

Rust Belt Revival

*A GOP tide is surging through
the Great Lakes region*

BY DUNCAN CURRIE

ALL them Reagan-Hillary Democrats. That label may sound awkward, but it provides a useful description of the working-class whites who helped the Gipper secure a pair of landslides in the 1980s and then propelled Clinton to a series of primary victories in 2008. While these voters represent a declining share of the national electorate, they are heavily concentrated in the Rust Belt—the blue-collar manufacturing region centered around the Great Lakes. It's a region where Republicans got absolutely clobbered in the last two election cycles. This year, however, the GOP has experienced something of a Rust Belt revival, which may yield big gains on November 2.

Indeed, barring an eleventh-hour collapse, Republicans will capture the governor's mansions in Pennsylvania, Ohio, Michigan, and Wisconsin, while also picking up Senate seats in Pennsylvania, Wisconsin, and Indiana (where they already hold the governorship). The polls are extremely tight in Illinois, but there is a decent chance that the GOP will win the governorship and/or Barack Obama's old Senate perch. Across these six states, no fewer than 21 Democratic House districts (and perhaps several more) are either in play or likely to flip Republican. In some states—including Pennsylvania, Ohio, and Indiana—Republicans seem poised to acquire full control of the legislature.

What explains the GOP comeback? Working-class whites obviously aren't the whole story, but they're a significant part of it. A recent AP-GfK survey found that whites who do not have a four-year college degree favor Republican congressional candidates by a margin of 22 percentage points (58 percent to 36 percent). Two years ago, according to exit-poll data, the corresponding margin was only eleven points. In 2006, it was just nine points.

Less educated whites account for a

shrinking portion of the overall U.S. voter pool—the minority population is growing faster than the white one, and more whites are getting college degrees—but they still wield major influence in the Rust Belt. Shortly before the 2008 election, Brookings Institution demographers William Frey and Ruy Teixeira noted that Ohio and Michigan “feature eligible voter populations dominated by white working class voters.” Such voters also “play a central role” in Pennsylvania politics, said Frey and Teixeira, especially around Harrisburg (central Pennsylvania) and Allentown (northeast Pennsylvania), “where their absolute numbers are actually increasing.”

Those are the areas of the Keystone State—along with western Pennsylvania, another white-working-class (WWC) stronghold—where Hillary Clinton crushed Obama in the 2008 Democratic primary contest. Next door in Ohio, Clinton carried 83 out of 88 counties, losing the big cities but garnering huge support from WWC communities in the state’s myriad small

and 1984, to George H. W. Bush in 1988, and to Barack Obama in 2008.

Obama’s Rust Belt success was driven by the same factors that boosted Democratic candidates throughout the country: the Great Recession, and the massive unpopularity of Republicans in general and George W. Bush in particular. Between November 2004 and November 2006, Bush’s approval rating among voters (as measured in the exit polls) plunged from 61 percent to 38 percent in Indiana, from 53 percent to 41 percent in Ohio, from 50 percent to 38 percent in Pennsylvania, and from 50 percent to 36 percent in Michigan. By November 2008, he had become even less popular in these four states, and Pennsylvania was the only one with a seasonally adjusted unemployment rate below the national average. In the 2006 and 2008 elections, GOP losses in the Rust Belt quartet amounted to 14 House seats, two Senate seats (in Pennsylvania and Ohio), one governorship (in Ohio), and four legislative chambers (one in each state). Republicans also lost a House seat and a

plenty of WWC social conservatives. So does 26-year incumbent Paul Kanjorski (D., Pa.), another nominal pro-lifer who backed Obamacare and has caught hell for it. (His district has been ravaged by the economic downturn, and Kanjorski is now trailing his Republican challenger, Hazleton mayor Lou Barletta, a prominent scourge of illegal immigration.)

Health care isn’t the only vote causing trouble for Rust Belt Democrats. Just ask Rep. Baron Hill, a member of the Indiana Basketball Hall of Fame, whose district (Indiana’s 9th) stretches into coal country. In June 2009, Hill voted to pass cap-and-trade; ever since, Republicans have been pounding him for it. The former hoops star is now highly vulnerable, as are Ohio Democrats John Boccieri and Zack Space, two of Hill’s fellow cap-and-trade supporters. Indiana derives well over 90 percent of its electricity from coal, and the equivalent figure in Ohio is not much lower.

Four years ago, when Hill and Space won their seats, Indiana and Ohio Repub-

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towns. In the Indiana primary, she got drubbed in Marion County (Indianapolis) but more than made up for that by walloping Obama in the southern and eastern-central parts of the state, which are loaded with WWC voters. As for Michigan—whose 2008 Democratic primary was rendered meaningless by the state’s loss of convention delegates (punishment for moving up its primary date) and by Obama’s non-participation—it is home to a large collection of traditional Reagan Democrats. Indeed, that term first became famous when pollster Stan Greenberg applied it to the socially conservative WWC voters in suburban Macomb County, outside Detroit.

The four states listed above—Michigan, Indiana, Ohio, and Pennsylvania—constitute the vast majority of Rust Belt territory, with chunks of Wisconsin and Illinois forming its western outskirts. (The industrial swaths of other states, including New York and West Virginia, are also considered part of the region.) All four gave their electoral votes to Ronald Reagan in 1980

legislative chamber in Wisconsin, plus a House seat in Illinois.

Today, of course, unemployment levels are much higher than they were two years ago, and Democrats are suffering the political fallout. Michigan’s jobless rate was the highest in America for a mind-boggling 49 consecutive months, from April 2006 to May 2010. As of August, it stood at 13.1 percent, compared with a U.S. average of 9.6 percent. The rates in Indiana and Ohio were both north of 10 percent, and Pennsylvania’s was 9.2 percent.

While economic issues are consuming most of the oxygen in Campaign 2010, many Rust Belt Democrats have found themselves on the defensive over abortion. In 2006 and 2008, the region elected to Congress a sizable number of self-identified pro-life Democrats, nearly all of whom subsequently voted for Obamacare (the lone exception was Rep. Jason Altmire of Pennsylvania), which was ardently opposed by the National Right to Life Committee and other anti-abortion groups. These Democrats hail from districts with

licans were hampered by the (very different) travails of their respective GOP governors, Mitch Daniels and Bob Taft. Elected in 2004 after serving as White House budget chief, Daniels had angered many Hoosiers with his decisions to adopt Daylight Saving Time for the entire state and lease the Indiana Toll Road to a joint venture of two foreign companies (from Spain and Australia). Taft’s problems were far more severe: He had been convicted of multiple misdemeanor ethics violations stemming from the “Coingate” scandal, which ultimately landed GOP fundraiser Tom Noe in prison. Ohio was hemorrhaging jobs, and Taft had become woefully unpopular.

Fast-forward to 2010: Daniels now boasts an approval rating in the 60s, and he is being touted as presidential material. Both of the policies that once made him unpopular have worked out rather well. He cruised to reelection in the Year of Obama (2008), and he has earned plaudits for his sound fiscal management. This motorcycle-riding governor has also

launched ambitious health savings accounts to broaden insurance coverage among low-income Indianans.

In Ohio, meanwhile, Taft is gone, and Republicans are on the verge of retaking both the governorship and the state house of representatives. Yet this does not mean that Ohioans have suddenly rediscovered an affection for the GOP. “I think it would be a gross mistake for the Republican party to think that its brand has improved,” says Matt Mayer, president of the free-market Buckeye Institute. “The Republicans are simply benefiting from the fact that they are not the incumbent party right now.” The party exercised complete control over state government during the 1990s and early 2000s, and its economic stewardship was hardly impressive. In that sense, Ohio Republicans bear at least partial responsibility for many of the problems they now want the opportunity to solve.

The same could be said of the Michigan GOP, observes Joe Lehman, head of the conservative Mackinac Center. Looking back on the past decade, “the Republicans share blame with the Democrats for not making the tough fiscal choices necessary to turn Michigan’s economy around.” The Wolverine State has been pulverized by job flight and out-migration, much of it fueled by union excesses. Its next governor will almost certainly be wealthy Republican venture capitalist Rick Snyder, a novice candidate who, in Lehman’s words, “has surprised just about everyone in the Michigan political establishment.” Snyder “has strong credentials as a businessman,” Lehman adds, and he “should know how to read a financial statement.”

Writing in the *Wall Street Journal*, Gerald Seib reminds us that Rust Belt GOP governors were once at the forefront of conservative policy innovation. During the 1990s, Michigan’s John Engler and Wisconsin’s Tommy Thompson introduced bold school-choice and welfare-reform initiatives that earned nationwide attention and inspired Republican lawmakers on Capitol Hill. Today, the GOP’s most visible policy pioneer at the state level is Governor Daniels, who has become the darling of right-leaning journalists and think-tankers. At a moment when state budgets need trimming and health-care programs need revamping, Daniels has offered a robust example of practical, effective conservative leadership. Whether other Republicans will embrace that example remains to be seen.