White, working-class and angry: Ohio's left-behind help Trump to stunning win

Many in traditionally Democratic Youngstown voted for Trump on Tuesday, in a rebuke to an economic system that had left them humiliated and hopeless

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Trump supporters Robin Speece and Nick Stamp at a Trump election night event in Youngstown, Ohio. ‘It would have meant socialism in this country if Clinton had won,’ Speece said. Photograph: Jon Swaine

Jon Swaine in Youngstown, Ohio
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A ferocious roar rang out as each battleground state fell. Then came the chants of “Lock her up!” As the Miller Lite began to flow, the men in red baseball caps grew bolder. “Bitch,” several shouted at the television.

Inside a strip-mall office in Youngstown, north-eastern Ohio, dozens of white working-class voters were celebrating an extraordinary revenge after eight years of bruising defeat by Barack Obama’s
rainbow coalition. A rebuke of an economic system that had left them feeling humiliated and hopeless.

“All the media and all the pollsters just didn’t understand that the little people like us all over the country were quietly supporting Donald Trump,” said John Vass, a 66-year-old engineer and former Democrat. “And today we made our voices heard.”

Vass called up on his cellphone a photograph of his 97-year-old mother, Mary Ann, who lives in a nearby nursing home. “She also was a hardcore Democrat much of her life,” he said. “And Trump is her guy, too.”

Youngstown is one of many traditionally blue-collar Democratic bastions that voted for Trump on Tuesday, buoyed by the Republican nominee’s consistent appeals to those communities that believed they had been left behind. Early polling data shows that around the country the turnout for Trump of white non-college-educated voters was crucial in securing Trump’s victory. In 2010, the city was 47% white.

What appears to have made the biggest difference on the night was the turnout for Trump of white voters across the board - of both sexes and almost all ages and education levels.

Just a few hours after traipsing into their local Republican party headquarters fearing the worst, amid claims from some pollsters that Hillary Clinton had a 99% chance of victory, Trump’s loyalists were suddenly drawing up their wishlists for his first term in office.

“I don’t want abortion,” said Kerri Smith, a 48-year-old carer for disabled children and another former Democrat. Trump, who has a supreme court vacancy to fill, has pledged to appoint judges who would overturn Roe v Wade, the 1973 ruling protecting a woman’s right to termination.

Robin Speece, a 61-year-old retired teacher and yet another former Democrat, said she was eager for Trump to repeal Obama’s signature healthcare reform. Her husband, who already pays $700 a month for insurance and has a $7,000 deductible, is facing a 25% increase in his premium next year, she said.

“I am just so ecstatic,” Speece said soon after Trump’s clinched Ohio. “It would have meant socialism in this country if Clinton had won. The end of the American dream.”

Youngstown’s blue-collar Democratic roots run so deep that Bruce Springsteen wrote a song about it. Everywhere you looked on Tuesday, however, there was another Republican newcomer campaigning with the zeal of a convert. They enjoyed a potluck dinner after a final day of knocking doors, heaping paper plates with beef stews and tearing off slices of pepperoni pizza dripping with cheese.

Before the results began rolling in, the room fell quiet as guests bowed their heads and began to pray.

“This is what freedom is all about, Lord,” said Donna Bricker, the Mahoning County Republican chairwoman. “But let us not cause a war afterwards depending on whoever wins and whoever loses.”

Gentle arguments broke out over which TV channel should be shown to the room. Bricker dismissed Fox News as insufficiently rightwing. Others attacked NBC, along with most other
media outlets, as being biased against their candidate. “Every time Chuck Todd talks, I throw up a little in my mouth,” said one supporter.

Joe Jasinski, a 72-year-old former firefighter, who said he had voted for Democrats as far back as Lyndon Johnson in 1964, urged Trump to prioritize blocking America’s acceptance of refugees from the Syrian civil war. “You can’t vet these people,” he said. “We need to destroy Isis, like Trump has said he will.”

The victory was tinged with disappointment. Despite Trump’s statewide victory, the Youngstown campaigners could not quite deliver a win in their own Mahoning County. By slashing Barack Obama’s old winning margins, however, they helped Trump over the finish line and illustrated the Democrats’ dire problems in Ohio.

Clinton beat Trump in Mahoning on Tuesday by just 49% to 46% - a margin of less than 3,500 votes. Four years ago, Obama beat Mitt Romney by more like 35,000, finishing with 64% to the former Massachusetts governor’s 35%. Obama secured a very similar win over Senator John McCain in 2008.

Headline statistics show Ohio’s economy recovering steadily under Obama since the 2008 financial crisis and recession. Unemployment has fallen. But according to US census bureau data, median household income in the county is actually almost 15% lower now than in 2000 once inflation is taken into account. The proportion of Mahoning residents in poverty has risen by half since then.

Workers have been repeatedly squeezed by bosses who blame aggressive overseas competition. Trump, in turn, was emphatic in blaming America’s free trade agreements for exposing working-class people to the ravages of globalization.

Signs of decay are all over Youngstown. Factories and office blocks sit vacant, fronted by overgrown yards and lined by broken windows that are thick with grime. Tufts of grass sprout through cracks in concrete paving that is in dire need of replacement. Signs and shopfronts are dirty and faded.

The Republican nominee managed to tie Clinton both to the North American Free Trade Agreement (Nafta), which was implemented under her husband Bill after being signed by George HW Bush, and to the proposed Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), which she once appeared to support but now opposes.

At least among his supporters in north-eastern Ohio, whose former glories in steelmaking and heavy industry are legend, Trump in 2016 appeared to succeed in casting the Democrats as the party willing to sell out American labor.

“The Democrats used to be for the working man,” said Jasinski, the retired firefighter. “Now they cater to the very poor, who they can keep in bondage with free stuff, and to the very rich in Hollywood, to keep the donations coming in. We in the middle have been forgotten.”

Trump has set expectations for the presidency extraordinarily high. Millions of people voted for his promise to achieve an improbable reversal of the decades-long structural decline in American manufacturing. By November 2020, the voters of Mahoning County will expect results.
“I want him to bring America back,” said Smith, the carer for disabled children. “Bring back the jobs, bring our country back.”

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