

# Vote breakdown shows class interests, not race, drove Trump's defeat in Midwest "battleground" states

Barry Grey  
10 January 2021

The defeat of Donald Trump in an election that produced the biggest turnout since 1900 was an expression of broad popular opposition to the fascistic politics of his administration. That it was far more an anti-Trump than a pro-Joe Biden vote was demonstrated by the poor showing of the Democratic Party in down-ballot contests (Congress, state legislatures and governors).

The election results overall were a clear refutation of the efforts of the Democratic Party and allied media outlets (e.g., *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, NBC, CNN) to promote a racist narrative, which interprets virtually every aspect of American society as an expression of "white supremacy" and the supposed innate racism of white people, especially white workers.

The ideological and political function of this right-wing brand of politics is to obscure the central division in capitalist society, socioeconomic class, and sow divisions within the working class.

But as the *World Socialist Web Site* explained on November 6:

A comparison of the results of the 2016 and 2020 elections shows that the major factor that turned the election was the impact of the pandemic and the economic crisis on a substantial section of working class whites who cast their vote for Biden.

The Brookings Institution noted the shift in voting patterns nationally that cut against the racist narrative. It reported:

While whites continued to favor the Republican candidate in 2020—as they have in every presidential election since 1968—it is notable that this margin was reduced from 20 percent to 17 percent nationally. At the same time, the Democratic margins for each of the major nonwhite groups was somewhat reduced. The Black Democratic margin—while still high, at 75 percent—was the lowest in a presidential election since 2004. The Latino or Hispanic and Asian American Democratic margins of 33 percent and 27 percent were the lowest since the 2004 and 2008 elections, respectively.

An analysis of the vote results in the three Midwestern "battleground" states that were key to Biden's victory—Michigan, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin—confirms that the critical factor was a turn by substantial sections of white workers to oppose Trump.

In 2016, the shift of the so-called "blue wall" of industrial states in the Midwest gave the election to Trump. The Democratic Party and its pseudo-

left satellite organizations attributed the stunning loss of these states to white working-class racism, ignoring the fact that all three states had voted for Barack Obama in both 2008 and 2012, and by substantial margins.

In this election, both candidates increased their votes in the three states, but the increase in votes for Biden exceeded that for Trump. The general pattern was a substantial increase in votes for the Democratic candidate in urban areas, particularly in the suburbs of major cities, and reduced margins of victory for Trump in more rural areas that he won four years ago.

## Michigan

In 2016, Trump defeated Hillary Clinton in Michigan by a slim margin of 10,704 votes, or 0.3 percent. In this election, Biden outpolled Trump by 148,000 votes, a margin of 2.64 percent. Turnout in the state was a record 5.5 million, higher than in 2008.

Trump added 365,000 votes to his 2016 total, but Biden added 522,000 votes to those received by Clinton. The big difference was the increased vote for Biden over Clinton in the mostly white suburbs of Detroit, combined with significantly smaller margins for Trump in more rural counties.

In the largely white working-class Detroit suburb of Macomb County (which had voted for Obama twice) Trump once again won the vote, but with a significantly smaller margin than four years ago. In 2016, Trump won 54 percent of the vote to Clinton's 42 percent. This time he polled 53 percent as compared to 45 percent for Biden.

The Democratic candidate made up even more ground in the Republican stronghold of Livingston County, an exurb of Detroit, and in Ottawa County, just outside Grand Rapids. Trump won all but 11 of the state's 83 counties, but his margin of victory in many of the counties he took fell substantially.

It dropped 8 percent in Emmet County, 9 percent in Ottawa County, and nearly 10 percent in Grand Traverse. In Antrim County, Trump's margin fell by 15 percent.

On the other hand, Biden received 1,000 fewer votes in the city of Detroit than Clinton received in 2016, while Trump's vote in the city rose by 5,000 votes. This was in line with the national pattern, in which large counties with non-whites in the majority saw a 20 percent increase in votes for Biden, but a higher, 29 percent increase, for Trump. This reflected an increase in socioeconomic polarization among blacks, Latinos and Asian Americans.

Data from exit polls show even more clearly the dominant role of social-economic class in the flipping of Michigan back to the Democratic column in the presidential vote.

Trump's margin among white voters in the state shrank from 21 percentage points in 2016 to 12 points this year. In contrast, Trump's deficit among black voters narrowed from 86 percentage points to 80 points.

Trump's lead among white men shrank from 35 percentage points in 2016 to 22 points. Among white women, his margin declined from 8 percentage points to 2 points.

Among black men, Trump's deficit declined from 79 percent to 72 percent. Among black women, the margin of defeat narrowed from 93 percent to 86 percent.

Whites with no college degree gave Trump a lead of 31 points over Clinton, but only 20 points over Biden. But Trump's deficit among voters of color with no college degree declined from 70 percentage points to 52.

Similarly, Trump narrowed his loss among non-white college graduates from 70 percentage points in 2016 to 52 points this year.

Exit polling that breaks down the vote according to household income underscores the same dynamic. One of the sharpest changes occurred among voters with a family income between \$30,000 and \$50,000. In 2016, Trump won this cohort by 8 percentage points. This time, he lost to Biden by 14 points.

In the \$50,000-\$100,000 range, a largely working-class cohort, Trump went from an 8 percentage point win to a 3 point loss. In the category of under \$100,000, Trump went from a 3 percentage point deficit in 2016 to a 9 point loss this year.

## Pennsylvania

In the biggest turnout since 1960, Biden flipped Pennsylvania, gaining a margin of some 73,000 votes, or 1.1 percent of the ballots cast. Trump had won the state four years earlier by some 44,000 votes, or 0.7 percent.

The pattern was similar to that in Michigan. Biden piled up his margin of victory not in Philadelphia, with its large African American population, but in the largely white suburbs of Philadelphia as well as in the Pittsburgh area, while cutting into Trump's margins in more rural counties.

Turnout in Philadelphia precincts with a predominantly black population was down 6 percent from 2016. Trump's vote in the city as a whole increased by some 20,000 to 18 percent of the votes cast. Biden's vote declined by more than 20,000 from vote Clinton's tally and his percentage fell by 3 percentage points from Clinton's 84 percent.

Biden had gains in the Philadelphia suburbs of Chester, Delaware, Montgomery and Bucks counties, outpolling Clinton's 2016 total by more than 85,000. He won 48,000 more votes in taking Allegheny County, which includes Pittsburgh, than Clinton received in winning the county in 2016.

Biden flipped two counties that had gone for Trump four years ago: Northampton (Easton) and Erie. All the others had the same winning party, but with improved margins for Biden.

Biden bettered Clinton's 2016 winning margin in Lackawanna County, which includes Scranton, beating Trump by 8 percentage points as compared to Clinton's 3.5 points.

Biden, Clinton and Obama all won Dauphin County, home to the state capital, Harrisburg, but Biden's margin was substantially higher: 8.4 points compared to 2.9 and 6, respectively.

Perhaps most significant was Trump's reduced margin of victory in rural and small-town Pennsylvania. Trump's margin, for example, fell by

5 points in Luzerne County (Wilkes-Barre and Bethlehem) and 3 points in Lancaster County.

Exit polling data underlined the shift in the working-class vote, particularly among a section of white workers, which led to Trump's defeat in Pennsylvania.

Trump's leading margin among white men in the state declined from 32 percentage points in 2016 to 25 points in this election. His deficit among voters with a household income under \$50,000 increased from 12 percentage points to 14 points.

In the \$50,000-\$100,000 cohort, Trump's margin of victory declined from 14 percentage points to 4 points.

On the other hand, while Trump's lead among white voters with no college degree held steady at 32 percentage points, among voters of color with no degree, Trump's deficit declined from 76 percentage points to 67 points.

## Wisconsin

Trump defeated Clinton in 2016 in Wisconsin by some 22,700 votes, a percentage margin of 0.7. This year, Biden took the state by about 20,500 votes, duplicating Trump's 2016 margin of 0.7 percent.

Again, the decisive factor was a swing from Trump to Biden by sections of white workers and middle-class people, particularly in the urban centers and suburbs. Biden marginally increased his margin of victory in Milwaukee over Clinton's. A more significant shift came in Milwaukee's three traditionally Republican, predominantly white suburban counties: Waukesha, Ozaukee and Washington. This year they went for Trump, as in 2016, but by substantially narrower margins. In Ozaukee, for example, Trump's advantage dropped by 7 percentage points.

Brown County, home to Green Bay, is a swing county that voted for Obama in 2008, Mitt Romney in 2012 and Trump in 2016. While turnout was up 12 percent this year, Trump's margin of victory declined. Trump won by 10,300 votes. In 2016, he won by 14,000 votes. His margin of victory in the county fell from 10.8 percent to 3 percent.

Trump actually improved his performance in Wisconsin's rural counties, but could not make up for the anti-Trump shift in more urban areas.

One significant Wisconsin cohort that defies the racist narrative is white non-degreeholding men. Trump's advantage in this group fell sharply from 40 percent in 2016 to 27 percent this year. Another is black men, whose vote for Trump increased from 8 percent to 12 percent, while Biden's percentage declined from 90 percent to 87 percent.

Exit polling based on income cohorts provides the starkest data on a working-class shift away from Trump. Trump's deficit among voters with a household income of less than \$30,000 shot up from 9 percentage points in 2016 to 35 points this year.

In the \$30,000-\$50,000 group, Trump went from a tie (at 43 percent) four years ago to a 12 point deficit (43 percent to 55 percent) this year.

In the \$50,000-\$100,000 category, Trump's lead fell by 3 percentage points.

\*\*\*

There is no let-up in the efforts of the Democratic Party and allied media outlets, led by the *New York Times*, to distort the actual voting results and portray Biden's victory as the result of a surge in votes by blacks, which overcame the entrenched racism of whites.

Shortly after Election Day, *New York Times* columnist Charles Blow published a column pointing to Trump's gains among African Americans and concluding absurdly that it was a manifestation of the "power of the white patriarchy."

In a somewhat more nuanced attempt to prop up the racialist template, *Times* columnist Jamelle Boule on November 18 wrote a column that sought to obscure the socioeconomic and class issues underlying the vote results. Boule claimed that Trump improved his performance among minority voters simply because he supported the issuing of \$1,200 stimulus checks and temporary unemployment benefits under the bipartisan CARES Act.

This, of course, ignores the fact that the unemployment supplement expired nearly four months ago and no additional relief has been provided, leaving millions of workers, black and white, on the edge of destitution.

In the face of the pandemic, mass unemployment, Trump's dictatorial conspiracies and the threat of war, it is critical that the working class become conscious of the class divisions that dominate capitalist society and of its own independent interests. That understanding does not develop simply spontaneously. Workers are subjected to immense pressures and a constant stream of propaganda and lies from the corporate media and both big business parties.

Millions of workers who voted for Trump did so not because they support his fascistic politics, but because they are disgusted with the Democratic Party, which is no less an instrument of Wall Street and the military and no less hostile to the working class than Trump. Its right-wing politics of race and identity succeed only in sowing divisions and confusion in the working class. Seeing no progressive alternative, sections of workers are susceptible to Trump's phony posturing as an opponent of the establishment.

However, despite the contradictions and problems, the trajectory within the working class is to the left, and mass struggles are on the agenda. The crucial issue before workers and young people is the building of the Socialist Equality Party as the new political leadership to develop genuine class consciousness based on the common interests of all workers in the struggle against capitalism and for socialism.



To contact the WSWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://wsws.org/contact)**