

Understanding California's Trump Country

Note: *The following piece originally appeared at KCET.com on Inauguration Day, 2017.*

AT A JUNE 2016 rally in San Jose, Donald Trump told an eager crowd, “I think we can win the state of California and win it pretty substantially. Now, I’ve been told by all these geniuses, all these brilliant guys — they all say you can’t win the state of California. I think we can.” Characteristic bravado aside, Trump was surely aware of the enormous odds against him in the Golden State: in every presidential election since Bill Clinton won office in 1992, California has given its electoral votes to Democrats, often by a landslide. So it was little surprise that California overwhelmingly supported Hillary Clinton, who garnered almost 62 percent of the vote.

But to end the story with Clinton’s smashing victory in California actually explains very little about the history and meaning of California’s political behavior in 2016, and it hides the contours of a territory too often overlooked by the pundits: California’s Trump Country.

Almost half of California counties—twenty-five—voted for Donald Trump, and he claimed almost 33 percent of the state’s popular vote. These are not numbers to be ignored. And though Trump’s share of the California popular vote was less than Mitt Romney’s 37 percent in 2012, in fourteen counties, Trump not only beat Clinton by more than 10 percent but also beat Romney’s tally from 2012. Within “blue California,” there are clearly strong bastions of red.

Many of the same areas that voted for Trump voted for Bob Dole in 1996, George W. Bush in 2000 and 2004, John McCain in 2008, and Romney in 2012, forming a Republican archipelago that spans the far north and northeastern portion of the state. Studying county-level maps from those elections gives the impression of a kind of perennial political immutability in those regions.

And yet, though these regions have remained consistently red in the previous twenty-five years, their fate was not destiny. The votes in these regions were made by people, yet the narrative to describe them remains surprisingly unsophisticated. Typically, such voters are simply and only described as white and rural. But a thorough analysis by the *Sacramento Bee* revealed a more complex profile: ten of the fourteen very conservative Trump counties are located in far northern California, and the remaining four are in the western Sierra foothills; their residents are approximately 75 percent white, are more likely to have served in the military than residents elsewhere, are commonly older than residents elsewhere (41 percent are fifty or older), and have high rates of gun ownership, and these counties are generally losing their younger residents to outmigration.

If this describes roughly who the residents of Trump Country are, what do they believe? Why did they respond to Trump's fiery but often fuzzy call to "Make America Great Again?"

In some cases, Trump Country's disaffection was demonstrably tied to revulsion with long-standing Democratic agendas like environmental protection. For example, blue-collar workers in Lassen County—which, at 72.7 percent, had the highest proportion of Trump voters of any California county—point to the disappearance of logging jobs due to expanded implementation of the Endangered Species Act (1973). In the 1990s, unemployment in Lassen was staggeringly high, with rates hovering around 13 or 14 percent for much of the decade. The unemployment rate currently sits at just about 6.2 percent (compared to the national average of about 4.7 percent).

Similarly, in naturally water-starved San Joaquin Valley, farmers and ranchers often perceive Democratic-spearheaded environmental initiatives as threats to irrigation. Drive into the heart of the Central Valley, and you will find countless signs celebrating Trump's victory over those who would "steal" water for environmental restoration purposes. This issue was particularly acute in 2016 because of the governor-supported "twin-tunnel" initiative that will deliver more water to Kern County from the San Joaquin Delta.

Yet, in other cases, Trump support appeared to derive from concerns that were not geographically specific but rather inchoate. And in these cases, Trump Country voters battled ghosts of an earlier era, an era in which many of them spent their formative years. In fact, much of California's Trump support can be interpreted as a referendum on California in the 1990s.

One of the most decisive single issues for many voters in California's Trump Country is gun ownership. A quick look at data from the California Office of the Attorney General shows the extraordinarily high proportion of Trump Country residents who have applied for and received concealed carry permits from their local sheriff's office. In the small Mariposa County town of Coulterville, almost half of the population possesses a concealed carry permit, and in dozens of other cities in far northern California, at least 10 percent of the residents do. In these far-flung regions of the state, with limited law enforcement, Trump Country residents regard gun ownership as a simple right of self-defense. And their beliefs are not always unwarranted: Trump Country counties generally have some of the highest violent crime rates in the state—Shasta County, for example, has a higher violent crime rate than does Alameda, whose county seat is Oakland. Consequently, there is still widespread resentment over California's pathbreaking gun control measures of the 1990s, most famously the Roberti-Roos Assault Weapons Control Act, which went into effect in January 1991 and inspired the subsequent 1994 Federal Assault Weapons Ban.

Thus, Trump's campaign claim that "Hillary wants to abolish the Second Amendment"—though untrue—resonated with Trump Country gun owners who were wary of what they perceived to be the hyper-regulatory atmosphere of California. Trump's professed commitment to a "national right to carry" and his opposition to any assault weapon bans put him in good stead among these voters. Unsurprisingly, Trump Country voters turned down Proposition 63, though it won statewide, thereby expanding background checks for ammunition and magazines.

A second issue of central importance to Trump Country voters is illegal immigration, particularly from Mexico. This was most pronounced in Kern County, the largest of the Trump Country counties, where almost 55 percent of voters selected Trump. His outspoken opposition to "illegals"—a term which is often and erroneously used interchangeably with "Mexicans"—clearly stoked enthusiasm for his plan to "build a wall." In the early 1990s, Bakersfield, whose county seat is Kern, witnessed both manufacturing capital flight—with a loss of nearly 5,000 jobs—and a simultaneous surge of Mexican immigration. Though there was no clear correlation between those two developments, it was easy for residents who had fallen on hard times to imagine one. Capitalizing on the growing antipathy toward immigrants statewide, Governor Pete Wilson claimed that there were more than 2 million "illegals" living in California in his bid for Proposition 187 in 1994. Billed as the "SOS" (Save Our State) initiative, Proposition 187 won by a landslide. In few counties was the victory more pronounced than in Kern, where it won by 72.3 percent. The proposition—which would have denied a host of medical and educational services to undocumented immigrants—was later declared unconstitutional, but it nonetheless revealed the depth of animus in the state at that historical moment.

A third political impulse in Trump Country is hostility to taxation. Although both tax propositions—55, which sought to extend the so-called "millionaires' tax" on high earners to support education, and 56, which raised the tax on cigarettes by \$2 a pack—passed statewide, Trump Country residents generally turned them down. Opposition to 55 was not universal among the fourteen Trump Country counties, but opposition to 56 was. Allowing for the possibility that residents in those counties may be more likely to smoke, their opposition to the cigarette tax also drew on antipathy to policy making of the 1990s, when the state raised taxes on both cigarettes and alcohol. Read locally as further intrusions of the so-called "nanny state," these and countless additional "use" taxes implemented to fill the budgetary hole left by Proposition 13 (1978) riled conservatives and led to the passage of Proposition 218. Approved in 1996, the proposition enacted a constitutional amendment that required majority approval of the legislature to raise general taxes and two-thirds of the voters to approve special taxes. By 2000, anti-tax advocates claimed, California had one of the highest overall tax burdens in the United States, though the Legislative Analyst's office demonstrated that the burden was about average, particularly when compared to other western states with similar economies. But as in so many other cases, perception trumped reality.

Donald Trump has already proven to be erratic and dishonest, but it does not follow that his supporters are. Understanding the landscape they inhabit, and the values they cherish, is a step toward understanding an important segment of California: the people we call our neighbors, and even sometimes our friends.