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Democrats Lost the Most in Midwestern 'Factory Towns,' Report Says

The party's struggles in communities that saw declines in manufacturing and union jobs, and health care, could more than offset its gains in metropolitan areas.



Half of Michigan's voting population lives in the type of midsize and small manufacturing communities that the report focused on. Spencer Platt/Getty Images

WASHINGTON — The share of the Democratic presidential vote in the Midwest declined most precipitously between 2012 and 2020 in counties that experienced the steepest losses in manufacturing and union jobs and saw declines in health care, according to a new report to be released this month.

The party's worsening performance in the region's midsize communities — often overlooked places like Chippewa Falls, Wis., and Bay City, Mich. — poses a dire threat to Democrats, the report warns.

Nationally and in the Midwest, Democratic gains in large metropolitan areas have offset their losses in rural areas. And while the party's struggles in the industrial Midwest have been well-chronicled, the 82-page report explicitly links Democratic decline in the region that elected Donald J. Trump in 2016 to the sort of deindustrialization that has weakened liberal parties around the world.

“We cannot elect Democrats up and down the ballot, let alone protect our governing majorities, if we don’t address those losses,” wrote Richard J. Martin, an Iowa-based market researcher and Democratic campaign veteran, in the report titled “Factory Towns.”

Mr. Martin wrote the report in conjunction with Mike Lux and David Wilhelm, fellow Democratic strategists who, like him, also have roots in the region and worked together on President Biden’s 1988 presidential campaign.

For all the arresting data, vivid graphs and deepening red maps presented, Mr. Martin offers little guidance on how to reverse the trends. He does, however, offer a warning, one that Midwestern Democrats have been issuing since Mr. Trump’s victory five years ago.

“If things continue to get worse for us in small and midsize, working-class counties, we can give up any hope of winning the battleground states of the industrial heartland,” writes Mr. Martin.

Surveying ten states — the Great Lakes region as well as Missouri and Iowa — Mr. Martin laid out a set of stark figures.

Comparing Barack Obama’s re-election to President Biden’s election last year, he notes that Democrats gained about 1.55 million votes in the big cities and suburbs of the region surveyed. In the same period, they lost about 557,000 votes in heavily rural counties.

But in midsize and small counties, Democrats lost over 2.63 million votes between the two elections. Dubbing these communities “factory towns,” Mr. Martin separates them by midsize counties anchored around cities with a population of 35,000 or more and smaller counties that lean on manufacturing but do not have such sizable cities.

Taken together, the changes illustrate the degree to which Mr. Obama relied upon the votes of working-class white voters to propel his re-election — and how much Mr. Biden leaned on suburbanites to offset his losses in working-class communities that had once been a pillar of the Democratic coalition.

What alarms Mr. Martin, and many Democratic officials, is whether the party can sustain those gains in metropolitan areas. It’s uncertain, as he puts it, “if moderate suburban Republicans will continue to vote for Democrats when Trump is not on the ballot.”

Democratic gains up and down the ballot in fast-growing Sun Belt states like Arizona and Georgia garnered significant attention last year. Yet Mr. Biden wouldn't have won the presidency and Democrats couldn't have flipped the Senate without victories in 2020 across the Great Lakes region.

However, those wins proved more difficult than many pre-election polls concluded because of the G.O.P.'s continued strength in manufacturing communities. And, the report noted, these communities made up a significant portion of the region's vote share. In Wisconsin, midsize and small manufacturing counties make up 58 percent of the statewide vote. In Michigan, half of the voting population is in these communities.

This is where the decline in manufacturing has been most damaging to Democrats. The ten states included in the survey have lost 1.3 million manufacturing jobs since the beginning of this century.

In the small to midsize "factory town" counties in those states, where support for the Republican presidential nominee grew between 2012 and 2020, the losses were acute: More than 70 percent suffered declines in manufacturing jobs.

The elimination of those jobs also led to declines in health care, according to data from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and the University of Wisconsin Population Health Institute.

In the counties that suffered manufacturing losses and health care declines, Republicans surged between 2012 and 2020. Nearly half of the party's gains in these states came in communities where there were both manufacturing cuts and worsening health care.

Republicans also prospered in communities hit hard by the decline in manufacturing that were predominantly white. With fewer well-paying industry jobs, the power of local unions declined as well, silencing what was always the beating heart of Democratic political organizing in these areas. In 154 such counties, Democrats suffered a net loss of over 613,000 votes between the elections in 2016 and 2020.

Perhaps most striking was the decline in union membership across the region.

Nine of the 10 states included in the survey have accounted for 93 percent of the loss of union members nationwide in the last two decades. And just in the last 10 years, these states have lost 10 percent of their union membership — an average that is three times greater than nationally.