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ELECTION 2020

Trump Loses Ground in Suburbs Key to His Path in Several States

Big margins in blue-collar suburban counties in the Great Lakes region helped the president flip those states four years ago

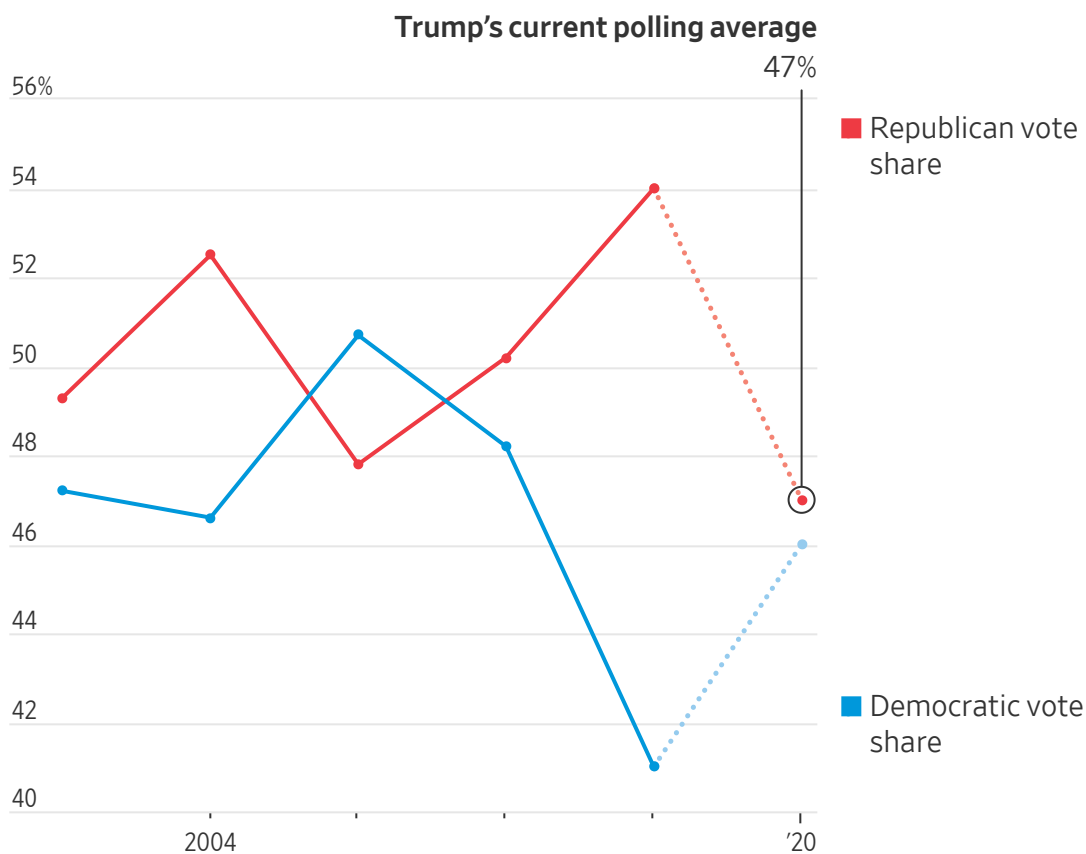
By Dante Chinni/ Photographs by Maddie McGarvey for The Wall Street Journal

Aug. 7, 2020 8:27 am ET

LAKE COUNTY, Ohio—Four years ago Donald Trump ran away with this longtime battleground county, capturing it by more than 15 points. The president's re-election chances could hinge on his ability to replicate that feat in places like this in 2020.

Big margins in Lake and similar blue-collar suburban counties in the Great Lakes region helped Mr. Trump flip several states and win the Electoral College. But polling data in similar counties and interviews here show he has lost some support in places that were central to his 2016 victory.

Share of presidential vote by party in middle suburbs



Sources: WSJ/NBC poll (polling average), Dave Leip's Atlas of U.S. Presidential Elections (results).

Erin Marrott, a longtime Republican voter who pulled the lever for Mr. Trump in 2016, says this year she is voting for former Vice President Joe Biden, the presumptive Democratic nominee. Mrs. Marrott, 49 years old, said she doesn't approve of the way Mr. Trump has comported himself in office and reached her tipping point after the president suggested publicly that injected disinfectants could be a treatment for the coronavirus. Mr. Trump later said he was being sarcastic, but public health officials warned people not to ingest or inject disinfectants.

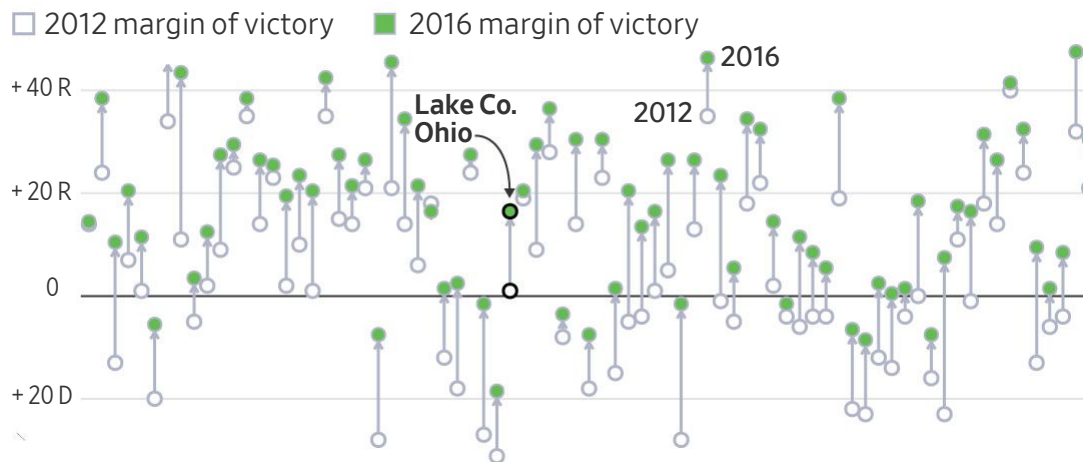
Mrs. Marrott, a nurse practitioner who lives in Concord, said she received a call after that asking if "disinfectant IVs" were available from her employer, the Cleveland Clinic.

"I always believed that any candidate—red or blue—would rise up to meet the challenges of a public health crisis. Even in 2016, I thought Trump could handle a crisis like this, but obviously, he can't," she said. "President Trump has done good things: The stock market is up and unemployment was down before the pandemic. But I cannot vote for someone who is supposed to be a role model and doesn't rise to the occasion."

Trump's Middle Suburb Surge

In 2016, President Trump won the White House by running up the score in a collection of blue-collar suburban counties around the Great Lakes.

Margin of victory in middle suburb counties in 2012 vs. 2016 presidential elections



Source: Dave Leip's Atlas of U.S. Presidential Elections
Maureen Linke/ THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Mr. Trump in 2016 won a swath of counties like Lake that are classified as Middle Suburbs by George Washington University's American Communities Project. The group—which also includes Macomb County, Mich., Racine County, Wis., Beaver County, Pa., and others—is generally less diverse and more blue-collar than other suburban areas that have seen big swings toward Democrats in recent years.

Mr. Trump took those counties by 13 percentage points, compared with a 2-point win for Republican Mitt Romney in those same places in 2012. That success, combined with his strong performance in rural areas, helped Mr. Trump outweigh Democrat Hillary Clinton's strength in cities to win Ohio, Michigan, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin, states that didn't back Mr. Romney and that pushed Mr. Trump over the 270 electoral vote threshold.

Wall Street Journal/NBC News polling this year indicates that Mr. Trump has a 1 point lead over Mr. Biden in those Middle Suburb counties in 2020, within the margin of error and much smaller than his 2016 edge.

Dale Fellows, chairman of the Lake County Republican Party, is bullish on Mr. Trump's chances in Lake and believes he can repeat his 2016 performance. He says his office is seeing a steady stream of supporters wanting signs, magnets and bumper stickers bearing the name Trump.



Lake County Commissioner Jerry Cirino, a Republican, says he has run into some voters who backed the president in 2016 but are fed up with his rhetoric now.

“We were surprised at how many people—nontraditional politically involved people—would come into our office back in 2016. They’d never been into a political party office in their lives. They wanted anything Trump. They just really, really liked Trump,” he said. “And it’s the same thing now.”

Of the four Great Lakes states he flipped, Mr. Trump’s victory was the widest in Ohio, which he won by 8 percentage points, and he is polling better here than in the other three.

Most people interviewed in Lake County—where Mr. Trump outperformed Mr. Romney by double digits—said they think he is likely to win again. But there are signs he cannot count on the lopsided victories here and in similar counties that helped him win key states four years ago.



Downtown Willoughby, Ohio.

Lake County Commissioner Jerry Cirino, a Republican who is running to serve in the Ohio state Senate in 2020, says on the campaign trail, he's running into some voters who backed the president in 2016 but are fed up with his rhetoric now.

“When I knock on a door and someone tells me they don't like him or they're not going to vote for him, 90% of the time it's about stylistic things,” he said. “They're certainly not the hard-core supporters, but they're definitely people who have voted for him, who voted for him last time by all appearances.”

He said he thinks that to some extent that is to be expected after four years in office, and he believes most of Mr. Trump's supporters will stick with him. Mr. Cirino said the president should move the campaign conversation back to the economy if he wants to win.

Lake County, which sits just east of Cleveland, bears all the marks of Trump-friendly terrain. It is older and less racially diverse than the nation as a whole, with fewer college degrees and more manufacturing jobs. The median household income sits about \$3,000 above the national average.



Headlands Beach State Park in Mentor, Ohio, in Lake County.

Ohio has seen increases in its coronavirus case counts in recent weeks. Lake County has seen 37 deaths since the beginning of the pandemic and has an infection rate that places it squarely in the middle of the pack in Ohio, according to data from Johns Hopkins University.

Lake, which was hammered economically in the pandemic initially, has rebounded somewhat. Since spiking to 21% in April, the unemployment rate was back down to 12% in June, still higher than it was before the pandemic.

The Cleveland Clinic has put a nearly \$1 billion expansion on hold, says Dave Wondolowski, executive secretary of the Cleveland Building and Construction Trades Council. The assumption is those buildings will still go up, including a new hospital in Lake County, but no one knows when, he said.

Mr. Wondolowski said he thinks the unemployment situation could improve before Election Day, which could help the president, but he thinks Mr. Trump's handling of the coronavirus and response to recent protests against police have caused some voters to sour on him. "It doesn't feel like there's a ton of support for him," he said.



Democrat Kevin Malecek, pictured at Headlands Beach State Park in Mentor, Ohio, lost his seat as a Lake County commissioner in 2016.

The swing in 2016 voting caught a lot of people by surprise, including Democrat Kevin Malecek, who lost his seat as a county commissioner. He says he led in early voting but lost when late voters broke heavily to Mr. Trump, and he thinks the drivers were less economic than cultural factors. The Obama administration's support for same-sex marriage and defense of abortion rights, he suggested, weren't popular in Lake, where older Catholics are the dominant religious force. Democratic nominee Hillary Clinton was particularly unpopular here, Mr. Malecek said.

Mr. Malecek noted that in 2018, Democratic Sen. Sherrod Brown won Lake County in his re-election bid. Mr. Biden, who was born in Scranton, Pa., has a similar appeal to voters,

Mr. Malecek said. “He’s got that blue-collar mentality that Sherrod does,” he said. “I’m not saying Joe Biden is going to win the county, but that blue-collar mantle is there.”

Mr. Cirino says he expects Mr. Trump to carry Ohio and to win Lake comfortably, but he’s fine with a smaller winning percentage than in 2016.

“You don’t have to win double digits. I still think it’s possible that these polls are faulty,” he said. “But again, 6% would be perfectly fine with me.”



Kids playing at Osborne Park in Willoughby, Ohio.

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