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The Counties that Counted: Could 2020 Repeat 2016 in the US Electoral College?

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Abstract: We briefly trace the claim that a set of counties across the three states of Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin in large part determined the outcome of the 2016 presidential election. Rather than the demographic characteristics of the Census as such it is the meaning that these categories (young/old, Black/White, male/female, and so on) take on in particular places in which people's lives are grounded that drives electoral outcomes. Given that the counties in question were ones in which Obama had performed well but which Trump won in 2016 and this shift was put down to his appeal to those "left behind" in the post-2008 economy, we focus on whether or not this localized appeal can be expected to continue in 2020.

Introduction

We briefly trace the claim that a set of counties across the three states of Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin in large part determined the outcome of the 2016 presidential election. Counties provide an appropriate unit of account given their significance as administrative units for everyday life and in the context of a geographically driven electoral system such as the Electoral College. Rather than the demographic characteristics of the Census as such it is the meaning that these categories (young/old, Black/White, male/female, and so on) take on in particular places in which people's lives are grounded that drives electoral outcomes. Given that the counties in question were ones in which Obama had performed well but which Trump won in 2016 and this shift was put down to his appeal to those "left behind" in the post-2008 economy, we focus on whether or not this localized appeal can be expected to continue in 2020. In particular, Trump's performance as president, specifically his use of tariffs in the trade disputes with China and the EU, could be having negative effects in these counties (and beyond). Of course, much of Trump's appeal is seen as resting in the status anxieties of older White voters rather than with respect to this or that economic

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issue. Notwithstanding the truth to any of these claims, Trump could still win the three states even if he loses these counties, by building up bigger majorities in other counties, but these counties can still be regarded as bellwethers for Trump's prospects given the narrow path to re-election that he probably faces.

The 2016 Counties that Counted

One of the major surprises of the 2016 US presidential election was not only that Donald Trump won but how he won. The voters who determined the outcome in the Electoral College could all be seated in the University of Michigan football stadium. They came from a set of counties across the three states of Michigan, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin which now seem to be the last parts of the US where voters can switch between presidential candidates of the two main parties between elections at a time when so many voters appear entrenched in polarized partisan worlds. Yet, as is known from national polling, the majority of voters everywhere are not as polarized as the loud voices of politicians and activists in designating everyone as either a Republican or a Democrat make them appear. It is just that these potential switchers are frequently swamped in places where the menu of political choice and the number of partisans leans towards somewhat fixed outcomes thus leading to the frequently noted, if exaggerated, “red fighting blue” account of homogeneous sectional and state-level political preferences (e.g. Hopkins 2017).

As a result, it is the places where significant numbers of voters switch political preferences across elections that can swing electoral outcomes one way or the other. They have become increasingly crucial in determining the overall outcome of US presidential elections. One temptation might be to see these as places with concentrations of “indifferent” or loosely affiliated voters who switch with ease. But why there should be so many in small town/rural counties in the states in question is more mysterious. Implicit attitudes tapped into by Donald Trump but not previously manifested in political leanings might be more on target (e.g. Ryan 2017). The bombastic and demagogic rhetoric of Trump may indeed have found resonance precisely with those tired of the pluralism and political correctness of mainstream US politics looking to blame the problems in their lives on intentional plots against them by shady foes rather than in situational accounts of forces beyond anyone's control (e.g. Busby et al. 2019). Rather like Putin in Russia (Medvedev 2019), Trump has a pick-and-mix ideology with himself at its core and appeal to nostalgia and resentment of a shifting set of enemies as moments of mobilization for his fearful “base.” Identifying scapegoats and decrying experts

who have failed to address the crises in which many people find themselves enmeshed prove crucial (e.g. Moffitt 2015; Caramani 2017). Perhaps Trump just admires the *modus operandi* of Putin rather than actively colluded with him during the 2016 election campaign?

The percentage of all counties flipping between parties at subsequent elections has never been very high over the period 1952–2016, so the counties that do flip can take on a real significance when elections are tight and a limited number of states are crucial in the final tally of electoral votes (Sances 2019). From 2004 down through 2016 a set of counties across the upper-Midwest of the US consistently exhibited this quality with others in northern New England and scattered counties elsewhere waxing and waning in similar volatility. Most of the country remained locked into consistent local majorities for one or the other party without much of a shift whatsoever. In 2016 the pattern of consistently volatile counties finally had a nationwide impact through the mechanism of the Electoral College. Could this repeat in 2020? Given the overall lack of equivalent historical volatility in other parts of the country, such as Florida, Arizona, Colorado, and New Mexico, the upper-Midwest states of Michigan and Wisconsin plus some counties in Pennsylvania may prove crucial once more whatever the relative disposition of total votes between parties at the national level. One indicator of this trend that favors Republican candidates is that from 2013 to 2017 across the most competitive congressional districts nationwide, 8 of 25 of the seats trending Republican were in Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin whereas none of the 25 seats trending Democrat were in those states (Wasserman and Flinn 2017).

A key element in the outcome of the 2016 presidential election were those voters largely in the Midwest and Pennsylvania who had backed President Obama in 2008 (and 2012) but then reversed course to support Donald Trump in 2016. Nationally about 9 percent of Obama voters went for Trump in 2016, about 5 percent of the total electorate (Sides et al. 2018). According to Ballotpedia (2017), 206 counties nationwide voted for Trump in 2016 that had voted for Obama in 2008 and 2012. The 206 counties were spread over 34 states. It was where their numbers were concentrated in key states, however, that was crucial. Michigan had 12 “pivot” counties, Pennsylvania had 3, and Wisconsin had 23 (Figure 1). This is where the voters who allowed Trump to eke out his victory in the Electoral College were located as he was massively losing the nationwide popular vote to Hillary Clinton. Trump won the three states of Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin by net 77,744 votes, mostly concentrated in a number of largely rural and exurban counties in the three states. These voters seem to be mainly White working-class voters who never obtained college degrees. Like their peers across the country, having supported Obama’s campaigns, they turned away from Hillary Clinton and voted for Trump. If the flipped counties in crucial states had

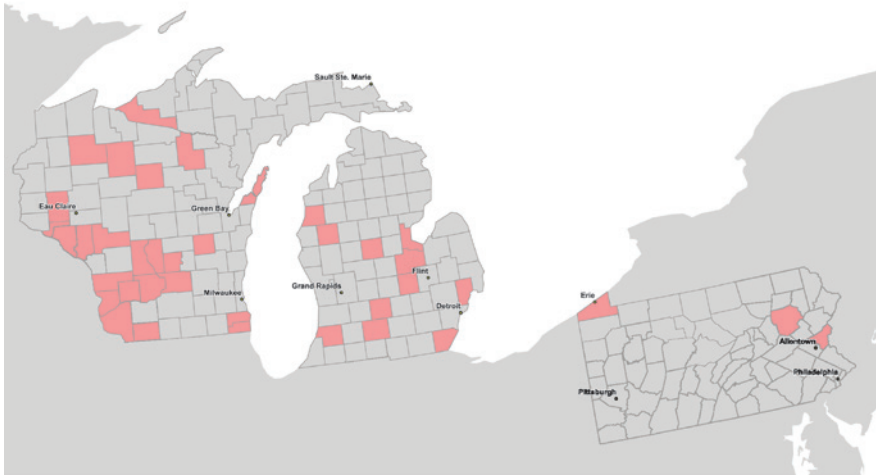


Figure 1: The Big Three States Showing the Counties that Flipped from Obama (2008 and 2012) to Trump (2016).

not flipped in 2016, Clinton would have won the Electoral College by 3 votes and the lowest-educated counties (by average years of education) had voted as they had in 2012, she would have claimed the Electoral College by around 30 votes (Sances 2019).

Much speculation and some hard survey data suggest that this was due to both a sense that Washington during the Obama years had failed to deliver on the economic front for the vote flippers and their communities and also in reaction to the increasingly rabid politics of race and policing that had erupted in the second of Obama's terms of office (Agnew and Shin 2019, p. 77–81). The relentless federal focus of the Democratic Party and its relative neglect of state and local politics probably also fed the sense of neglect (Winter 2019). Trump also was not the typical Republican candidate; his positions on trade and immigration as well as his hostility to the “caste” of traditional politicians and bureaucracy matched the sort of alienation probed in rural Wisconsin by Katherine Cramer (2016) rather than conventional Republican verities. Overly broad characterizations swept the places vital to Trump's election into oppositions such as rural versus urban, heartland versus coasts, the left behind versus the getting ahead, and White-nationalist versus globalist America without careful consideration of how economic and cultural anxieties intersect on the ground (e.g. Tharoor 2017; Chokshi 2018; Krugman 2018; Neel 2018). Generalization ran ahead of specification.

It is important to note though that the 2016 vote involved a very hard choice. Neither candidate was particularly popular across the broader electorate. Thus

in making a choice, the vote was as much against one of the candidates as in favor of the other. In 2020 the flipped voters of 2016 will face a president with a behavioral and policy record, on the one hand, and, at least potentially, a Democratic candidate without Hillary Clinton's negative baggage, on the other. After 4 years of partisan squabbling about Trump's reliance on Russian interventions in social media in 2016, his impeachment by the US House, and evidence from the 2018 midterm congressional elections that Trump's often incoherent policies and unorthodox behavior are far from popular nationally, the 2020 election may not be a simple shoo-in. Arguably, in 2016 it was as much voters who failed to vote for Clinton (or anyone else) in the most urban counties who had previously voted for Obama than it was Obama flippers to Trump who pushed the swing states over to Trump (Agnew and Shin 2019, p. 77–81). Yet, in 2020, even if incumbency may benefit a “prizefighter” like Trump, the “illegitimacy benefit” of having won first time around without winning the popular vote may well weigh against him (Mayhew 2019, p. 164).

Why Counties Count

In one respect counties are simply accounting units for aggregating votes. Even though these units nest into the states that are the entities for accumulating the votes in US presidential elections and reflect the hierarchical territorialism of US federalism, they need not be understood apart from the sweeping together of discrete individual persons who are after all the “votes” that ultimately count in all elections. To make sense of how they vote, we typically understand these persons in terms of their demographic characteristics (young/old, Black/White, well educated/poorly educated, affluent/poor, and so on). Yet, the compositional characteristics of areas like counties (percent over 65, percent Black, etc.) are also usually taken to signify features of the persons that reflect their life experiences and outlooks and thus why they vote the ways they do. Analysts are not always very clear about the fact that these are as much contextual, in the sense of reflecting everyday lives in different places, as they are compositional, reflecting the presumed common experiences of being Black or elderly wherever you happen to live in the US. Hillary Clinton's campaign in 2016 seemed particularly confused about this fact. Everyone who had voted for Obama anywhere was assumed to be on track to support Clinton in 2016.

Demographic indicators by themselves even when reported for what turn out to be “key” counties in electoral outcomes, like those in the Big Three states in 2016, often show few major differences with averages for their respective states or the states taken together (Table 1). It is how these characteristics and various

Table 1: County-Level Demographic Indicators for the Big Three States.

	Obama 2008	Obama 2012	Clinton 2016	Trump 2016	Margin 2016	Counties 2016	White (non- hispanic)	African- American	No college	Unemployment	Median income	Over 65	Share of total export- supported jobs under retaliation
US	53.6	51.9	48.3	46.2		3109	61.2	9.1	66	4.7	\$50,955	15.2	6.2
MI-PA-WI	56.7	53.6	47.4	48.2	0.8	222	79.2	3.4	78.4	4.3	\$53,072	16.9	6.8
MI-PA-WI- flipped	56.2	53.3	42.6	52.5	9.9	38	..	3.4	79.9	3.9	\$52,204	16.7	..
MI	58.4	54.8	47.3	47.6	0.3	83	76.1	4	79.2	5.1	\$49,655	17.5	5.9
MI flipped	55.2	52.3	41.8	53.2	11.4	12	..	5.9	80.1	4.7	\$49,411	16.0	..
PA	55.2	52.7	47.6	48.8	1.2	67	78.6	4.7	77.9	4.5	\$54,338	16.7	5.4
PA flipped	56.8	54.2	43.8	52.5	8.7	3	..	5.4	74.4	4.8	\$55,757	16.0	..
WI	57.1	53.5	47	47.8	0.8	72	82.8	1.6	77.8	3.3	\$55,833	16.3	9
WI flipped	57.6	54.2	43.5	51.2	7.7	23	..	1.8	80.5	3.3	\$53,197	17.2	..

historical-contextual factors come together that affects the sorts of choices made by voters on the ground, so to speak. The counties that counted in 2016, therefore, are not just ones with more less-educated White people over 65 but places where social class, status anxieties in a changing world, and recent events experienced there differently from elsewhere combined to produce distinctive electoral outcomes. Place effects on voting behavior are an emergent phenomenon not simply reducible to this or that demographic characteristic.

So, we would argue that the context/composition nexus should be made more explicit. Indeed, before the advent of national opinion surveys and the presumed nationalization of national politics through communications media and the projection of national census categories onto the population at large this was what much electoral analysis tended to do. The presumption was that the act of voting took place through the prism of the everyday realities facing people that did not exclude wider influences from beyond the locality but which saw local paths and practices relating to types of workplaces, religious beliefs, educational opportunities, and histories of class and racial prejudice as fundamental to political choices. These are all placed geographically in complex ways that cannot be reduced readily to the distribution of census categories over space (e.g. Agnew 1987, 1996).

The county, then, can be regarded as much more than just a unit of aggregation. It is potentially a setting where the socio-economic and cultural processes emanating locally and from wider networks and relations come together to provide many of the experiences and outlooks that in turn lead to different electoral choices. This is not much of a radical claim. Counties have long been the primary administrative units across much of the US. They are particularly important as the providers of public goods and services that are vital to people's lives from education, police, and public health to roads, transportation, and fire protection. As Tocqueville was one of the first to note, the history of US settlement history privileged certain administrative units such as counties as legitimate political entities that were vital for the very spirit that informed American politics as it had evolved from independence until when he was writing in the 1830s. Local affairs and needs were seen as shaping affiliations higher up the territorial hierarchy of states and the federal government. Arguably, in the face of globalization and the retreat of the federal government from earlier interventionist periods such as the New Deal of the 1930s and the New Society of the late 1960s, the "local state" has become even more significant politically in people's lives (Jonas 2002). Even with the rise of the Web and social media, most people's online networks mirror their offline ones with heavy concentrations in their geographical vicinity (e.g. Dunbar et al. 2015). Counties count, therefore, as politically defined and relevant contexts rather than simply as units of account for the mere accumulation of individual voter outcomes in geographically organized elections.

Pathways Through the Electoral College

Before the 2016 election, of six scenarios for a pathway to winning the Electoral College, only one seemed possible for Donald Trump (AEI 2016; Misra 2016). This had him probably losing the national popular vote but winning Virginia, New Hampshire as well as Pennsylvania and Wisconsin and missing Michigan. In fact, he added Michigan to his tally but lost Virginia and New Hampshire. So, Trump's pathway to victory was seriously constrained. Yet he prevailed through the Electoral College even while losing the overall nationwide vote mainly because of the huge majority Hillary Clinton ran up in California. In other words, the Electoral College matters. What are the likely scenarios for 2020 with respect to plausible pathways for Donald Trump or his opponent given various assumptions about his standing and that of possible adversaries? In the subsequent section we then consider the various factors such as local economic conditions and patterns of support across the critical counties in the three crucial states in 2016 for a possible repeat of the 2016 outcome in 2020.

We briefly consider three ways of construing pathways that could lead to the magic number of 270 Electoral College votes in 2020. Teixeira and Halpin (2019) provide the first method. This follows the demographic approach pioneered in AEI 2016. For Trump to win the national popular vote in 2020 he would need to significantly raise his support among his strongest demographic group: White non-college voters. If the increase were of the order of 10 percent, Trump would win the national vote by 1 percent. Increasing support among other demographics (Blacks, college-educated Whites, etc.) by even 10–15 percent over 2016 would not lead to a win in the popular vote. None of this matters, of course, on the ground. The crucial question is where Trump's support is located relative to his competitors within the Electoral College.

Under the scenario where turnout and voter decisions by demographic stay the same as in 2016, and only the overall demography of the electorate in a state changes (fewer elderly Whites, etc.), Trump would lose Michigan, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin and thus suffer a loss in the Electoral College by a margin of 279–259 votes. If Black turnout in 2020 follows 2012 rather than 2016, North Carolina could be added to the list of Trump's losses. If non-Whites on the whole swing to the Democratic candidate by 15 points, Florida and Arizona would also flip from Trump. If college-educated Whites alone were to swing to the Democrat by 10 points then Arizona, Florida, and North Carolina would join the Big Three of Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin in flipping from Trump.

The best performance scenarios for Trump in the Electoral College require significant swings in his direction on the part of various demographics. To win the Big Three and add Maine, Nevada, and New Hampshire into his column, he

would need a net shift of 10 percent of non-college educated voters in his direction leading to a 329-209 victory in the Electoral College. With an unlikely 15 points shift in his support over 2016 for all non-White groups, Trump would lose the popular vote but add New Hampshire and Nevada as well as the Big Three to his column. Finally, if college-educated voters went Trump's way by 10 points, he would be edged out in the popular vote but add Maine, Minnesota, and New Hampshire to his conquests (323–215).

These scenarios assume a uniform swing in turnout and of voter preferences in different demographics across all states. This is problematic for a number of reasons. First of all, trends in turnout and preferences vary widely across the country for the same election. Second, and crucially, the swing states that occur in all of the above scenarios are ones where all candidates will concentrate their resources during the 2020 campaign thus affecting the final outcome quite profoundly. At the same time that Trump needs to keep the Big Three in his column, he must worry that some of the other mentioned states, such as Arizona, Florida, and North Carolina, could potentially knock him out of contention even if he retains all of the other states he won in 2016. Trump's approval ratings by state and the results of the 2018 Congressional Midterm election will provide his opposition with a roadmap for exploiting his weaknesses across the Electoral College.

The second method directly uses the results of the 2018 Congressional election to map a probability scenario for 2020 (Silver 2018). The scaling up from congressional contests in one election to the presidential ballot 2 years in the future is obviously fraught. But it does give a more explicitly political picture than the reliance on demographic groupings tends to do. In aggregate, the 2018 map looks much more like that of 2012 than that of 2016, suggesting that Trump faces something of an uphill task if he is to win in 2020. In 2018 Democrats performed particularly well in Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin. The map that emerges from treating the accumulated congressional votes by state as equivalent to presidential ones looks very much like that of 2012 when Obama defeated Romney. Interestingly, while Democrats did well overall and in must-win states for them in 2020, they also performed remarkably well in some states including Arizona, Iowa, North Carolina, and Texas, where their prospects in 2020 are probably more questionable. At the same time, states that at one time were seen as bellwethers for subsequent presidential elections, such as Missouri and Ohio, defied the national "trend." They are now probably not worth the effort to Democratic presidential candidates in the Trump era.

Even if the 2018 vote is "adjusted" to make it more reflective of the typical balance in recent years between the parties nationwide, by subtracting 6 percent from the Democrats' 2018 margin in every state, Democrats still have an overall advantage. In this scenario the Big Three once more emerge into prominence. To

win, a Democrat needs these three, what Silver (2018) terms the “Northern Path,” because, as long as they hold all other states from 2016, they do not need to add anywhere else. Florida would not be enough as a substitute. They would need a “Sunbelt Strategy” adding Florida to at least one of Arizona, Georgia, North Carolina, or Texas as a substitute for the northern route. Crucial to the outcome is whether the Democratic candidate falls between the two stools provided by the two pathways. If the southern strategy still does not look “ripe” enough yet demographically for 2020, the Northern path will therefore be even more central to the result. As Silver (2018) concludes: “If Trump has lost the benefit of the doubt from voters in Pennsylvania, Wisconsin and Michigan, he may not have so much of an Electoral College advantage in 2020.”

Finally, the Big Three and a couple of adjacent states, Iowa and Ohio, can be considered in light of the overwhelming propensity for Trump to appeal to a specific demographic/cultural clientele of non-college educated Whites who overlap with such categories as so-called evangelical voters and those Whites anxious about their status in an increasingly ethnically and racially diverse country. During his term of office he has focused on this “base” rather than trying to extend his constituency very much into other parts of the national population. So, in 2020 this grouping will be even more crucial to his success. As Michael Sances (2019) shows, since the 1970s educational attainment has become an increasingly powerful predictor of US political polarization everywhere. He also demonstrates that the shift in the vote of the less educated towards Trump in the particular Midwestern states and Pennsylvania was central to the outcome in 2016. Had the counties in the bottom ten percent of the education distribution stuck with their 2012 preferences, Clinton would have tied with Trump in the Electoral College. If the bottom 20 percent had done so she would have won. This group of counties was crucial. They will be again in 2020. And this is so not just because of a singular demographic trait but also because of a history of electoral volatility combined with a recent cultural-economic history that is very open to Trump’s messaging.

All three approaches suggest unequivocally that Trump and whomever he faces in 2020 have relatively narrow pathways to victory. As in 2016, it will likely be Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin that will provide the margin of victory either way. In all likelihood it will be the counties Sances (2019) identifies within the three states that will once more loom large on election-day 2020.

2020: 2016 Redux?

So, 2020 may well come down to a scenario remarkably like that of 2016. The critical question is: what now works for Trump and against him in the crucial

counties/states? We examine this question from three viewpoints. The first relates to Trump's 2016 explicit appeal to reversing the conventional Republican positions on trade and industrial policy to emphasize the "disaster" of free trade, as he saw it, for US workers, particularly those in areas of decline in manufacturing employment. This has led, among other things, to imposing tariffs on imports from China and other countries, that have then been met with countervailing ones, targeted expressly at places supportive of Trump in 2016, including agricultural as well as manufactured products. Trump's positions on trade and manufacturing employment appealed directly to groups historically more inclined to vote Democratic. It also helped him to glue together his overall "base" by opposing his "nationalism" to the "globalism" that had supposedly caused the depredations visited on the so-called left-behind in declining industrial areas (Jacobson 2017).

National polling in late 2019 suggests that Trump's efforts have led to a significant increase in support for more open trade rather than the tit-for-tat tariff policy on which he has embarked. But 2016 Trump voters may in fact see his efforts more as an effort to "level the playing field" and as temporary measures rather than seeing him as fundamentally anti-trade (Russonello 2019). Thus Trump's trade "war" may still pay off for him in the crucial counties. The national economy has certainly held up extremely well in the face of the phase of the business cycle (in slow expansion since 2012/2013) and in the face of Trump's trade measures. So, this is a background condition to the specific effects on the ground in the localities in question. Yet, through much of 2019 the states of Michigan and Pennsylvania had decreases in employment particularly in manufacturing and Wisconsin had only a modest increase in overall employment when many parts of the country were experiencing net employment growth well above the national mean (*Economist* 2019).

In 2016 Trump certainly benefited from his rhetorical flourish about negative trade impacts and decline in manufacturing employment. Even though much of the latter can be ascribed to automation more than to the globalization of production. Trump's support grew disproportionately compared to that of Romney in 2012 in places with major declines in manufacturing employment. China was a more compelling villain than technological change. The impact of the financial crisis that began in 2007 is also part of this story. Incomes were hit everywhere but most of all in certain types of place with vulnerable and marginal industries. The pattern was non-random (e.g. Reeves and Gimpel 2012). The crisis lingered in its impact in places where industrial decay and hardship had been under way for years. Much of this was concentrated indeed in less populated, older, Whiter, and less educated counties in states such as Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin (Noland 2020). Since 2016 these areas have not seen much improvement in their employment conditions. Since Trump's arrival in office, Michigan, Pennsylvania,

and Wisconsin in particular have had very low growth in jobs and their manufacturing sectors show few if any signs of revival (Casselmann and Russell 2019). Of course, this could be put down to the limited timeframe for national policies to trickle down to local communities without the advantages in terms of localization and urbanization economies now largely associated with the largest cities. The tariff impacts can be used as a surrogate for the overall situation the counties find themselves in as their previously favored candidate returns to ask for their votes.

We therefore now focus centrally on the geographical impact of tariff measures in the crucial counties in 2016 and presumably in 2020. After 50 years of leading efforts to lower barriers to international trade, in 2018 the US government enacted several waves of tariffs on specific countries and products. Import tariffs increased from 2.6 percent to 16.6 percent on 12,043 products covering about 12.7 percent of annual US imports. In reaction, the affected countries, mainly China, Mexico, Canada, and the European Union, imposed retaliatory tariffs on US exports. These measures raised tariffs from 7.3 to 20.4 percent on 8073 products covering 8.2 percent of annual US exports. The county-level exposure to tariff increases was extremely uneven across the country through April 2019 (Fajgelbaum et al. 2019). The largest impact on import declines due to tariff increases was in the Great Lakes region, southern New England, the Carolinas, and scattered counties in the West. The major impact of the countervailing tariffs on US exports was across the Great Plains and the West Coast, and in Texas and the Mississippi Valley. Regional and local economies specializing in agriculture and metals have been particularly hit by the countervailing tariffs. Though metropolitan areas have been affected as well, typically the share of exports hit is much larger percentage-wise in rural areas and small towns. Suggesting at least a degree of targeting of products by foreign governments, counties won by Trump in 2016 seem to have been much more exposed to the countervailing duties than counties that were won by Clinton (Parilla and Bouchet 2018; Fajgelbaum et al. 2019). Even though the tariff war between the US and its partners in NAFTA has abated, that with China and the EU continues even if in the former case an initial agreement seems very likely if very incomplete (Bradsher 2019).

Not simply because of the enhanced probability that the flipped counties of 2016 have faced the negative impact of the tariff wars, it seems that they are especially vulnerable to such shocks because of the overall vulnerability of their economies. Examining all of the “pivot counties” nationwide, including those in the Big Three states, can provide a clue as to the confluence between shocks such as the tariff increases and ongoing trends in county-level economies. Consequently, it looks very much as if these counties have not only not turned around since Trump’s election but that they are in fact mired in continuing economic and demographic stasis (Fikri et al. 2019). Indeed, basic trends are little changed

in these counties since 2012 except that in terms of job growth the gap between these counties and ones that did not flip grew larger between 2016 and 2018. The same thing went for the growth of business establishments over the same period. As Fikri et al. (2019) say, if voters truly believe in the powers of a given President to enact economic miracles over a short time, “their hopes have so far been unfulfilled.”

A second viewpoint moves from the aggregate position relating to the impacts of tariffs in the counties to considering how much this might matter to the overall political atmosphere in these places. In other words, we are interested in whether or not there have been shifts in views of Trump as a net result of the tariff and other economic measures (tax cuts favoring business, etc.) across affected areas. The evidence is necessarily very fragmentary but nevertheless suggestive of what can be seen so far. Historically, states such as Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin have been strongly disputed between the two parties. To win, a presidential candidate must take the swing counties in the swing states. Critical to the verdict is how much the shocks to local communities translate into shifts in turnouts and individual votes (e.g. Kiewiet and Lewis-Beck 2011). The community/county define the settings in which the translation occurs, not “national” economic conditions per se (although that may have ideological impacts: “He’s doing the right thing but it just hasn’t worked out around here yet” e.g. Politi 2019) Even if someone is not immediately on the end of job loss or the fading of employment prospects, the sight of abandoned factories, declining real estate values, rising drug abuse, and so on fuel anxiety and anger across the local populace (e.g. Reeves and Gimpel 2012; Ansolabehere et al. 2014). This is also the case in predominantly agricultural counties where most of the population is not directly employed in farming any more but the economic health of the farming sector drives the prospects for all of the other businesses and people in the vicinity.

It is now something of conventional wisdom that economic changes are mediated in their effects on voting in complex ways, particularly in relation to anxieties about social status and worries about the future beyond whether or not jobs are growing or trading with foreign countries is “unfair.” Indeed, it may well be Trump’s populist rhetoric, notwithstanding its negative material impacts, that continues to attract voters. The increasingly polarized electorates, including now those in the Obama-Obama-Trump counties in question, may be less swayed than in the past by how well the economy is or is not doing (Ip 2019). Issues of race, immigration, and gender dominated the 2016 campaign more than economic issues per se. National survey evidence suggests strongly that the voting gap by education-level for Trump cannot be adequately explained solely in terms of economic difficulties. Attitudes on race and gender strongly channeled the direction of votes in 2016 (Schaffner et al. 2018). Given that it was non-college Whites

whose flipping largely led to the outcomes in the counties of the Big Three states in 2016 it seems that this relationship holds for them too. Whether this was an aberration of a year in which the first woman presidential candidate was running against someone who made unrestrained use of racist and misogynistic tropes and gestures in the aftermath of a two-term African-American President is impossible to say. What it does suggest is that we cannot simply assume a straightforward causal arrow going from recent economic trends to voting outputs. This is particularly the case, as was noted earlier (see, e.g. Ryan 2017; Busby et al. 2019), for a set of places in which a history of relatively weak partisan affiliations in a substantial section of the local population has led to swings in voting behavior that led to the exposure of implicit attitudes with the emergence of a candidate like Donald Trump's whose appeal is not really to either a conventional Republican constituency or to the more urban-liberal ethos of today's Democratic Party but to a populist base alienated from all politics-as-usual.

From the third viewpoint, we are interested in how this all adds up to in terms of the likely prospects for Trump in 2020. With respect to the crucial counties in the Big Three states, the demography of employment would seem in theory to favor a Democrat over Trump; workers in service employment now far outnumber those in manufacturing and transportation. But the prospect for manufacturing tends to color the vibrancy of work in these other sectors: it has bigger multiplier effects across local economies. There are relatively few foreign immigrants in most of these counties. But absence does not always make the heart grow fonder. The counties are overwhelmingly White relative to the national average. They also have relatively high shares of the non-college educated, as noted previously. They also have relatively older populations (Fikri et al. 2019; McGraw 2019). Yet, 2019 survey evidence from the Big Three states suggests that Trump cannot be written off for 2020; far from it. Trump's approval rating even while low and largely stagnant nationally since coming into office has risen in the crucial counties (e.g. Saul and Peters 2019; Zitner and Chinni 2019). This is despite the lack of much by anything of major economic improvement and in the face of being in the trenches of the tariff wars. The signs of a drawdown in the tariff war with China in late 2019 and the passage of the updated NAFTA trade deal with Canada and Mexico may improve Trump's prospects (Rappeport et al. 2019). Trump has other things going for him too, particularly his demagoguery on race and immigration (Guo 2016). Trump overcame weak approval and favorability ratings in 2016. In 2020 he can point to the "partisan" impeachment effort by Democrats in 2019, whatever the evidence of criminality he was involved in, to once more portray himself as an outsider, sowing chaos in Washington and around the world on behalf of "the people." Whether Democrats can mobilize around the impeachment to limit Trump to a single term is a very open question (Balz 2019b).

Of course, his prospects in 2020 depend on what sort of candidate he faces this time around. Last time around he had one who shared his low favorability rating. Since coming into office Trump has done nothing to expand his base. “The wild card,” as the journalist Dan Balz (2019a) makes the point: “is the identity of the Democratic nominee and how that shapes the general election debate. Will that nominee be running on a platform that moderate voters see as too far left? Will that nominee be able to energize the party’s woke base and still appeal to White working-class voters.” This perspective also engages the relative turnout question. Older, more conservative American voters have a greater propensity to vote than other demographic groupings. This is undoubtedly in Trump’s favor (Leonhardt 2016; Jacobs 2019). Even if in 2016 the overall role of relative turnout on each side could be exaggerated (e.g. Cohn 2017), its importance in the Big Three states, particularly in urban counties where Obama had reaped high rates of voting by African Americans and Clinton did not, was significant in the story of the outcome in the three states. It could be again. In obvious counterpoint, in the crucial counties in those very states what matters most of all, if recent research on the topic is to be believed, is that in places with a history of swing voters a party that nominates a more “extreme” candidate, rather than mobilizing the hitherto uninvolved as “mobilization theory” would predict, tends to bring out voters on the other side in increased numbers (Hall and Thompson 2018). Trump could very well trump himself in the right places from 2016 with the right candidate on the other side. 2020 will test this thesis on the ground.

Conclusion

In brief compass, we have described the counties in the US that counted most in the outcome of the 2016 presidential election because of the nature of the Electoral College as a mediating mechanism. Using counties, however, is not simply because they are units of account for votes but also because they are contexts in which people are exposed to differing experiences and influences that affect their vote choices. Of course, these places are not isolated but they still provide dominant settings in which everyday lives are lived. We then traced the ways in which the Electoral College in 2020 might follow the pattern established in 2016 with the Northern Pathway involving the crucial 2016 counties in the Big Three states as the most likely one again in 2020. Finally, we weighed up the pros and cons of recent economic impacts, particularly Trump’s tariff wars, on the counties in question and how the effects might play out in 2020. Our conclusion is that Trump could very well succeed again. Trump’s electoral appeal is not ultimately based in economic issues per se. His standing with indifferent swing voters is such that

he just needs enough of them to show up to outnumber the other side. If he campaigns as he did in 2016, by stoking anger and hostility against their “adversaries,” he could do this once more.

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