

Markéta Kocmanová

The United States Presidential Election 2016: Where Trump's Triumph Comes From

Anotace

Příspěvek analyzuje sociopolitické rozdělení společnosti Spojených států na takzvanou Retro a Metro Ameriku, přičemž se zaměřuje zejména na demografické faktory, které byly určující pro generování podpory Donaldu Trumpovi během amerických prezidentských voleb v roce 2016. Trumpova volební kampaň byla koncipována a realizována s cílem zabezpečit hlasy těch demografických skupin obyvatelstva, které v posledních desetiletích zažívaly zmenšující se mocenský vliv ve společnosti, zejména s ohledem na dopady procesů vyvolaných globalizovanou ekonomikou.

Klíčová slova

Demokratická strana (USA), Donald Trump, volby prezidenta USA, Republikánská strana (USA), volební demografie.

Abstract

The paper examines the main socio-political division between the so called Retro and Metro Americas within the US society as well as a wider range of decisive demographic factors determining the support for Donald Trump as these were demonstrated during the 2016 US presidential election. Trump's campaign strategy was devised and implemented with the aim to secure the votes of those demographic groups who have felt increasingly powerless over the last decades when facing the impact of the changes brought about globalized economy.

Keywords

Democratic Party, Donald Trump, election demographics, Republican Party, US presidential election

Introduction

In their book *The Great Divide: Retro vs. Metro America* (2004) John G. Sperling and co-authors famously depicted the division between the red Republican and blue Democratic United States which now seems to have been corroborated by the results of the 2016 presidential election. Donald Trump's symbolic victory convincingly shows how this deep class, cultural and ideological divide influences the way the Americans cast their vote. The central claim the book makes supports the notion that the United States has never been a united country but rather the opposite – there are in fact two nations “one traditional and rooted in the past, and one modern and focused on the future” (authored, 2016). The authors' conclusion points to the fact that the American politics is not driven by any ideological convictions, but these are the differences between the so-called Metro America and Retro America that determine individual voter preferences.

Retro vs Metro America: Definition and Political Characteristics

Sperling et al. demarcate their Metro and Retro spheres of the United States not only in geographical terms, but they also provide us with their distinct political dimensions and features¹. *Metro America* can be delineated along the Northeast coast, the West coast, and the Great Lakes states while *Retro America* covers the area of the South, the Plains States, the Mountain West and Appalachia (A rough idea of the distribution of 'Retro and Metro' can be illustrated with the division between metropolitan and micropolitan areas, see Figure 1).

The basic, and somewhat simplistic, proposition puts forward that Retro America can be politically linked to the Republican Party whereas Metro America, by her intrinsic nature, aligns herself with the Democrats. The authors give us a general outline of the respective social, cultural and political characteristics.

Retro America is “made up of 25 states [with] low wages, subsidies, [and] religious zealotry; it is dominated mostly by rural, conservative, intolerant white male political leadership (though many have large poor minority populations) for whom social services, public education and economic and cultural change are more worrisome than welcome” (Press, 2004). As for the economic aspects, the Retro States depend heavily on government subsidies granted especially to oil, gas and coal industrial sectors; numerous military facilities are located there as well as low-wage manufacturing. On the whole, the industrial base here represents ‘the old type’ of economy which provides limited opportunity for economic growth.

¹ The factual information in the current chapter draws on the following source: Press, P. (2004) *Not red vs. Blue states, but 'retro' vs. 'Metro'*. Available at: <http://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/not-red-vs-blue-states-but-retro-vs-metro-71722222.html> (Accessed: 31 December 2016).

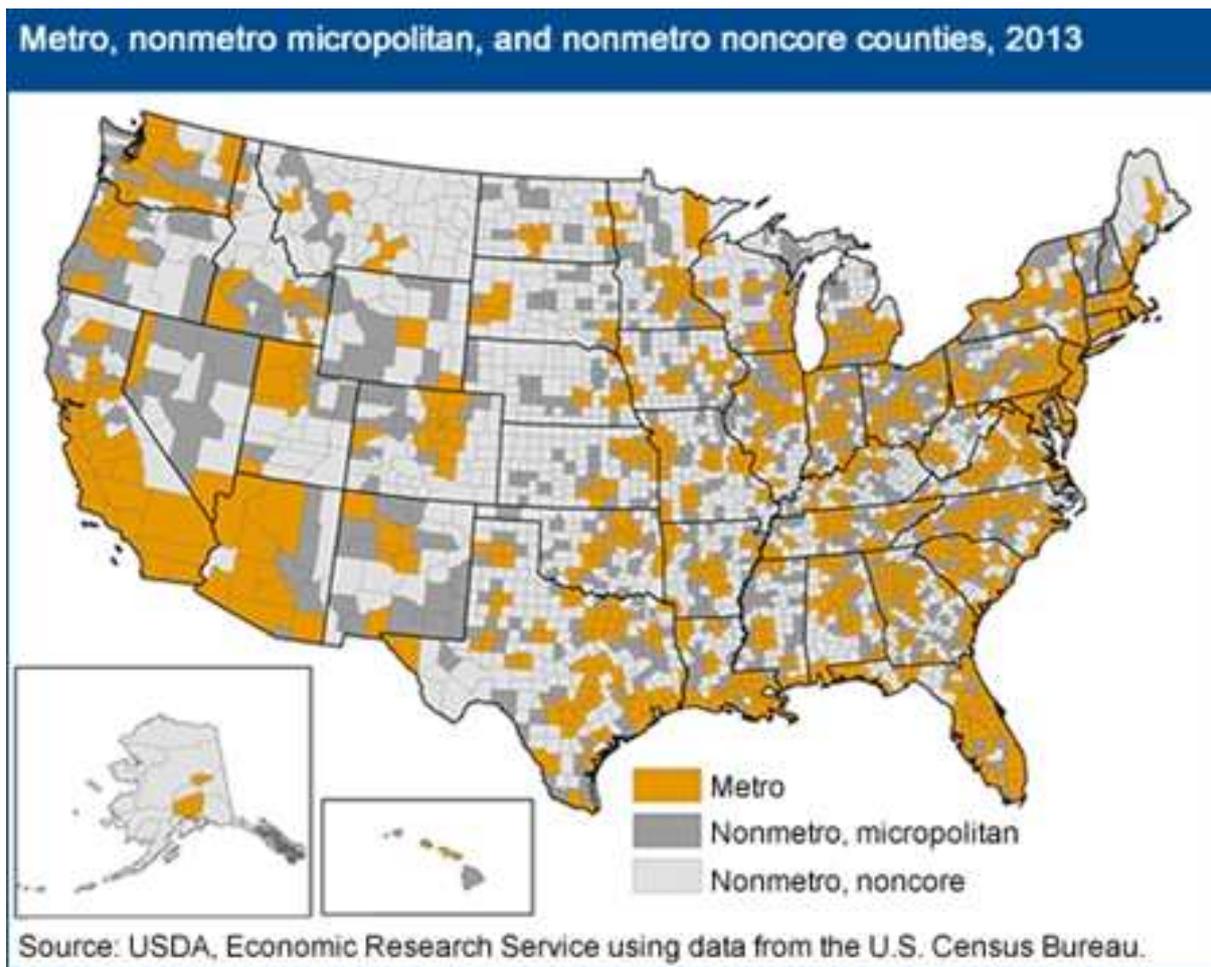


Figure 1: US counties by metropolitan and micropolitan status. Source:

<https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/rural-economy-population/rural-classifications/what-is-rural.aspx>

With regard to the number of inhabitants, the ‘Retro areas’ mainly in the Midwest are struggling with shrinking population while the electoral college voting power remains unchanged – a situation even Donald Trump as the President-elect has called to be remedied (BBC, 2016) though he himself benefited from it in the 2016 election. When considering religion, the Retro States have some influential religious minorities (for instance Mormons in Utah) that, as Sperling puts it, perceive cultural expression, higher education and scientific innovation as a threat. Another important subject area which divides the above Americas is the race. It is symptomatic of the Retro American states that the voices of black Americans and women are frequently not listened to.

2016 Election Results

After having counted the popular votes in particular states, Donald Trump finally secured 304 votes of the presidential electors, which enabled him to beat Hillary Clinton by 77 electoral votes in the United States presidential election of 2016 (see Figure 2). The election results precisely correspond to how Trump targeted his campaign – he won in the states which had been taken by the Democratic Party in the previous presidential battle. As the CNN website’s report pinpoints, Trump’s victory has changed the electoral map “by putting

Democratic states in the decaying industrial Midwest into the Republican column with his anti-trade rhetoric" (Reston and Collinson, 2016).

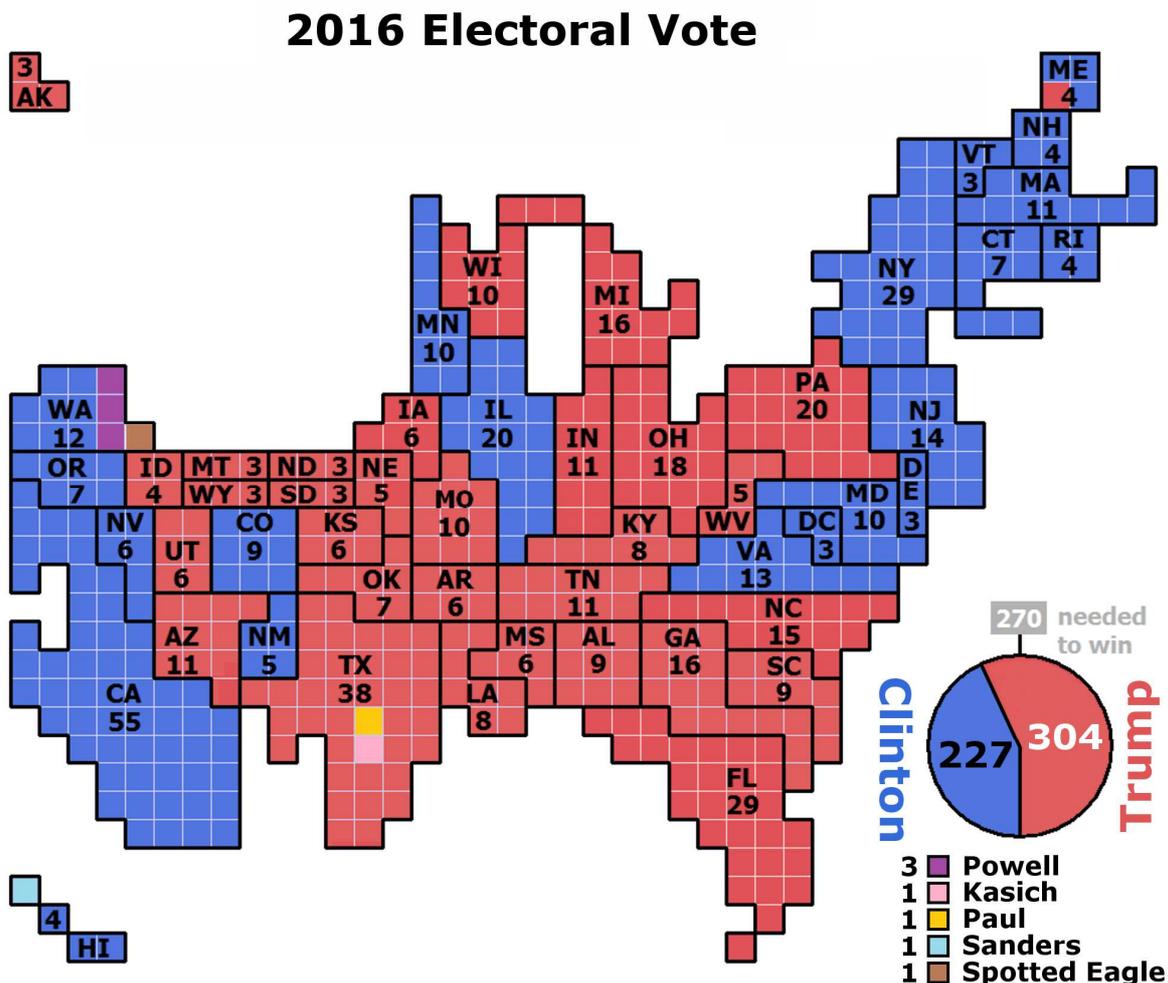
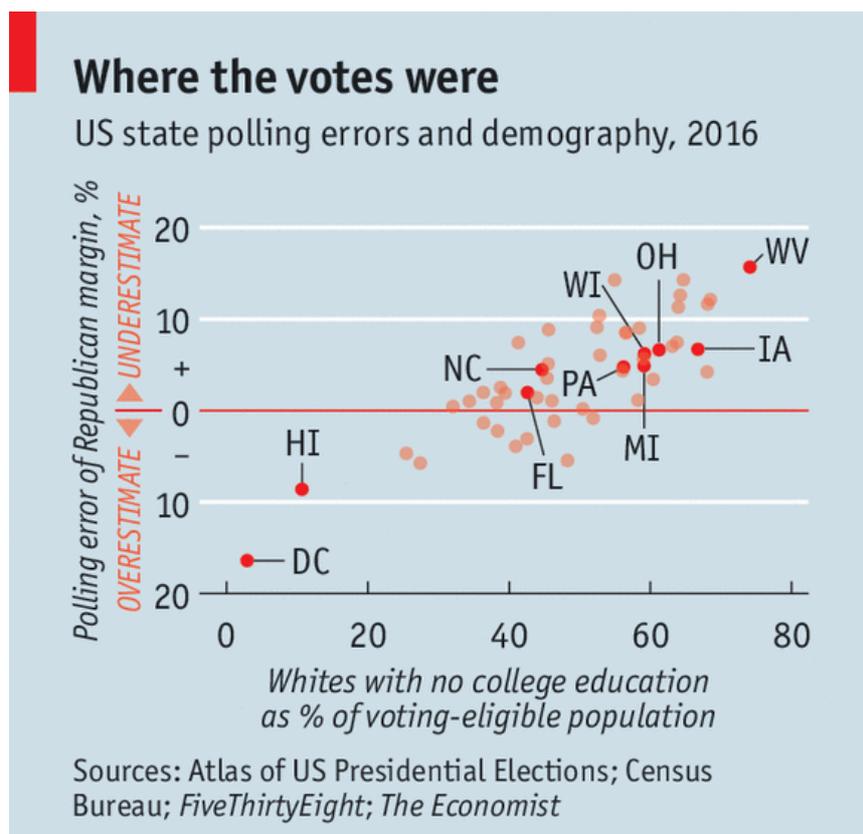


Figure 2: US Presidential Election 2016 cartogram presenting the number of electoral votes secured.

Source: Wikimedia Commons https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:2016_Electoral_Vote-Cartogram.png.

The Democratic hopes from the pre-election national polls, which had expected Mrs Clinton to take the presidency, eventually failed to materialize. One of the most convincing and decisive Trump's "outperformances occurred in states around the Great Lakes... [although] Mrs Clinton led the polls in Wisconsin by five points, and in Michigan and Pennsylvania by four; Mr Trump [was] projected to claim them all. He did even better in Ohio, where he turned a two-point poll lead into an 8.5-point romp, and Iowa, where a three-point edge became a 9.5-point blowout" (Economist, 2016a; see Figure 3).



Economist.com

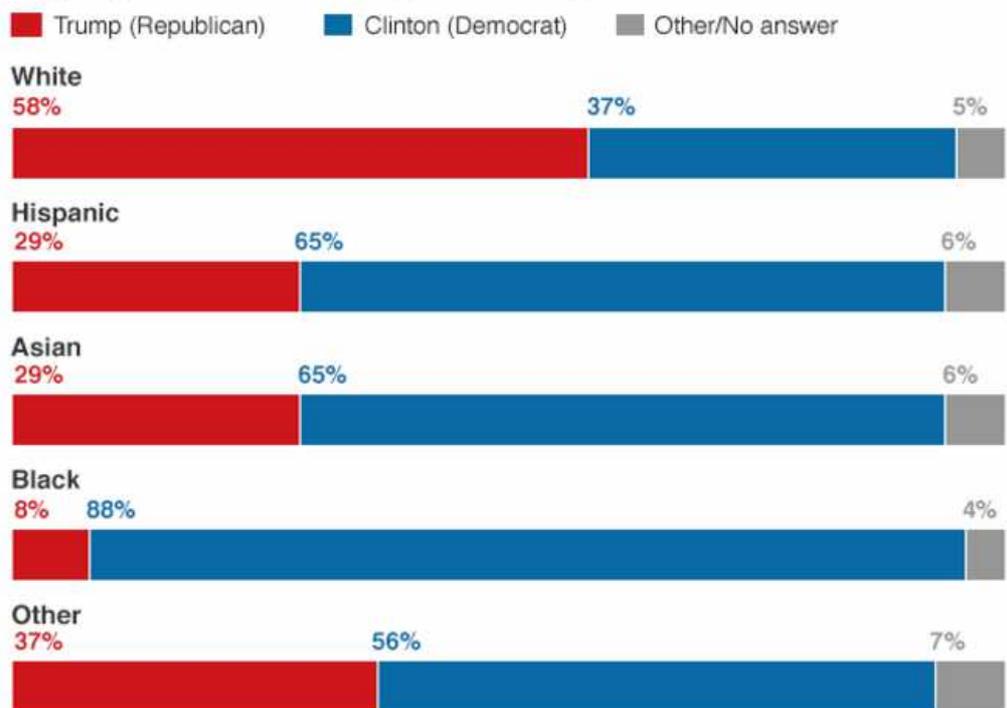
Figure 3: How Trump outperformed Clinton in some of the Great Lake states and Iowa.
Source: economist.com)

In order to get a more precise and complex idea about which social groups voted for Trump and what were the motivations behind their decision, it might prove useful to closely examine the social, ethnic, religious and geographical distribution of the voters who cast their vote for the Republican candidate.

Election Demographics

Not surprisingly, the most powerful demographic group which backed Donald Trump were the working-class whites (see Figure 4). His campaign slogan 'Make America Great Again' symbolized a wide range of issues which resonated with the themes and concerns of this group of voters. Trump was able to identify the problems this specific demographic group was suffering from, and how "lower-class white Americans have been kicked around and mistreated" (Cowie, 2016). It seems to be the catchy campaign slogan referring to the times when the whites felt to be more in control that made the voters from the previously industrial South and Midwest lend their support for Trump.

Majority of white voters opt for Trump



Source: Edison Research for ABC News, AP, CBS News, CNN, Fox News, NBC News



Figure 4: 2016 Presidential election results with respect to race. (Source: BBC, 2016b)

As Cowie (2016) notes, the decline of the poor and working-class whites began in the 1970s when “the growth of the high-technology and service sectors transformed the U.S. economy; [consequently] many blue-collar jobs have vanished, wages have stagnated for less educated Americans”. While rapid development of modern technologies has empowered urban centres on the coasts, the central and southern areas populated by the lower-class whites (apart from other ‘minorities’ such as black Americans in the South) have been offered with much fewer benefits yielded by the new, globalized economy.

Working-class Whites

It might be found intriguing to examine the working-class whites as a “neglected and underrepresented slice of the electorate” (Fukuyama, 2016) more closely. The chief defining characteristic this demographic group possesses is the level of formal education attained. The largest cluster of white Americans voting for Trump hold no college degree. “This population is the heart of red-state America. It dominates the rural landscape of swing states like Ohio, Pennsylvania, Iowa and Wisconsin (see Figure 5). But it is outnumbered in urban centres and in most suburban areas” (Fessenden, 2016). If we compare the map in Figure 5 with the presidential election results, we can observe that Trump’s decision to target his campaign at this specific group while touring the country proved its estimated worth.

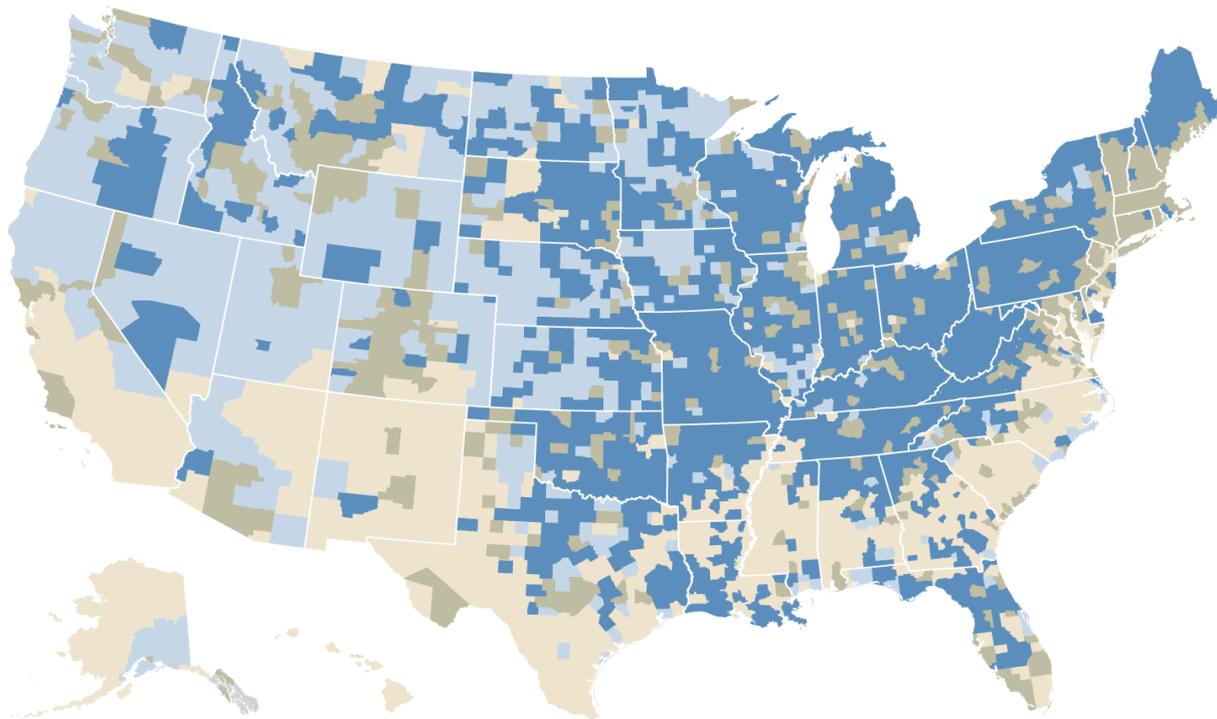


Figure 5: White educational-attainment populations calculated based on proportions in the over-25 population applied to voting-age population. Turnout is calculated for each of seven **race-education groups (white, no college – dark blue; white, some college – light blue; white, college degree – dark grey; Hispanic; black; Asian-American; and other minorities – light grey)** at the state level, and applied to county voting-age population. **Source:** The New York Times

In their article for *the Atlantic* Rogers and Teixeira (2014) claim that “there have been fundamental shifts in the American economy and work force over the past generation, [and while] service-sector employment has continued to grow... only about 25 per cent of workers are blue-collar (craft workers, operatives, transportation workers, and labourers), while 58 per cent are white-collar.” Moreover, rapid development of modern technologies and their impact on the structure of global, and domestic economies respectively has brought about changes affecting mainly the blue-collar jobs. It is the so-called Rust Belt region which represents the national symbol of industrial decline (see Figure 6).

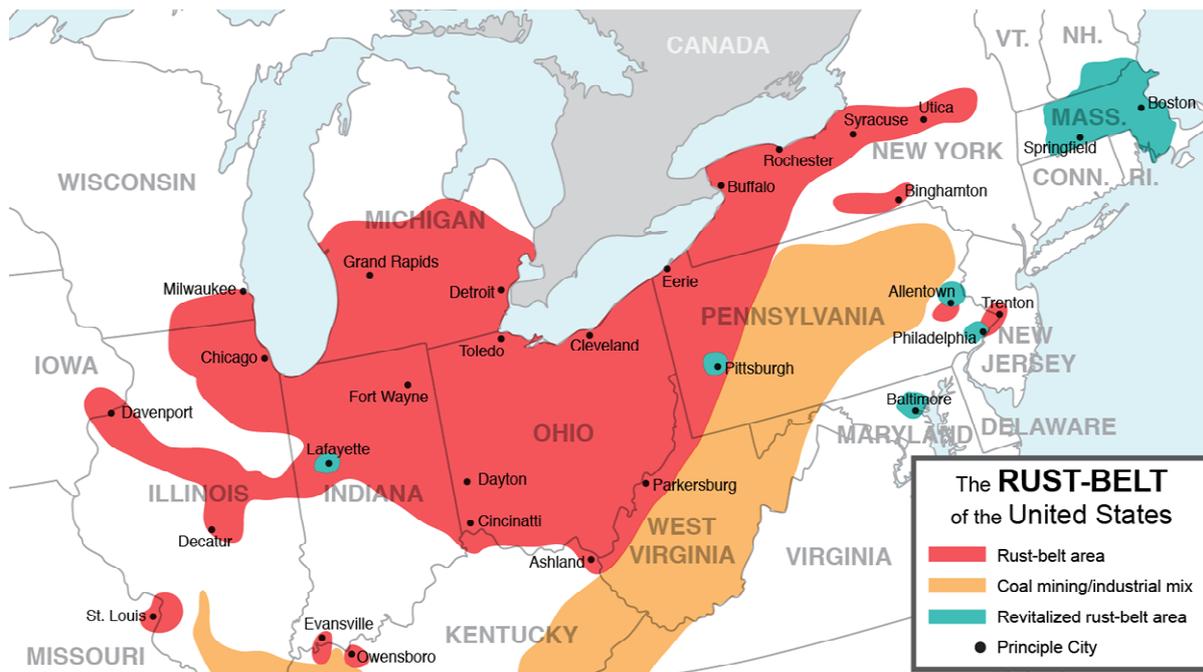


Figure 6: The industrial areas of the Rust Belt. Source: <http://islamforward.com/2016/11/11/the-election-swing-a-white-working-class-rebellion-in-maps/>

The Great Divide already foreshadowed by Sperling et al. has become a definition of the new, globalized working-class whites not only in the United States. To reiterate what Rogers and Teixeira aptly summarize, this demographic group represents the genuine swing voters in the US politics. Not only their loyalty shifts from election to election, but they also constitute the majority – about 55 per cent of voters and of the adult population.

Public Health Issues: Non-College Whites Do Not Explain Everything

Nonetheless, the variable of white Americans without any college degree does not prove to be entirely accurate in explicating Donald Trump's triumph. The team of the Economist 'conducted a mission' to discover a more determining factor that would demonstrate a more comprehensive explanatory potential (Economist, 2016b). Eventually, they identified the public health statistics as a fundamental aspect revealing a more underlying motive behind Trump's success.

The authors claim that the categories comprising the variables of white Americans holding no college degree as well as declining health constitute a source of complex explanation for the results of the 2016 US presidential election. Their conclusions derive from the mass of statistical data generated by the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation at the University of Washington. The researchers analyzed the county-level information about life expectancy, the prevalence of obesity, diabetes, heavy drinking and habits related to engaging in regular physical activity. Subsequently, it was concluded that "together, these variables explain 43% of Mr Trump's gains over Mr Romney [in support for the Republican candidate in 2012 and 2016 presidential election], just edging out the 41% accounted for by the share of non-college whites" (Economist, 2016b; see Figure 7).

Vitality and the vote

United States, health metrics against swing to Donald Trump, by county

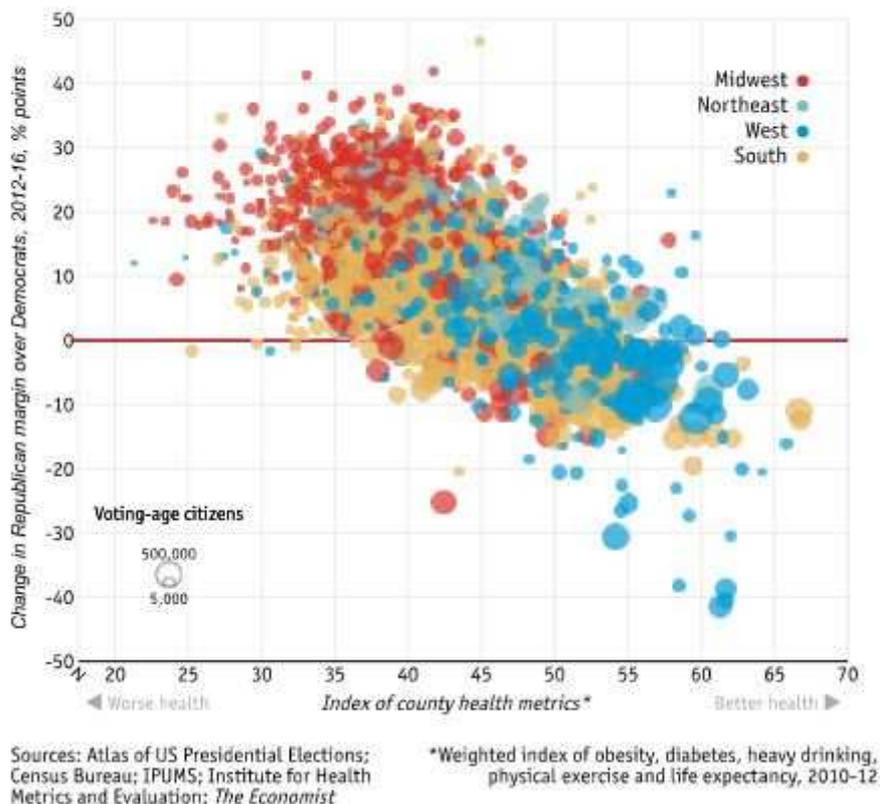


Figure 7: Voting preferences for Trump with respect to the distribution of health issues.
Source: *The Economist*.

Finally, the Economist carries on to infer that “if diabetes were just 7 % less prevalent in Michigan, Mr Trump would have gained 0.3 fewer percentage points there, enough to swing the state back to the Democrats [and] if an additional 8 % of people in Pennsylvania engaged in regular physical activity, and heavy drinking in Wisconsin were 5 % lower, Mrs Clinton would be set to enter the White House” (ibid.). Interestingly, the correlation between failing health and this specific demographic group appears to be the consequence of the process of deindustrialisation – higher unemployment rate implies lower life expectancy, which are both jointly responsible for securing popular backing for Donald Trump in key swing states, thus enabling him to take office as the 45th President of the United States.

Conclusion

Although Donald Trump himself pinpointed that the voting power of some Midwestern states does not correspond with the current demographic situation, i.e. the number of electors does not currently reflect the faithful representation of the population (after all Clinton earned about three million of popular votes more²), he was apparently very much aware of this fact while campaigning for his presidency - at least that is what plentiful

² See https://ballotpedia.org/Presidential_election,_2016

analyses of his truly marketing strategy indicate (Rivero, 2016). Hence, the campaign was carefully crafted to entice these Americans who seem to be losing particularly in the economic battle in the globalized world. Most importantly, it appears to be a psychological 'warfare' for the souls of those Americans afflicted by civilization diseases directly linked to their lifestyle habits established as a response to their despair.

References

- [1] authored, W. (2016) 'John Sperling', in *Wikipedia*. Available at: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Sperling (Accessed: 31 December 2016).
- [2] BBC (2016) *Trump: I could have won popular vote if I needed to*. Available at: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-37992573> (Accessed: 31 December 2016).
- [3] BBC (2016b) *US election 2016: Trump victory in maps*. Available at: <http://www.bbc.com/news/election-us-2016-37889032> (Accessed: 31 December 2016).
- [4] Blyth, M. (2016) *Global Trumpism*. Available at: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2016-11-15/global-trumpism> (Accessed: 31 December 2016).
- [5] Cowie, J. (2016) *The Great White Nope*. Available at: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/reviews/review-essay/2016-10-17/great-white-nope> (Accessed: 31 December 2016).
- [6] Economist, T. (2016a) *Epic fail*. Available at: <http://www.economist.com/news/united-states/21710024-how-mid-sized-error-led-rash-bad-forecasts-epic-fail> (Accessed: 31 December 2016).
- [7] Economist, T. (2016b) *Illness as indicator*. Available at: <http://www.economist.com/news/united-states/21710265-local-health-outcomes-predict-trumpward-swings-illness-indicator> (Accessed: 31 December 2016).
- [8] Economist, T. (2016c) *The trump era*. Available at: <http://www.economist.com/news/leaders/21709951-his-victory-threatens-old-certainties-about-america-and-its-role-world-what-will-take> (Accessed: 31 December 2016).
- [9] Economist, T. (2016d) *Trump succeeds where health is failing*. Available at: <http://www.economist.com/blogs/graphicdetail/2016/11/daily-chart-13> (Accessed: 31 December 2016).
- [10] Edsall, T.B. (2012) *White working chaos*. Available at: <http://campaignstops.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/06/25/white-working-chaos/> (Accessed: 31 December 2016).
- [11] Ehrenfreund, M. and Guo, J. (2016) *A massive new study debunks a widespread theory for Donald Trump's success*. Available at: https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2016/08/12/a-massive-new-study-debunks-a-widespread-theory-for-donald-trumps-success/?utm_term=.6715e31badae (Accessed: 31 December 2016).
- [12] Fessenden, F. (2016) *Donald Trump's big bet on less educated whites*. Available at: http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/11/07/us/how-trump-can-win.html?_r=0 (Accessed: 31 December 2016).
- [13] Frank, T. (2004) *American psyche*. Available at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2004/11/28/books/review/american-psyche.html> (Accessed: 31 December 2016).
- [14] Fukuyama, F. (2016) *Trump and American political decay*. Available at: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2016-11-09/trump-and-american-political-decay> (Accessed: 31 December 2016).
- [15] Press, P. (2004) *Not red vs. Blue states, but 'retro' vs. 'Metro'*. Available at: <http://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/not-red-vs-blue-states-but-retro-vs-metro-71722222.html> (Accessed: 31 December 2016).
- [16] Reston, M. and Collinson, S. (2016) *How Donald Trump won*. Available at: <http://edition.cnn.com/2016/11/09/politics/donald-trump-wins-election-2016> (Accessed: 31 December 2016).
- [17] Rivero, C. (2016) *How marketing helped Donald Trump win the 2016 election*. Available at: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/politics/2016-election/trump-campaign-marketing/> (Accessed: 10 February 2017).
- [18] Rogers, J. and Teixeira, R. (2014) *America's forgotten majority*. Available at: <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2000/06/americas-forgotten-majority/378242/> (Accessed: 31 December 2016).
- [19] Rosin, H. (2004) *Red, blue and lots of green (washingtonpost.com)*. Available at: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A62936-2004Oct25.html> (Accessed: 31 December 2016).