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IN DEPTH | THE GREAT UNRAVELING

# The Places That Made Donald Trump President

Rust Belt counties facing declines in manufacturing, shrinking populations, rising immigration and fraying social fabric moved heavily toward the Republican candidate and his message of national restoration

By [Bob Davis](#) [Follow](#) and [John W. Miller](#) [Follow](#)

Updated Nov. 11, 2016 5:33 pm ET

WILKES-BARRE, Pa.—Tamika Shupp twice voted for Barack Obama as the candidate best equipped to shake up Washington. This year she chose [Donald Trump](#) for the same reason.

“Obama tried to do well, and it didn’t turn out how we thought,” said Ms. Shupp as she prepared Polish dumplings at Mom & Pop’s Pierogis in this Rust Belt city. Mr. Trump should do better, she figures, by cracking down on illegal immigration and upholding American values like hard work.

Mr. Trump “is going to be another Obama,” said the 43-year-old Ms. Shupp. She considers both men to be agents of change. As for the crude remarks Mr. Trump made during the campaign, especially concerning women, Ms. Shupp said she dismissed them as bragging and “shoptalk,” and she didn’t believe the women who accused him of sexual assault.



Tamika Shupp, who works at Mom & Pop’s Pierogis in Wilkes-Barre, Pa., says she voted for Donald Trump after twice voting for Barack Obama. PHOTO: JEFF LAUTENBERGER FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Wilkes-Barre is in the heart of Luzerne, the Pennsylvania county whose swing to Mr. Trump on Tuesday was the state's most dramatic, helping to deliver Pennsylvania—and the presidency—to the New York businessman. On its own, Luzerne County accounted for 40% of the Republican's roughly 65,000-vote winning margin in the state.

The region resembles many counties in the industrial north and Midwest that moved heavily toward Mr. Trump. What ties them together are factors such as a decline in manufacturing, shrinking populations, a fraying of social cohesion and a rise in immigration, all of which made them ripe for Mr. Trump's message of national restoration.

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His victory Tuesday, which stunned so many, encapsulated a shift that has been under way in this corner of Northeastern Pennsylvania for at least two decades. As in many pockets of the country, the promises made by policy makers in the late 1990s—that advances in [technology](#) and [global trade](#) would benefit all—[fell short of reality](#). And the worsening economy deepened the sense that communities around the country were in a state of decline.

Surrounding Luzerne is a wide swath of counties whose votes for Mr. Trump increased vastly from GOP nominee Mitt Romney in 2012. Mr. Obama took Luzerne by five points in 2012, while Mr. Trump took it by a resounding 20 points. Neighboring Lackawanna, Wyoming, Sullivan, Columbia, Schuylkill and Carbon counties all notched Republican gains of similar magnitude, although of those, only Lackawanna went for Mr. Obama in 2012, when he carried Pennsylvania.



Wilkes-Barre is in the heart of Luzerne, the Pennsylvania county whose swing to Donald Trump on Tuesday was the state's most dramatic. PHOTO: JEFF LAUTENBERGER FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Nationally, both Mr. Trump and Hillary Clinton fell below the vote tallies Mr. Obama and his GOP rival, Mr. Romney, racked up in 2012. Around Luzerne, that dynamic was different. In the three counties that make up the Wilkes-Barre/Scranton metropolitan area, Mr. Trump topped the Romney vote count by 31,000, while Mrs. Clinton garnered 27,000 fewer votes than Mr. Obama.

Luzerne County, a short drive from Vice President [Joe Biden](#)'s childhood hometown of Scranton, hadn't gone Republican since George H.W. Bush took it in 1988. That's a legacy, political analysts say, of the influence of unions and lingering memories of New Deal programs that bettered the lives of the county's largely Irish, German, Polish and Eastern European stock.

The county, however, has suffered one economic gut punch after another since the 1970s, steadily weakening the party's hold.

### The Flipping of Pennsylvania

Luzerne, the Pennsylvania county that flipped most dramatically for Donald Trump on Tuesday, helped to deliver the state—and the presidency—to the Republicans. Surrounding Luzerne is a swath of counties whose votes for the GOP nominee increased vastly from 2012.

#### Change in margin of victory by percentage points, 2012-16

Counties Trump won:

(No decline in margin from '12)

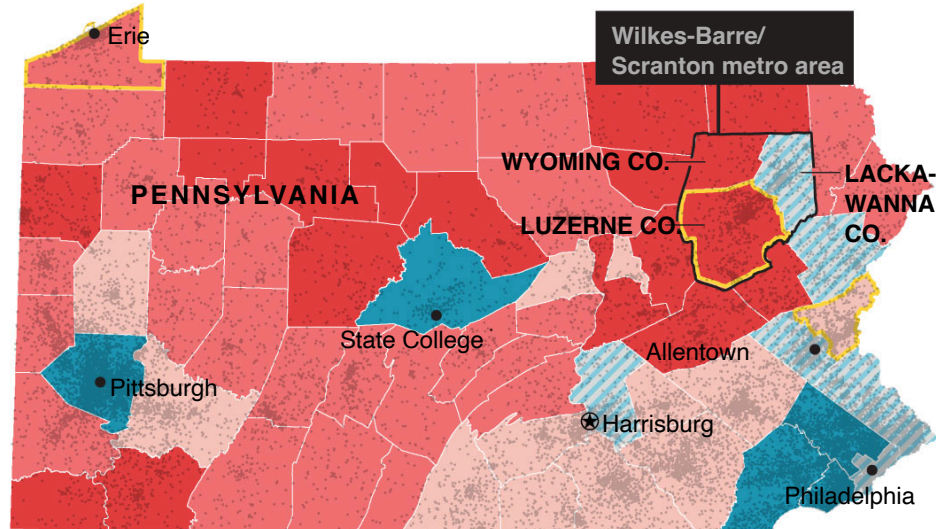
0 +10 +20 +30

Counties Clinton won:

-20 0 +10

■ Voted for Obama in 2012, Trump in 2016

● Population:  
Each dot=500 people



Source: Associated Press

Foreign competition largely wiped out the area's dress and shoe industries. Many in the county bitterly remember pencil maker Eberhard Faber moving a plant to Mexico in the mid-1980s and other manufacturers closing factories. A plan in the mid-2000s to capitalize on computer-network technology and turn the county into "Wall Street West" proved a bust after few financial firms moved back-office processing to the area. The Greater Wilkes-Barre Chamber of Commerce is

hatching a new plan to attract businesses by involving the local colleges in recruitment efforts, but the program is too new to have much effect so far.

## THE GREAT UNRAVELING

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The unemployment rate in Luzerne County, now 6.2%, has generally exceeded the national average since 2000, and manufacturing employment in the county is down by around one-third since 2000. Many of the jobs that remain are low-wage service ones in local hospitals, colleges, chain restaurants and stores. Median income, after accounting for inflation, has been flat in Luzerne County since 2000.

Young people are leaving the region in search of jobs elsewhere, leaving an older, more conservative group of voters. In Luzerne, the population has remained steady since 2000, at about 320,000, but the number of people age 25 to 44 fell by about 10,000, according to [Moody's Analytics](#).

The weak economy has, over the decades, contributed to a tattering of the county's social fabric. Church attendance is down since 2000, opioid addiction is up, and civic organizations like the Rotary Club and the Masons have trouble recruiting young members, say local residents. Of the four Evangelical Lutheran churches in Wilkes-Barre in 2000, says Rev. Peter Kuritz of Good Shepherd Lutheran Church, one closed and two other don't have full-time pastors.

Meanwhile, the county's Hispanic population has climbed nearly 10-fold since 2000, to 31,000, adding a layer of ethnic tension to a place where 84% of the population is non-Hispanic white.

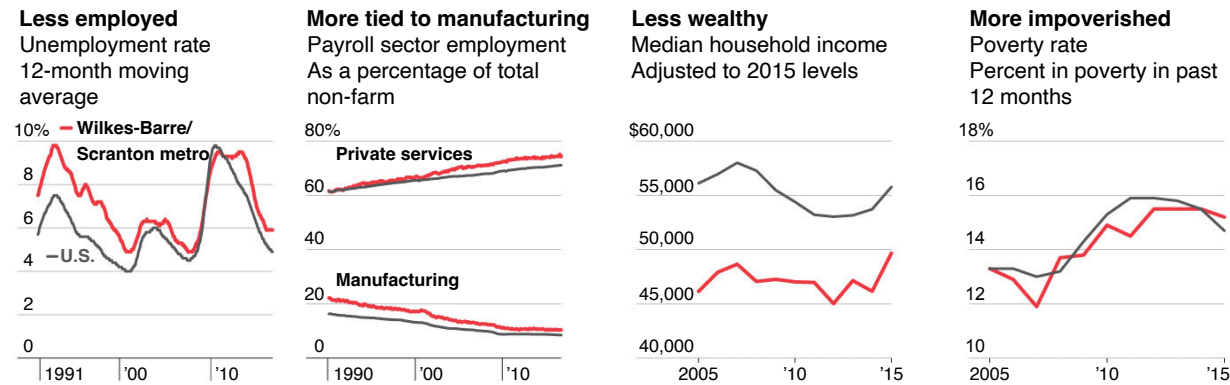
"There's a sense that the new residents don't look like us or sound like us," says Rev. Kuritz. "People feel it's not like it used to be."



The region had been drifting from its New Deal Democratic roots for years, and Mr. Trump took full advantage with its working-class voters. They had long been sympathetic to conservative arguments on issues such as gun control and abortion, while skeptical of the GOP's perceived catering to the wealthy. Mr. Trump's brand of populism bridged that divide.

### The Wilkes-Barre/Scranton metro area economy

Compared with the U.S. as a whole, the area is ...



Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics (employment); U.S. Census Bureau (income, poverty)

Tom Calpin, business manager of Iron Workers local 489, says when he distributed a letter to members opposing Mr. Trump, some responded by telling him not to “pry into who people vote for.” He says that is the first presidential election he can recall where politicking prompting a backlash.

Tom Calpin, business manager of Iron Workers local 489, says it was the first presidential election he can recall where politicking by the union prompting a backlash. PHOTO: JEFF LAUTENBERGER FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

County GOP leaders say they looked to boost turnout by shifting two paid workers to Hazleton, a city that gained national prominence by passing an ordinance penalizing landlords for renting to illegal immigrants, which was later blocked by the courts. “Immigration is a big issue there,” says

Luzerne County Chairman Ron Ferrance. “There are so many passionate people” who were ready to make phone calls and canvass for Mr. Trump, who takes a hard line on immigration, he says.

Bill O’Boyle, a veteran reporter and columnist for Wilkes-Barre’s Times Leader, says he figured Mr. Trump was a lock to win Luzerne County when he compared the turnout at political rallies. The area has long been a stopover for presidential campaigns.

“You had Hillary Clinton, 500 people. Teddy Cruz, 300 people. Bernie Sanders, 1,500 people. And then Donald Trump, 11,000. How could those crowds not mean something?”

A federal building sits alongside a shuttered brewery and bottling plant in Wilkes-Barre. PHOTO: JEFF LAUTENBERGER FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Nineteen-year-old Jasmine Castillo, who makes tacos at the family’s food truck in Wilkes-Barre’s downtown, says her family’s life has become worse as Mr. Trump’s popularity soared. People now tell her to speak English when she speaks Spanish, and to go back across the border, though she is an American citizen. Someone left feces outside her father’s kitchen-cabinet business, she says.

“People feel empowered now” to make insults and threats against Hispanics, she says. “It’s terrifying.”

For Mr. Trump’s supporters, expectations are so high it reminds them of what they once felt for President Obama.

Jasmine Castillo, who makes tacos at her family’s food truck in downtown Wilkes-Barre, says people now feel empowered to make insults and threats against Hispanics. PHOTO: JEFF LAUTENBERGER FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Martha Wallace, whose family owns a small manufacturer of crucifixes and other Catholic jewelry, says, “Trump drummed up the enthusiasm, just like Obama drummed up the enthusiasm last time.” Her 7-year-old son has declared himself “a Trump man.” Her 16-year-old daughter also supports Trump. “I’ve encouraged her to dream big,” Ms. Wallace says.

Ms. Wallace says she is worried about the future of the U.S. economy and the threat of terrorism, and is counting on a Trump presidency to ease her fears about both. “We hope some of Trump’s economic policy will make it easier for us compete and still stay true to always being a ‘Made in the USA’ company,” she says.

How counties in the Wilkes-Barre/Scranton metro area have voted in presidential races

|                |            |            |         |         |         |
|----------------|------------|------------|---------|---------|---------|
|                | Democratic | Republican |         |         |         |
| Lackawanna Co. | Carter     | Reagan     | Dukakis | Clinton | Clinton |
| Luzerne Co.    | Reagan     | Reagan     | Bush    | Clinton | Clinton |
| Wyoming Co.    | Reagan     | Reagan     | Bush    | Bush    | Dole    |
|                | 1980       | 1984       | 1988    | 1992    | 1996    |
| Lackawanna Co. | Gore       | Kerry      | Obama   | Obama   | Clinton |
| Luzerne Co.    | Gore       | Kerry      | Obama   | Obama   | Trump   |
| Wyoming Co.    | Bush       | Bush       | McCain  | Romney  | Trump   |
|                | 2000       | 2004       | 2008    | 2012    | 2016    |

Source: Associated Press

On the campus of King’s College, a small liberal-arts college in Wilkes-Barre that was set up to educate the children of coal miners, students debated on Thursday the impact of a Trump presidency. Skyler Makuch, 19, said she was worried her rights as a gay American would be

impinged by a conservative Supreme Court. “I already know a Trump presidency is not going to be good for me,” she said.

Twenty-year-old Tanner Hale, who cast his first vote for Mr. Trump, said opponents should remember he will need to turn to old Washington hands to run the government, making it less likely he would take extreme measures. “He’s surrounding himself with good people,” Mr. Hale said. “And he’s not going to be the one making all the calls.”

He believes Mr. Trump will improve security at home and abroad. “I expect him to deliver on that, and to protect the Second Amendment,” Mr. Hale said. “Hunting is what I do for fun.”

Tanner Hale, a Trump supporter and student at King’s College, believes Mr. Trump will improve security at home and abroad. PHOTO: JEFF LAUTENBERGER FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Mr. Ferrance, the Republican county chairman, says he realizes voters expect Mr. Trump to deliver. “If it’s the status quo, people will be upset,” he says. “People want him to govern in the spirit of what he said” during the campaign.

He figures there is some wiggle room in some of Mr. Trump’s more controversial stances, such as his repeated claim that the U.S. would build a wall across the U.S.-Mexican border and make Mexico pay for it. Maybe, he says, Mr. Trump could argue that job growth caused by tougher trade policy would be a way of having Mexico “pay.”



Young people are leaving Luzerne County in search of jobs elsewhere. PHOTO: JEFF LAUTENBERGER FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

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*Appeared in the November 12, 2016, print edition as 'The Places That Made Trump'.*