginia counties are predominantly rural, while Mahoning,

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Jefferson and two of the Texas counties (Cameron and Hidalgo) are home to medium-sized cities.

Collapse of Democratic Party strongholds

All of these regions, with the exception of Howard County, Indiana, are former Democratic Party strongholds. In Mahoning County, Ohio, a majority of voters supported the Republican candidate in 2020 for the first time since 1956, when Dwight Eisenhower led the ticket. The West Virginia counties regularly voted over 65 percent for the Democratic Party until the mid-2000s. The Rio Grande Valley has been considered a dependable Democratic region in an otherwise Republican state for several decades.

These regions share other commonalities. They are deeply impoverished and ravaged by the social crisis. Nearly 55 percent of the population of the Rio Grande Valley is below the federal poverty line. McAllen and Brownsville, in Hidalgo and Cameron counties, were the first and second poorest cities in the United States, according to 2010 census data.

One local nonprofit describes conditions in Southern West Virginia as follows: "Mingo County has the dubious distinction of ranking last of 55 West Virginia counties for adverse health behaviors, including smoking, obesity, binge drinking, teenage births and motor vehicle crash deaths." The child poverty rate increased 20 percent from 2010 to 2017. Similar conditions prevail in Wyoming and McDowell counties.

Howard County, Indiana just suffered its highest drug overdose period in the first quarter of 2020. In July, the county ran out of money to perform autopsies on the dead. In 2015, the *World Socialist Web Site* encountered homeless autoworkers living near Kokomo's auto plants.

In 2019, Youngstown, Ohio had the second-highest poverty rate in the country, at 37.9 percent. This was a seven percent rise from 2018—just one year. Fifty-seven percent of children live in poverty, and the county has a vacant housing rate that is 20 times the national average. In Jefferson County, Ohio, per capita income is only $16,476. Ohio has the second highest drug overdose rate in the country—behind only West Virginia—double the national average.

Trade unions oversee massive job cuts and decades of concessions

Eastern Ohio and Southern West Virginia are particular victims of mass job loss, with tens of thousands of coal jobs eliminated in recent decades. Youngstown's population fell by 60 percent from 1960 to 2010, while Steubenville's was cut in half over the same period, due to the shutdown of the region's steel mills. In 1977, Youngstown Sheet & Tube cut 40,000 jobs in a single day, known as "Black Monday."

Is it any wonder that these regions, led for decades by the Democratic Party and then forgotten as conditions worsened, are voting for a candidate who claims to be opposed to the political establishment? In the absence of any political representation for many decades and under conditions of constant media lies and attacks on public education, it should come as no surprise that many workers are confused and express their anger by voting for the billionaire Trump.

These devastated regions were once the center of historic episodes in the class struggle. Massive steel strikes shook eastern Ohio, giving steelworkers one of the highest standards of living of any section of the working class.

The mining counties of West Virginia were the center of labor wars, giving counties like Mingo the moniker "Bloody Mingo." Wildcat sitdown strikes swept across Central Indiana in 1936-37. In many cases, those voting for Trump are the children or grandchildren of those who fought in these mass social struggles, but who have witnessed a catastrophic assault on their living conditions.

The trade unions, once powerful institutions in these regions, oversaw massive job cuts and decade after decade of concessions justified as necessary to "save" whatever jobs remained until they too were slashed. The fact that many workers are so politically disoriented that they cast ballots for the con man Trump is primarily a testament to their miseducation by the unions, which have spewed nationalism and anti-immigrant chauvinism for 40 years. To the extent that Trump's xenophobia and jingoism have found fertile soil, it is above all the fault of the trade unions.

Workers give Barack Obama a chance in 2008

The corporate media chastises workers in these regions for insufficient appreciation of Barack Obama. They portray hostility to the former president as a sign of racism and political reaction.

In fact, Jefferson County and Mahoning County in Ohio both voted for Obama, and two-to-three times more people in Southern West Virginia voted for Obama in 2008 than for Biden in 2020. Roughly 50 percent more Howard County, Indiana residents voted for Obama in 2008, when he carried the state, than they did for Biden in 2020, when Trump won the state by a blowout 57-41 margin.

The fact that Trump was able to capitalize on hostility to Obama is the direct result of the ferociously anti-working class character of that administration. In the lives of workers in these counties, the years 2009-2017 meant significant increases in poverty, foreclosures and drug overdoses, and declining life expectancy. Sons and daughters returned from the Obama-Bush wars, devastated by PTSD, with increased numbers taking their own lives or turning to drugs and alcohol.

Support for Bernie Sanders in 2016 collapses in 2020

And at the end of Obama's two terms, many workers in these counties voted for Bernie Sanders, exposing the claim that these regions are hopelessly reactionary and hostile to socialism. But high support for Sanders in 2016 collapsed in 2020.

In Ohio, for example, Sanders won 513,549 votes in the 2016 Democratic primary, but only 142,544 in the 2020 primary. Sanders' support in Mahoning County dropped from 14,066 in 2016 to 2,956 in 2020. In Jefferson County, Sanders won 3,353 votes in 2016 but only 693 in 2020.

Sanders defeated Hillary Clinton in West Virginia in 2016 by a margin of 123,860 to 86,354, but lost to Joe Biden in 2020 by a margin of 122,468 to 22,778. Sanders had dropped out of the 2020 race before the West Virginia primary.

While it is certainly not the case that all Trump voters supported his candidacy after voting for Sanders in 2016, these figures do show there is a substantial mood for a *fighting* left-wing perspective against inequality and, as Sanders said at the time, against the Democratic Party "establishment." Most Sanders supporters in these regions, however, were justly disgusted by his effort to save the hated Democratic Party and elect Clinton, and decided not to support him again in 2020.

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The fight for a revolutionary socialist party

These shifts make clear that workers who supported Trump cannot be dismissed as nothing but a mass constituency for fascism, or, as Hillary Clinton put it, a "basket of deplorables."

What is required is to win these workers on the basis of a real program to confiscate the wealth of the financial aristocracy and distribute it to meet the needs of broad sections of the working class who have been subject to decades of attacks on social conditions by both Democrats and Republicans. As Leon Trotsky constantly stressed in his writings on Spain, France and Germany, only a resolute and revolutionary program of action—not DSA-style appeals to Democratic Party self-reform—is capable of winning those who wrongly view Trump as an opponent of the political status quo.

The Socialist Equality Party opposes the racialists and proponents of identity politics who blame "white people" for Trump's vote. This is guaranteed to spread racial animosity. The development of a socialist movement independent of both parties is required to raise the cultural level of all sections of the working class, train them in the history of the class struggle, and convince them of the need for the racial and international unity of the working class against the capitalist system.

The World Socialist Web Site *has extensively documented the social crisis in these regions, including in the following important articles and series:*

Howard County, Indiana:

A portrait of life in America's Rust Belt

Eighty years after founding of UAW, homeless autoworker speaks out

West Virginia:

Economic transformation of Welch, West Virginia: from mines to prisons

The social crisis in Appalachia

Rio Grand Valley/US-Mexico border:

Immigration under capitalism: Life and death along the US-Mexico border

The view from inside America's child immigrant detention shelters

Eastern Ohio:

Steubenville, Ohio: Portrait of a rust belt city

The shutdown of GM's Lordstown plant

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