

Did German Americans again support Donald Trump?

In our analysis of the 2016 Presidential election, we showed German Americans paved Donald Trump's road to the White House through Iowa, Wisconsin, Michigan, Ohio and Pennsylvania. We argued the failure of many polls to accurately predict the 2016 elections, especially in so-called American Heartland, must be attributed to the failure of recognizing the distinct electoral behavior of the overlooked German Americans. IN 2020, the Midwest was again a contested battleground and again, analysis of the electoral behavior of German Americans allows better understanding voting patterns in critical swing states.

The German American Experience

Forty-four million Americans claim German ancestry. They constitute a large heritage group, and the largest by far in the Midwest. Between 1850 and 1890, Germans arrived in the millions to settle, transforming the frontier wilderness into farmland and fuelling the Midwestern industrialization with manpower and entrepreneurial spirit. Politically, they were never a unified voting bloc. Many were freethinkers, fighting against slavery and for women's suffrage. They founded newspapers and led labor movements. Others were leading Evangelicals, forming the Missouri Synod, one of the most conservative religious bodies of the country. For decades, political parties vied for the vote of this heterogeneous immigrant group.

Things changed in the wake of two world wars. To avoid stigmatization, German Americans stopped speaking German, anglicized their names and became outwardly more American than any other European immigrant group. As a result, most contemporary German Americans are barely recognizable and are perceived as "white" or "rural" voters. Yet, despite their low political profile, German Americans have shown common voting patterns for decades.

'Ghost Pain of the Past'

Today's German Americans are more conservative than their ancestors. Most counties of heavy German American heritage are rural and vote Republican. We suggested in 2016 the steady economic decline in agriculture and domestic manufacturing in the Midwest made German Americans receptive to populist messages with racist overtones, a view implied by other political scientists and sociologists. A new, empirical study suggests German Americans' support of Trump in 2016 was not a simple outcome of party affiliation or an articulation of racism. Rather, German Americans were enticed by Trump's isolationist agenda, an ideological preference their communities had developed long before 2016. In fact, presidential candidates with policies of protectionism and anti-interventionism have consistently benefited from the German American

vote. In the 1992 race, third-party candidate Ross Perot opposed NAFTA and the first Gulf War. He shared many views on trade and foreign policy with Trump and performed better among German Americans.

Interestingly, the tendency to support anti-interventionist presidential candidates even extended to Obama, who proved more successful than any Democrat among German American voters, Obama proposed a foreign policy agenda that contrasted sharply with that of John McCain, who offered a continuation of George W. Bush's interventionism in the Middle East. German American support for America's first African American president reached close to 60% in many counties of America's heartland, making it very unlikely that racism was the primary force behind the swing toward Trump in 2016. Rather, this shows a consistent attraction to isolationist candidates rooted in the first half of the 20th century. That's when German Americans vehemently opposed U.S. military intervention in Europe while being forced to rapidly assimilate.

But can past traumas still influence voting behavior? Research on the persistence of historical legacies such as voting behavior in former slaveholding counties in the South shows political attitudes can be passed down over generations even while the experiential link to their origin is lost. It appears German American attraction to isolationism is a ghost pain of the past.

What happened in 2020?

Considering German American's attraction to isolationist candidates, Trump faced few vulnerabilities as a result of his "America First"-doctrine: He abolished NAFTA, withdrew from the Paris Agreement on climate change, pulled out of the Iran nuclear deal, started trade wars, snubbed military leaders and announced troop withdrawals from NATO allies. However, a central tenet of isolationism is a strong desire to stay out of trouble through non-involvement. Trump's inability to deescalate domestic crises and his incendiary response to Black Lives Matter protests, in particular, led to a polarization of Midwestern German Americans along the lines of the rural and urban experience. Trump attracted even larger numbers of German American voters in rural areas than in 2016 while urban German Americans withdrew their support. In a rare scenario, Iowa and Wisconsin parted ways in their preference. Judging by the margins, German Americans were highly relevant to the outcome in the Midwest as Cuban Americans were in Southern Florida. This election again showed the inefficacy of coarse concepts such as the "white vote" and the "Hispanic vote" for making accurate regional predictions.



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