

Why are the German-Americans Trump's most loyal supporters?

German-Americans paved Trump's road into the White House -- right through the rural and deindustrialized landscapes of Wisconsin, Michigan, Ohio, and Pennsylvania. When talking about ethnicity and immigration background, we frequently use labels such as African-American, Asian-American, Italian-American and Mexican-American. But despite the fact that currently about 46 Million Americans claim German ancestry and therefore constitute the largest national heritage group in the United States, one hardly ever encounters the term German-American. Who are the German-Americans, and why did they support Donald Trump?

Who are the German-Americans?

Millions of Germans arrived in the United States between 1850 and 1890. Many settled in the Great Lakes Region. As farmers and skilled workers they transformed the mid-western wilderness and fueled the industrialization with manpower and entrepreneurial spirit. Many German-Americans were freethinkers, fighting against slavery and for women's suffrage. They founded newspapers and labor unions. Socialist mayors Emil Seidel and Frank Zeidler dominated Milwaukee politics in the first half of the 20th century. So, how did a mostly progressive immigrant group that shaped the progressive era and set the stage for liberalism turn conservative?

The German-American Trump Connection

After having initially claimed to be of Swedish-American ancestry, Donald Trump later acknowledged his paternal grandfather's birthplace as Kallstadt, located in what had been the Kingdom of Bavaria in the 19th century. However, arguing that German-Americans were attracted to the president-elect based on his German-American heritage is missing the point. The pro-Trump swing vote occurred in states that had been solidly blue for a generation. This region, formerly known as the Blue-State Firewall, correlates with a high concentration of German immigrant settlements in the 19th century as the census map shows.

Progressive German Immigrants turned Conservative German-Americans

Today's descendants of German immigrants in the American Midwest have lost an authentic link to the cultural heritage of their forefathers. This happened through rapid assimilation, partly to avoid stigmatization in the wake of two World Wars. German-Americans stopped using their language. Their newspapers disappeared. They anglicized their names to become more American more quickly than any other European immigrant population. Assimilation to conservatism was part of this process.

Indifferent towards their heritage,

few German-Americans resumed after decades of hibernating a public articulation of their heritage. However, those who do connected to their heritage, have developed practices that bear little resemblance with what life looked like during the migration period. Cultural heritage events construct a coarse definition of Germanness that is centered around Beer, Bratwurst, and Lederhosen and silences the liberal and progressive ideas and actions of many ancestors.

The shift from liberal to conservative views can also be attributed to occupational patterns typical among German immigrants. Agriculture and entrepreneurial craftsmanship generated wealth that sustained families and communities for more than a century until globalization undermined the economic sustainability of family farms and domestic manufacturing. Those who could, left their rural communities and deindustrialized cities. Those who remained suffered twofold as economic hardship coincided with the end of the lifestyle many German-Americans shared. Steady decline, the collapse of communal structures, and the loss of a rich cultural heritage that provided a sense of being, made people receptive for Trump's anti-establishment gestures and his xenophobic messages.

German-Americans are not just the 'White Vote'

Analyzing the electoral patterns in the Great Lakes Region merely in terms of a 'whitelash' underlines the helplessness of political commentators in the efforts to explain the inaccuracy of polls, predictions, and probabilities. Despite the fact that political analysts routinely acknowledge diversity within the Hispanic vote and differentiate between, for example, Mexican-Americans in Texas, Cuban-American in Florida, and Puerto Ricans in New York, they treat the 'white vote' as one monolithic block. Their models ignore specific voting behaviors and ideological patterns that are particular to German-Americans and -- for that matter -- any other national heritage group that is 'ethnically invisible' in mainstream America.

An undifferentiated perception on the 'white vote' ignores the complex histories and the super-diversity among Caucasian Americans. Instead, pollsters and pundits must pay fine-grained attention to migration experiences and voting motives of white Americans. They may realize that their predictions will become more accurate, if they analyze voters of European descent with a higher level of nuance. We may be in for many surprises - and be less surprised on election night.



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