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IN DEPTH

The Place That Wants Donald Trump Most

Buchanan County, Va., shows the source of the front-runner's support and the problem he poses for rivals in both parties

By [Bob Davis](#) [Follow](#) and [Rebecca Ballhaus](#) [Follow](#)

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BUCHANAN COUNTY, Va.—There isn't much Jody Bostic believes in these days.

The government has abandoned him, he feels. Local coal mines have laid him off so many times he opened a T-shirt store to make a living. Big-city media treat him and his neighbors like know-nothings.

His remaining hope: [Donald Trump](#) will become president and use his business skills to bring jobs to this Appalachian mountain county. "Hey, in this county, things are going downhill. People are getting laid off. People are leaving," says the 39-year-old former miner. "If Trump don't get it, it will be another blow."

Mr. Trump won Buchanan County with 69.7% of the vote in the March 1 Republican primary, the highest percentage vote he has collected in any U.S. county so far. A close look at the white, working-class enclave, which is in Virginia's southwest, provides a clearer picture of why Mr. Trump inspires supporters and poses problems for anti-Trump GOP strategists.

Voters here say Mr. Trump understands their frustration and will fight the Washington establishment on their behalf. In an area awash in uncertainty—[Will mines remain open](#)? Will the river flood? Must the young leave to find work?—he is a reassuring presence, someone who has visited their living rooms for years via television.

Here, as elsewhere, his message of American renewal, closed borders and antigovernment populism resonates despite his brashness, even among Democrats.

His wealth isn't a put-off. County Sheriff Ray Foster, who supports Mr. Trump, says rich businessmen have long been well-liked around the county because "they make jobs for the people here."

As for the imbroglios over Mr. Trump's comments about women and [his shifting views on abortion](#) and foreign policy, which have driven up his negative ratings in national polls, they are generally seen here as a plus. They reinforce his outsider status.

"He talks before he thinks," Mr. Foster says, "so he doesn't have time to think up something and lie to you."

The lessons are important for [New York, where Mr. Trump is heavily favored to win the primary](#) on Tuesday and has a chance of peeling off working-class Democrats in the general election. He could do especially well in Republican strongholds along the state's southern tier, federally classified as part of Appalachia. Counties there share some characteristics of Buchanan County.

In Buchanan County, Mr. Trump has won over many Democrats because he not only "speaks for them—he speaks in terms they're comfortable with," says Gerald Arrington, the county's commonwealth's attorney and a registered Democrat. Mr. Arrington says Mr. Trump won his vote in the Virginia primary, the first time he had cast a vote for a Republican.

TRUMP'S VOTE SHARE



The 1,586 votes Mr. Trump received in the county were triple the total for the Democratic primary winner, Hillary Clinton. Eight years ago, the county was solidly Democratic: Mrs. Clinton won 2,245 votes then in a primary against Barack Obama, defeating him 90% to 9%, and collecting more than five times as many votes as the Republican primary winner.

Many in the county blame the [Obama administration's regulations for a downturn in the coal industry](#) and figure Mr. Trump will quash those rules and ignore scientists who warn about global warming.

Nationwide, the 10 counties Mr. Trump has carried by the largest margins have much in common. They are mainly white, rural and southern. They sharply lag behind the national average in

household income and education, and top it in poverty and disability payments.

Four of these counties rely on agriculture, says Moody's Analytics, while another three are local transportation hubs. A big employer in one, Tallahatchie County, Miss., is a prison.

While people in these counties feel left behind, they don't face the challenges from immigration or foreign trade that [Mr. Trump has made his signature issues](#). All but two of the counties trail the nation by wide margins in percentage of the population that are immigrants. Few face much pressure from Chinese imports. Buchanan County benefits from trade, especially through coal exports to China.

Instead, Mr. Trump's appeal is visceral. According to an October 2015 Wall Street Journal/NBC News poll, 76% of Trump supporters feel "uneasy and out of place" in their own country, compared with 62% of Republicans who say they wouldn't consider voting for him.

"Trump has an appeal that a traditional Republican would have a hard time matching," says Jeff Horwitt, a senior vice president at pollster Hart Research. [If Mr. Trump is denied the nomination at the Republican convention despite a clear lead among delegates](#)—a possibility being discussed by some in the party—[Republican turnout could fall sharply, he adds](#).

Robert Collins, 43, a Buchanan County trucker, says he isn't sure he could bring himself to vote for Sen. Ted Cruz if he wins the nomination by undermining Mr. Trump.

Mr. Trump's cocky style has turned off some supporters, including Ralph Rife, a disabled coal miner in Slate Creek who voted for him but now says he can't stomach him. "He's like a loose cannon," Mr. Rife says, citing [Mr. Trump's encouragement of Japan and South Korea](#) to develop nuclear weapons and his shifting abortion position.

Buchanan County has long seen itself as cut off from the American mainstream, separated by mountains, accents and a mining culture with the ever-present danger of cave-ins and explosions. Natives of this county at the westernmost edge of Virginia like to say "Virginia ends at Roanoke," a city with a trendy downtown about 180 miles east.

"We're like in purgatory," says James L. Rife, 54, who pulls up near a local [Wal-Mart](#) to buy Trump T-shirts sold out of the back of a black SUV. "You ain't dead, but you ain't alive." Mr. Rife has lived on disability checks since 1991 after he got buried in a mine cave-in.



A worker selling Trump paraphernalia stands outside the Grundy, Va., Wal-Mart to pitch T-shirts and hats. PHOTO: BENJAMIN LOWY FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

In the 1970s, coal trucks were so common residents complained about coal dust on cars and windows. When Danny Smith, 53, now a coal-mine superintendent, finished high school in 1981, he says his uncle left him miner's boots and a hard hat on his porch as a graduation present. In the 1990s, miners say, they could quit, walk down the road and find work at a different mine. Coal companies competed to hold the most elaborate Christmas parties.

Coal-industry employment has shrunk due to automation and declining markets. The county's population has fallen 27% since 1990 to 23,000 and has grown older as young people depart. Inflation-adjusted median income is barely half the national average and hasn't budged since 1995, Moody's Analytics estimates. Three times as many Buchanan households receive Social Security disability checks as have a college graduate.

Novelist Lee Smith, who was born in the county and writes about it, says fatalism and depression are rampant. The county seat of Grundy, on the Levisa Fork River, has had nine major floods since 1929. One in 1977 destroyed its shopping district. A \$177 million flood renovation project replaced the buildings with a highway and carved away part of a mountain to create flat land for the Wal-Mart, which opened in 2011.

"It's been nothing but construction and red mud for 15 years," Ms. Smith says of the reconstruction. "People are voting against what's happening to them. There's a disgust with the way things have been going."

For decades, that distrust translated into votes for Democrats, a tradition nurtured by the United Mine Workers and memories of the New Deal and Great Society. Al Gore carried the county in 2000

with 58% of the vote against George W. Bush, despite local suspicion of environmentalists. John Kerry did nearly as well four years later. Mr. Obama lost the county in 2008, but not heavily, 46% to 54%, to Sen. John McCain.

In 2009, the area elected a Republican to the Virginia House of Delegates for first time since the 1950s. In 2010, 14-term Democratic Rep. Rick Boucher was defeated for re-election. By 2012, the county was solidly GOP, with Mr. Obama receiving 32% of the vote in his re-election bid.

Vern Presley, the county's Democratic Party chairman, traces the Democrats' decline to the widespread belief Mr. Obama's environmental policies are crippling coal. He thinks the charge is unfair because coal is also hammered by cheap natural gas and shrinking foreign demand.

The charge sticks, and it benefits Mr. Trump, who pledges to eliminate the federal Environmental Protection Agency. At a February rally at Radford University, a 2.5-hour drive from Buchanan County, he told a cheering audience "we're going to bring the coal industry back 100%." He is one of the few presidential candidates to campaign in coal country this election.

Mrs. Clinton is unwelcome. Local residents seem to have memorized [her televised remarks in March](#) that if she became president "we're going to put a lot of coal miners and coal companies out of business," a comment she later said was a mistake. Joe Street, vice president of a coal-mine machinery supplier near Grundy, says he can imagine lawn signs this fall: "Hillary Clinton: The War On Coal."

Clinton spokesman Brian Fallon notes that Mrs. Clinton has proposed a [\\$30 billion plan to aid coal communities](#).

The Trump slogan "Make America Great Again," say supporters here, means returning to the economy of 10 years ago, when coal held its own and the global economy hadn't suffered through the financial crisis and its aftermath. Coal miners in the county were paid an average \$90,334 in 2014, the latest Bureau of Labor Statistics figures available, but such jobs are rapidly disappearing. Half the licensed coal mines closed between 2013 and 2015, reducing coal miners by 50% to 1,028, according to Virginia's mining authority.

While the county has looked to diversify its economy, the new jobs pay far less. A Sykes Enterprises call center advertised starting hourly wages of \$9.50 last year. Wal-Mart pays about \$10.



A customer sits in a booth at the Derby cafe in Oakwood, Va., in the heart of Trump country. PHOTO: BENJAMIN LOWY FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

At a dinner early this month with eight coal-industry executives in a local Chinese restaurant, all nod when asked if they support Mr. Trump. “We want a leader,” says Jeff Taylor, a local coal-mine operator who says he has slashed his workforce by one third since 2012. “Trump may be the one with enough backbone to pull back some of the government” regulations.

That is a widespread sentiment among ordinary workers, too. Why is there such faith that a billionaire will deliver for the working class?

One such local, coal entrepreneur Arthur “Smiley” Ratliff, was Trump-like in his tastes, recalls Ms. Smith, the novelist. He drove in a black Rolls Royce, his face black with coal dust, and lived in a fortresslike mansion. He used Ming vases for umbrella stands, say locals who trade Smiley stories, and 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.)

It isn’t a big leap from Mr. Ratliff, who died in 2007, to [Mr. Trump and his Boeing-757 airplane](#) with gold-plated fixtures, Ms. Smith says.

Mr. Bostic, the former coal miner, says he had enough of mining after being laid off three times in 13 months. He and his wife opened the T-shirt shop last month a few miles from Grundy and sell uniforms for church groups and softball teams. He says he isn’t making near the \$90,000 he did as a coal-mine “blaster,” an explosives expert.

The pay cut forced him to default on his timeshare condo, he says, and he struggles to make payments on the \$300,000 house he bought in 2011 when his mining job seemed secure. He sells buffalo jerky on the side and is training to become a school-bus driver.

He says he is looking to Mr. Trump for help. If the Republican can turn around the coal industry by slashing regulations, that should pump money into the local economy.

“Trump for us is the light at the end of the tunnel,” says Mr. Bostic’s wife, Sara. With him, “there’s some hope normalcy will come back to our area.”



The end of the road at a planned residential community sits atop the Southern Gap, a landscaped former surface coal mine near Grundy. PHOTO: BENJAMIN LOWY FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

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