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POLITICS ELECTIONS

# In Trump Country, Supporters Are Steadfast, but His Personality, Pandemic Wear

Virginia's Buchanan County is expected to give Trump a big win; the margin of victory remains uncertain

By Bob Davis [Follow](#) | Photographs by Laura Saunders for The Wall Street Journal

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GRUNDY, Va.—In early 2017, a few mine operators met in this coal town's lone Chinese restaurant to boast of their expansion plans. With [Donald Trump](#) in the White House, they said, they wouldn't be hobbled by environmentalists and would invest in new mines.

It hasn't worked out that way. In the past three years, coal prices collapsed, and China put heavy tariffs on U.S. coal as the two countries clashed over trade. None of the coal bosses opened mines. Two of them ditched mining to grow hemp for cannabidiol, or CBD, products.

With the election just a week away, the coal-to-cannabis converts are still ready to vote for a man they believe did his best to help the coal industry. "I'd have a stroke if I voted Democrat," says Tye Brinager, who closed his mine in 2019. But he has one big reservation about the president. "He'd be better off without that demeanor," Mr. Brinager says.

Buchanan County, Va., [is Trump country](#). But even his supporters feel some Trump fatigue after four years of controversy and a pandemic that has swept across the county's mountains and hollows and battered its economy. "I felt the energy" for candidate Trump in 2016 but not as much now, says Susan Mayhew, a Trump supporter who is dean of the Appalachian School of Pharmacy in Oakwood, Va. "People are just turned off by his personality," she says, which might keep them at home rather than voting.

When Mr. Trump was competing for the Republican nomination in 2016, voters here gave him the biggest share of the vote of any county through the Super Tuesday primaries—69.7%. That result prompted The Wall Street Journal to profile the county as "[The Place That Wants Donald Trump Most](#)." In the general election, the vote for Trump jumped to 78.9%. Hillary Clinton got just 18.6%, in a county that voted solidly Democratic 12 years earlier.



Susan Mayhew, a Trump supporter, says she 'felt the energy' for him in 2016 but not as much now.

On Nov. 3, even local Democrats expect the president to notch another big win here. But the margin of victory and the number of voters who turn out for him is uncertain. The president has done little to expand his political base, and to win another term, he needs to maintain his support, if not increase it, in working-class locales like Buchanan County.

The county is whiter, older, more rural and more evangelical than the U.S. overall. The same is true for Mr. Trump's supporters nationally. About 60% of his base is made up of whites without a four-year college degree, according to Wall Street Journal/NBC News polls. That describes about 90% of adults in Buchanan, where median income is half the national average.

The county's weak economy has hollowed out its population—down by one-third since 1990 to 21,000 people—as is the case in many rural areas important to Mr. Trump's re-election. In 1992, Democrat Bill Clinton won more votes in the county than Donald Trump did 24 years later, even though Mr. Trump

had a much larger margin of victory.

Another obstacle: Since 2000, white Virginians without a college degree have voted in lower percentages than voters in the state overall, limiting their political power. Nationally, Brookings Institution demographer William Frey estimates that white men who didn't attend college will make up 20.2% of the electorate in 2020, compared with 21.9% in 2016. For women, the number is 18.4% this year, compared with 20.5% four years ago.

Buchanan residents tend to explain their support for Mr. Trump by pointing to his policies, for instance pro-coal and antiabortion. But there is also an emotional bond. Many local residents look beyond Mr. Trump's wealthy New York City roots and see a recognizable character in Appalachia—the larger-than-life rich businessman who thumbs his nose at the established order. There is a history of coal-mine operators who toolled around town in Rolls-Royces and made their own rules.

Arthur "Smiley" Ratliff, for instance, used Ming vases for umbrella stands, say locals who trade Smiley stories, and in the 1980s he petitioned Britain to let him build an estate on an uninhabited British island in the South Pacific to be far from Washington regulation. (The British government

declined.) “You had a jet-setting crowd coming out of the coal fields,” says Ms. Mayhew, whose pharmacy school offers a scholarship sponsored by Mr. Ratliff’s family foundation.

Many in the area also see themselves as part of a beleaguered minority whose religiosity is mocked by elites and under constant threat. To them, Mr. Trump is a champion whose frequent scrapes with the press and the Washington bureaucracy add to his authenticity.

A church in Grundy. Many residents see themselves as part of a beleaguered minority whose religiosity is mocked by elites and under constant threat.

Phillip Imel, a local Baptist minister who is also dean of the business school at Bluefield State College in nearby West Virginia, was so turned off by Mr. Trump’s crudeness in 2016 that he voted for a third-party candidate. Now he is in the president’s corner. “We overlook things” about Mr. Trump, he says. “As a Christian, I saw him stand up and do what he said he would do.”

Today, the pandemic weighs on the county, depressing business and forcing the closure of annual events like an Oktoberfest in Council and a haunted-house police fundraiser in Grundy. It has also ignited yet another controversy involving the president, this one over how he handled the health emergency.

After a Covid-19 outbreak at a private boarding school in April, the county required mask-wearing in stores and limited the number of people there to 20% of capacity, only to quickly rescind the requirements after protests on social media. Now few wear masks. Retail spending remained depressed as unemployment doubled from the end of 2019 to 11.3% in July, though it eased somewhat to 8.9% the following month, the latest for which data is available.

A statue of a coal miner outside the local police precinct in Grundy. Some coal bosses have ditched mining to grow hemp for CBD products.

As of mid-October, only two people had died of Covid-19 in Buchanan County amid relatively low infection rates. But in the past few months, cases have been rising, though over the past seven days, Buchanan had fewer infections per population than the national average.

County schools have tried a mixture of in-person and virtual learning this fall. To get high-speed connections, some older students from mountain homes with poor internet service drive to the high school parking lot. In mid-October, the county suspended in-person instruction after three students tested positive for the virus. Grundy High School's principal, Karen Brown, says of the efforts to keep all students learning: "It's not working."

The pandemic turned Frances Minton, a 69-year-old nurse who owns a health clinic, against the president. A lifelong Democrat, she says she voted for Mr. Trump in 2016 because she thought he would help lift the local economy. Now she is voting against him because of what she views as his failed leadership on Covid-19.

Frances Minton, a nurse, voted for Mr. Trump in 2016 but the pandemic has turned her against the president.

“He will not listen to Dr. [Anthony] Fauci and the scientific community,” says Ms. Minton, who blames the president for the tough time she has convincing patients to wear face masks. “I say to them, ‘That’s your right, but you won’t get service’” without a mask, she says.

The president’s combativeness also may be starting to wear on people, say supporters. “He’s brassy; people tend not to like that,” says Logann Taylor-Deskins, 30, who moved back to the area to help her father, a former coal-mine operator, start a CBD business. “It mutes their view of the benefits he has brought,” she says, especially reduced taxes.

Still, the president has tools unavailable to his opponent. In late September, a local food bank distributed government food packages that included a letter signed by Mr. Trump, a tactic that has aroused controversy around the country. “As part of our response to the coronavirus,” the president wrote, “I prioritized sending nutritious food from our farmers to families in need throughout America.”

Recipients “think the president is personally sending them food,” says Paul Hayes, a retired county school official who volunteers at the food banks and says he was turned off by the letter.

A controlled burn takes place on a mountainside in Grundy.

An Agriculture Department spokesman said “politics has played zero role” in the food-box program and that the Trump letter “contains health information that is critical to slowing the spread of Covid-19.”

Trump supporters say they see signals that he remains popular. In late September, the county’s sheriff, John McClanahan, switched parties to become a Republican, saying the Democratic Party wants to defund the police. A month later, a caravan of Trump supporters in pickup trucks waved flags and honked horns as Black Lives Matters protesters gathered nearby in the adjoining county, Tazewell. Trump-Pence lawn signs abound.

But Mr. Trump no longer has an easy foil in Mrs. Clinton, who was widely disliked in the county. [Joe Biden](#) may be more reassuring to one-time Democrats, fret local Republicans. “They don’t realize the danger,” says Debbie Raines, a retired high-school teacher who backs the president, especially because of his antiabortion stance. “They want to think he’s a loving grandfather type” instead of an opponent of fossil fuels and proponent of abortion rights.

Grundy's town manager, Dennis Ramey, is considering voting for Joe Biden.

Grundy's town manager, Dennis Ramey, is one of those weighing a vote for Mr. Biden. The 65-year-old former coal-mine operator, who keeps a dented white hard hat in his office, says that he last voted Democratic in 2004. He went with Mr. Trump because he viewed Mrs. Clinton as anticoal. But what he calls the president's "bombastic" part rankled him then, and does now.

"I'm what they call a Blue Dog Democrat—a southern, conservative Democrat," he says. Mr. Biden reminds him of the kind of politician he once admired, those who could work with Republicans, he says. But he isn't sure that Mr. Biden, at age 77, is up to the job. "If Trump would lay the phone down" and stop tweeting, he might vote for him, Mr. Ramey says, but he doesn't expect that to happen. Instead, he plans to wait for Election Day and decide then who gets his vote.

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