Heartland Elegy

Deindustrialization and Political Realignment in the American Rust Belt

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Introduction

The political allegiances of white working-class Americans have undergone one of the most consequential transformations in modern U.S. history. Once the backbone of the Democratic New Deal coalition, many working-class communities—especially in the Rust Belt—have, over the last two decades, migrated decisively toward the Republican Party. This realignment has reshaped presidential election maps, disrupted the traditional boundaries of the two major parties, and triggered a long-running question: what has caused the collapse of Democratic dominance in places long synonymous with industrial labor, union power, and working-class liberalism?

At the heart of this shift lies a deep structural story. Since the 1970s, the American economy has experienced a profound shift in its employment base, characterized by the offshoring of manufacturing, automation, the decline of union density, and the expansion of precarious service-sector work. For communities built around steel mills, auto plants, and large-scale industrial production, this transition has not only disrupted local labor markets—it has upended social and civic institutions, altered expectations around social mobility, and left many residents uncertain about their place in the national economy. As the industrial middle class frayed, so too did the community networks and political infrastructures that once anchored collective identity. Economic dislocation, once channeled through union halls and party machines into reformist liberal politics, increasingly found new outlets—many of them culturally or ideologically reactionary.

Scholars have proposed competing explanations for this realignment. One school of thought emphasizes material grievances: the loss of well-paying jobs, declining wages, and downward mobility fueling economic populism. Scholars such as William Julius Wilson and

Peter Temin have traced how deindustrialization and structural economic change disproportionately harmed working-class communities, eroding traditional pathways to economic security.[1] A second line of argument points to cultural backlash—a reaction to demographic shifts, perceived status loss, and liberal social values. Diana Mutz, for example, argues that support for Donald Trump in 2016 was driven less by economic hardship than by group-status threat among whites.[2] Still, others focus on the institutional disintegration of civic intermediaries like labor unions and local Democratic organizations, which once offered working-class voters both economic protection and a political voice. As Frymer and Grumbach have shown, the decline of unions as both economic and political institutions weakened the infrastructure that once sustained cross-class Democratic coalitions.[3] These explanations are not mutually exclusive. This work looks to understand how economic, cultural, and institutional dynamics intersect in complex, place-specific ways. National trends provide the context, but it is local structures—unions, churches, political networks, and community memory—that shape how those trends manifest in electoral behavior.

Stephanie Ternullo's *How the Heartland Went Red* provides a compelling intervention into this debate by turning attention away from national averages and toward the local. Her analysis identifies a category of "white, working-class New Deal counties"—counties that supported the Democratic Party from 1932 to 1944, had a high share of industrial employment and remained majority-white and non-Hispanic through 2016, with continued blue-collar employment in construction, transportation, and production sectors.[4] Ternullo's map of these

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[1] William Julius Wilson, *When Work Disappears: The World of the New Urban Poor* (New York: Vintage, 1996); Peter Temin, *The Vanishing Middle Class: Prejudice and Power in a Dual Economy* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2017).
[2] Diana C. Mutz, "Status Threat, Not Economic Hardship, Explains the 2016 Presidential Vote," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 115, no. 19 (2018).
[3] Paul Frymer and Jacob Grumbach, "Labor Unions and White Racial Politics," *American Journal of Political Science* 64, no. 4 (2020).
[4] Stephanie Ternullo, *How the Heartland Went Red* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2024), 13.

counties (reproduced below) highlights a swath of midwestern and Appalachian communities where economic and political histories have long intersected.

White, Working-Class
New Deal Counties, 1932–1944
▨ Yes
☐ No
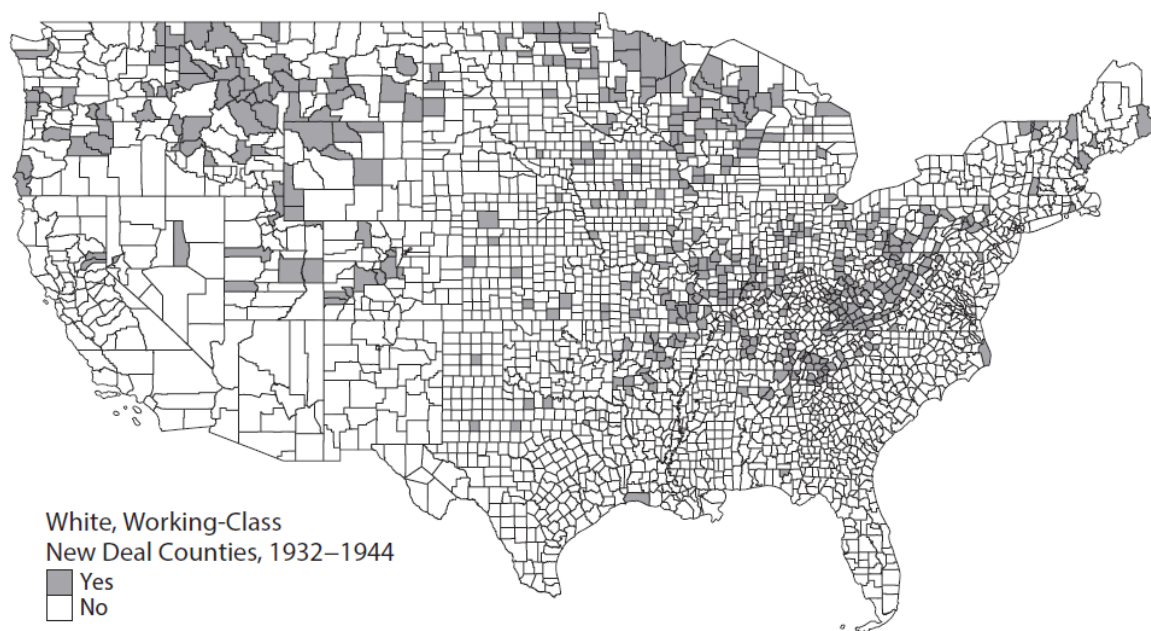
Ternullo's project examines cities and towns where partisan loyalty unraveled unevenly. She emphasizes how local civic infrastructures mediated the expression of economic anxiety. In some places, labor and Democratic Party ties endured; in others, the collapse of these ties left space for cultural resentment, anti-government sentiment, and right-wing realignment. Her conclusion is clear: local forces matter, even in an era of nationalized political discourse. However, her focus on cities limits the applicability of her findings to broader county-level transformations, particularly in places with larger, more diverse geographies and mixed institutional legacies.

This thesis builds upon and extends Ternullo's intervention by conducting a county-level comparative analysis of three emblematic Rust Belt counties: Beaver County, Pennsylvania; Monroe County, Michigan; and Rock County, Wisconsin. Each county shares the attributes Ternullo identifies—white-majority industrial heritage, historical Democratic loyalty, and

postwar economic decline—yet their political trajectories have diverged in important ways. Beaver and Monroe Counties have shifted decisively toward the Republican Party, albeit on different timescales. Meanwhile, Rock County has remained within Democratic control. What explains these divergences, given shared macroeconomic exposure and similar demographics? I address this question across three analytical dimensions:

1. Quantitative analysis of county-level time-series data on employment, union membership, GDP by sector, wage stagnation, inflationary pressures, and presidential vote share;

2. Spatial visualization of precinct-level electoral shifts, demographic change, and economic indicators to trace patterns of internal variation;

3. Qualitative fieldwork, including over 40 anonymized interviews across all three counties, conducted in spring 2025, with residents, union leaders, former industrial workers, political organizers, and public officials.

By triangulating these methods, this thesis demonstrates that political realignment in postindustrial counties is best understood as the outcome of local institutional legacies interacting with structural economic change. In counties like Rock, where labor and civic ties endured and were bolstered by Republican opposition, Democratic affiliation proved more resilient despite economic stress. In counties like Beaver and Monroe, the collapse of industrial employment coincided with the rise of cultural grievance politics—amplified by declining union influence and shifting religious and community identities as local Republican parties presented themselves as viable alternatives.

This project does not aim to generalize from three cases to the entire Rust Belt. Rather, it uses them as a window into broader dynamics shaping contemporary democratic engagement and the weakening of cross-class political coalitions. In doing so, it contributes to an ongoing body of literature that seeks to reconcile the nationalization of political discourse with the enduring importance of place-based identity and institutional mediation. Through its comparative, grounded approach, this thesis sheds light on how different communities with shared histories of labor, decline, and whiteness have charted divergent political paths in the postindustrial era—and what those paths suggest about the future of American democratic politics.

To fully understand the divergent trajectories of these counties, it is first necessary to situate them within the broader political, economic, and institutional transformations of the American Rust Belt since the mid-20th century. The contemporary realignment did not emerge in isolation—it was the product of long-term shifts in industrial structure, union power, cultural politics, and party strategy. The following sections trace this arc, offering a historical and theoretical foundation for the county-level analysis that follows. By outlining the rise and erosion of the New Deal order, the social costs of deindustrialization, and the competing explanations for political change in working-class America, it sets the stage for an examination of how local institutions shaped, delayed, or accelerated partisan realignment on the ground.

Industrial Expansion and the Rise of Unions (1930s - 1970s)

The mid-20th century marked the apex of the Rust Belt's industrial economy. Massive manufacturing expansion during and after the New Deal era turned the Great Lakes and Midwest

into an industrial powerhouse. Pro-labor policies like the Wagner Act (1935) facilitated a surge in unionization across factories and mines, giving organized labor a strong foothold. By the late 1930s, industrial unions affiliated with the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) had established strongholds across America's factory towns.[5] This era saw the forging of the New Deal coalition: a political alliance in which blue-collar workers and union members became core supporters of the Democratic Party, backing Franklin D. Roosevelt and his successors. Union organizations not only bargained for better conditions but mobilized their members politically, helping sustain Democratic dominance in these regions.

Demographically, the industrial boom attracted millions, including many African Americans who migrated north. For a time, shared economic gains muted ethnic and racial tensions within the Democratic camp. As Ira Katznelson and others have argued, the coalition's success depended on maintaining a precarious balance between its white Southern and Northern minority factions, often at the cost of racial equity in labor and welfare policy.[6] Still, through the 1940s and 1950s, strong labor unions and steady manufacturing growth underwrote broad middle-class prosperity in the Rust Belt. Political sociologists have long stressed that during this period, class—particularly union status—was a dominant cleavage in American electoral behavior. Unionized workers overwhelmingly supported Democrats, while non-union workers and white-collar professionals were more ideologically fragmented.[7] The political and economic strength of the industrial working class, in other words, was not only a function of material conditions but of embedded institutional networks that translated class identity into political cohesion. In short, the industrial expansion of the mid-century created both the material

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[5] Nelson Lichtenstein, *State of the Union: A Century of American Labor* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002).

[6] Ira Katznelson, *When Affirmative Action Was White: An Untold History of Racial Inequality in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2005).

[7] Seymour Martin Lipset, *Political Man: The Social Bases of Politics* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1960); Herbert McClosky and Paul Hoffmann, "Class, Status, and Party," *American Political Science Review* 54, no. 3 (1960).

foundation for a blue-collar middle class and the organizational foundation for sustained Democratic dominance.

Economic Decline and Deindustrialization (1970s - 1990s)

By the 1970s, parts of the industrial boom that had powered the Rust Belt's rise began to unravel. A confluence of globalization, automation, and policy shifts led to the shuttering of factories and the loss of millions of manufacturing jobs. Foreign competition (especially from Japan and later China) eroded American industrial dominance, while new technologies reduced the demand for labor in remaining plants. Free trade policies like the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) of 1994 and China's accession to the World Trade Organization in 2001 accelerated these trends by encouraging companies to shift production abroad. While these shifts spurred global economic integration, they also decimated the stable, unionized jobs that had once anchored working-class prosperity in U.S. industrial regions.[8]

The social fallout was profound. The disappearance of manufacturing jobs concentrated poverty in urban centers and left many workers stranded far from new sources of employment.[9] Once-thriving steel towns and auto hubs were hollowed out. Factory closures led to widespread unemployment and a steep decline in intergenerational mobility. According to Raj Chetty and coauthors, children growing up in many Rust Belt counties during this period faced some of the lowest upward mobility prospects in the country.[10] The one-income, union-supported family model was increasingly replaced by unstable, low-wage service sector work with few benefits.

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[8] David Autor, David Dorn, and Gordon Hanson, "The China Shock: Learning from Labor Market Adjustment to Large Changes in Trade," *Annual Review of Economics* 8 (2016).
[9] Wilson, *When Work Disappears*.
[10] Raj Chetty et al., "The Fading American Dream: Trends in Absolute Income Mobility Since 1940," *Science* 356, no. 6336 (2017).

As institutional ties frayed, new political narratives emerged. The late 1970s and 1980s saw the rise of so-called "Reagan Democrats": white working-class voters, especially ethnic Catholics in Rust Belt cities, who crossed party lines in response to Republican appeals to economic revival, patriotism, and law-and-order.[11] While many of these voters still harbored economic grievances, they started to doubt that Democrats could offer effective solutions. What began in the Reagan era as a slow erosion of party loyalty would, by the end of the century, become a deeper reordering of partisan identity across the industrial Midwest.

Yet even as the region moved in a broadly similar direction, these shifts were not uniform. Some counties retained civic threads that buffered against total political collapse; others were left with a vacuum. This variation—how communities navigated shared structural shocks with different institutional legacies—helps undergird the localized analysis to come.

The Erosion of the New Deal Coalition (1990s - 2008)

Entering the 1990s, Democrats still counted on a significant share of white working-class voters in the Midwest and industrial Northeast. However, this coalition was under strain. Republicans made steady inroads among white, non-college-educated voters during the 1990s and early 2000s, especially among men. Culturally charged issues became prominent in political discourse, potentially drawing some working-class voters to the GOP. In *What's the Matter with Kansas?*, Thomas Frank contended that Democrats' pivot toward cultural liberalism and professional-class centrism during the Clinton era alienated many white working-class voters. Frank pointed to Kansas and similar heartland areas as evidence that issues like abortion, school

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[11] Stanley Greenberg, Middle Class Dreams: *The Politics and Power of the New American Majority* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995).

prayer, and gun control had redefined political loyalties, allowing Republicans to assemble a dominant coalition of economic elites and cultural conservatives. In Frank's view, the white working class was defecting from its New Deal roots because Democrats had become the party of trade deals and professional-class sensibilities, leaving an opening for the GOP to champion (at least rhetorically) the "common man."[12]

Not all scholars saw this shift as uniform or inevitable, however. Larry Bartels challenged the notion of a massive white working-class exodus to the GOP. His analysis of voting patterns found that the biggest decline in Democratic support among white low-income voters occurred in the South as part of a broader racial realignment—not necessarily in the unionized North.[13] Similarly, Jeff Stonecash et al. observed that through the 1990s, Democrats continued to retain support among less-affluent white voters outside the South by emphasizing "bread-and-butter" programs like Social Security and Medicare.[14] Their data showed that Democratic gains still came disproportionately from lower-income families, suggesting the party retained some working-class appeal through the Clinton years. In short, the erosion of New Deal voter loyalties was real but regionally uneven—gradual in the Rust Belt, even as it accelerated in the South.

A ripple in this realignment was cleavage by gender and union status. Research by Brady et al. found that the white working-class drift to the GOP was driven largely by men, while working-class women did not fit the same pattern.[15] In fact, the partisan gender gap widened: white working-class men became increasingly Republican after the 1980s, but women in the same class often remained more Democratic-leaning, tempering the overall shift. Brady and

[12] Thomas Frank, *What's the Matter with Kansas? How Conservatives Won the Heart of America* (New York: Henry Holt, 2004).

[13] Larry M. Bartels, "What's the Matter with What's the Matter with Kansas?" *Quarterly Journal of Political Science* 1, no. 2 (2006).

[14] Jeff Stonecash, Mark Brewer, and Mack D. Mariani, *Diverging Parties: Social Change, Realignment, and Party Polarization* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2003).

[15] David Brady, Jason Beckfield, and Martin Seeleib-Kaiser, "Economic Globalization and the Welfare State in Affluent Democracies, 1975 - 2001," *American Sociological Review* 70, no. 6 (2005).

colleagues also questioned simplistic "culture war" explanations—their analysis did not find that moral issues alone drove the working class rightward, since unionized workers (even white ones) continued to prioritize economic issues more than social issues. Indeed, union membership itself remained a powerful predictor of Democratic voting. Frymer and Grumbach showed that union members were (and are) far more likely to focus on class-based concerns and cross-racial solidarity, whereas non-union white workers are more susceptible to racial appeals.[16] This implies that the decline of unions in the Rust Belt during the '90s weakened a force that had once kept white working-class voters aligned with the Democrats on economic grounds. As unions shrank, more of these voters were exposed to Republican messaging on taxes, crime, and social change without a countervailing labor narrative.

Racial politics also played a role in fracturing the New Deal coalition. By the 1990s and 2000s, explicit racism was less socially acceptable, but issues like affirmative action, welfare, and crime became proxies for racial anxieties. Some white Rust Belt voters felt that Democrats catered to minority interests at the expense of "ordinary" Americans—a sentiment the GOP often encouraged through tough-on-crime and anti-welfare rhetoric. For example, controversies over welfare reform and affirmative action in the 1990s saw Republicans using racialized messaging to peel off white support in blue-collar areas (e.g., ads about "welfare queens" or opposing quotas). At the same time, Democrats were gaining among educated suburbanites and racial minorities, contributing to a new regional polarization: urban centers (with growing Black and immigrant populations and more college graduates) stayed solidly Democratic, while many rural and small-town communities (predominantly white and less-educated) trended Republican. By the 2000s, the Rust Belt displayed a stark urban-rural split: its big cities (e.g. Detroit, Cleveland, Milwaukee) and union-heavy towns remained Democratic, but smaller industrial cities and rural

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[16] Frymer and Grumbach, "Labor Unions and White Racial Politics."

counties increasingly backed Republicans, reflecting what observers call a cultural and geographic divergence. This divergence was evident in electoral maps—for instance, John Kerry in 2004 won the cities of Cleveland and Pittsburgh, but lost most of the surrounding counties in Ohio and Pennsylvania. Katherine Cramer's fieldwork in Wisconsin during the 2000s captured the brewing resentment of rural voters, who perceived that "urban elites" and racial minorities were benefiting from government while their own communities were left behind.[17]

The upshot is clear: by the close of the 2000s, many of the Rust Belt's white working-class communities were already in motion—politically dislocated, institutionally unmoored, and increasingly susceptible to Republican appeals framed around loss, restoration, and cultural recognition. The groundwork had been laid for the dramatic partisan realignment that would accelerate in the next decade.

Realignment and the Trump Effect (2008 - 2016)

The election of Barack Obama in 2008 and the subsequent rise of Donald Trump marked a watershed in Rust Belt politics. During Obama's two terms, economic stress and racial-cultural backlash combined to reshuffle party coalitions. The Great Recession (2008 - 2009) hit manufacturing regions hard, and although the economy recovered by 2016 in macro terms, many working-class communities felt left behind. Amy Goldstein's *Janesville: An American Story* (2017) offers a powerful micro-level account of this transformation, chronicling the closure of the GM plant in Janesville, WI, and the social fragmentation that followed. Her narrative illustrates how deindustrialization not only undermined material security but also civic cohesion,

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[17] Katherine J. Cramer, The Politics of Resentment: Rural Consciousness in Wisconsin and the Rise of Scott Walker (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016).

with laid-off workers splintering into different political and cultural responses: some sought retraining, others blamed immigrants or elites, and many lost faith in institutions entirely.[18]

The stage was set for 2016, when long-simmering trends culminated in what some dubbed a "Rust Belt revolt." That year, traditionally Democratic states like Pennsylvania, Michigan, and Wisconsin flipped to the Republican column, providing Trump's margin of victory in the Electoral College. This shocking result represented the climax of the realignment that had been gradually unfolding. White working-class voters in the Rust Belt, once reliably Democratic, voted for Donald Trump by large margins. Why did this happen? A rich body of literature has explored the causes, generally pointing to a mix of economic populism and racial-ethnic "status threat."

One line of explanation emphasizes economic grievance and populism. Trump campaigned as a champion of the working class, vowing to bring back manufacturing jobs and renegotiate trade deals. His anti-free trade rhetoric and promises to revive industry resonated in areas ravaged by factory closures. According to Peter Francia, Trump succeeded in cutting into the Democrats' traditional advantage among union households, leveraging trade issues more than any prior Republican to give himself a crucial edge in Rust Belt swing states.[19] Trump explicitly blamed NAFTA, China's WTO entry, and other globalist policies for the region's decline, a message that validated the experiences of many displaced workers. Indeed, Michael McQuarrie argues that by 2016 white working-class Midwestern voters had accumulated years of latent discontent with the Democratic Party's shift toward a post-industrial, "knowledge economy" platform, but lacked a viable alternative until Trump's emergence.[20] Trump's blunt economic

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[18] Amy Goldstein, *Janesville: An American Story* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2017).
[19] Peter Francia, "The 2016 Election and the Demise of the Democratic Union Voter," in *Working-Class Politics in the Trump Era*, ed. David N. Gibbs (Routledge, 2020).
[20] Michael McQuarrie, "The Revolt of the Rust Belt: Place and Politics in the Age of Anger," *British Journal of Sociology* 68, no. S1 (2017).

nationalism—"America First"—offered that alternative. Voting patterns suggest this appeal activated new voters: turnout surged in rural and small-town counties. Analysis by Morgan and Lee found that many 2016 Trump voters were either Obama voters in 2012 or non-voters in 2012, disproportionately from the white working class.[21] In particular, some previously disengaged rural white voters (e.g. white agricultural workers) turned out at higher rates, contributing significantly to the GOP's gains. This indicates that Trump's populist messaging not only persuaded some swing Democrats but also mobilized new segments of the white working class who hadn't voted before—a powerful combination in closely balanced states.

Another influential line of research, however, stresses racial and cultural attitudes as the decisive factors in 2016. In Diana Mutz's aforementioned analysis, voters who felt a sense of threat from America's changing demographics and global standing were far more likely to flip to Trump than those who merely experienced personal economic woes.[22] Many Trump supporters perceived that "American greatness" was slipping—that China was rising economically and that traditionally high-status groups (whites, Christians, men) were losing cultural primacy at home. Trump's rhetoric explicitly tapped into these anxieties, with hardline stances on immigration, promises to ban Muslim travelers, and thinly veiled appeals to white identity (e.g. invoking crime in "inner cities" and the need for law and order). Reny et al. (2019) zeroed in on the pivotal "Obama-to-Trump" voters and found that concerns about immigration and racial integration—rather than local economic conditions—best explained their shift.[23] In other words, white voters who switched from Obama in 2012 to Trump in 2016 were far more likely to cite fears of immigrants, racial minorities, and cultural change than say they lost a job or struggled

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[21] Stephen Morgan and Jiwon Lee, "The White Working Class and Voter Turnout in the 2016 Presidential Election," *Socius* 4 (2018).
[22] Mutz, "Status Threat."
[23] Tyler Reny, Loren Collingwood, and Ali Valenzuela, "Vote Switching in the 2016 Election: How Immigration and Racial Attitudes Shaped Trump Support," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 83, no. 1 (2019).

financially. This aligns with other studies of that election: for example, those who believed whites were becoming discriminated against or who expressed resentment toward rising diversity were among the most likely to support Trump (Fear of losing status, not economic hardship, drove voters in the 2016 presidential election). By contrast, measurable economic distress (like income declines or unemployment) did not statistically predict Trump support once these status concerns were accounted for. Thus, the Rust Belt realignment in 2016 can be seen as part economic populism and part racial-cultural backlash—a potent fusion that Trump embodied.

Crucially, these dynamics were intertwined. Economic decline supplied the narrative of loss, and racial/cultural politics channeled the blame. Baccini and Weymouth note that in communities hit hardest by manufacturing layoffs, white voters interpreted their economic pain through a lens of group status, making them receptive to candidates like Trump who "defend racial hierarchy" while addressing distress.[24] In contrast, Black and other minority voters in those same areas did not flock to Trump, at least not in 2016. At that point, many actually doubled down in favor of Democrats, seeing Trump's appeals as hostile to their group interests. The result was a sharpening racial polarization in Rust Belt voting. Education level also emerged as a stronger cleavage than ever: non-college-educated whites voted Republican by unprecedented margins, whereas whites with college degrees (especially women) swung toward the Democrats, contributing to GOP losses in some suburban areas. Christopher Zingher documents this widening "diploma divide", showing that by 2016 - 2020, educational attainment had become one of the best predictors of party preference—a stark reversal from decades past when union membership or income was more predictive.[25]

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[24] Leonardo Baccini and Stephen Weymouth, "Gone for Good: Deindustrialization, White Voter Backlash, and US Presidential Voting," *American Political Science Review* 115, no. 2 (2021).
[25] Christopher Zingher, "The Diploma Divide and the Decline of Class Voting," *Political Behavior* 44 (2022).

These shifts amounted to a historic realignment across the Rust Belt. In 2016, Donald Trump carried union-heavy counties in Wisconsin, Pennsylvania, and Ohio—some of which had not voted Republican since the Reagan era—signaling a collapse of longstanding Democratic strongholds.[26] His brand of economic nationalism and cultural grievance politics capitalized on decades of industrial decline and disaffection, crystallizing trends that had been slowly reshaping working-class white voter behavior.

Joe Biden, Donald Trump, and Modern-Day Rust Belt Politics (2016-Present)

The 2018 and 2020 elections largely confirmed the Rust Belt's political realignment, though with some moderation. In 2018, Democrats regained ground in several Rust Belt suburbs and secured governorships in Michigan, Wisconsin, and Pennsylvania by assembling a coalition of urban, minority, and educated voters. However, they continued to lose support in many rural and working-class white areas. In 2020, Joe Biden, presenting himself as a moderate Democrat appealing to "regular folks," managed to rebuild the so-called Blue Wall, reclaiming Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin for Democrats. These victories were narrow, often by 1-2 percentage points, highlighting the persistent Republican strength among white working-class voters. Biden's win did mitigate some losses—for instance, he modestly improved Democratic performance in union-heavy counties compared to 2016—but the overarching pattern of polarization remained. The 2020 results underscored continuity: areas that had swung hard to Trump in 2016, such as rural manufacturing counties, largely remained Republican, while Democrats maximized turnout in major cities and made further gains in affluent suburbs, often at the expense of Republicans. Racial and cultural attitudes continued to be strong predictors;

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[26] Chris Cillizza, "The 59 Most Important Counties in the 2016 Election," *CNN*, November 19, 2016.

surveys indicated that racial resentment and nativist sentiments in 2020 were still closely associated with Republican voting, mirroring trends from 2016. In essence, Trump's influence solidified a new coalition—one where the Rust Belt's white working class became a core Republican base, and its urban, multiethnic centers formed a core Democratic base, with education levels increasingly dividing the two camps.

In the aftermath of Trump's first term, Rust Belt politics maintained these realigned coalitions. The elections of 2022 and especially 2024 indicate that the region remains fiercely competitive. Democrats under Biden initially recaptured some lost working-class support through an emphasis on economic policy. Biden's 2020 platform, dubbed "Bidenomics," included significant public investments in infrastructure, manufacturing, and job creation targeted at industrial and rural areas. Union leaders praised Biden's pro-labor National Labor Relations Board and support for union drives, and union members' support for Democrats increased in 2020 compared to 2016. Data from the 2022 midterms and various polls indicated that Democrats slightly improved their standing among white voters without college degrees relative to Trump's peak, though the GOP still held a clear majority of that group. Alan Abramowitz observed that the U.S. electorate has become highly "calcified" or polarized: voters' partisan choices are closely tied to their social identities (education level, racial group, religion, etc.), making dramatic reversals unlikely. This suggested that while Democrats might chip away at the margins of the GOP's working-class white base with targeted economic messaging, the overall realignment may endure.

Donald Trump's victory in the 2024 presidential election marked what many see as the full consolidation of the Rust Belt's political transformation. His reelection—secured by flipping back key states like Pennsylvania, Michigan, and Wisconsin—assured the durability of the

post-2016 realignment. Trump's coalition not only held strong among non-college-educated white voters but also expanded across new demographic terrain. He gained ground among Latino men (from 36% nationally in 2020 to 54% in 2024), chipped away at rural Black support, and made modest inroads with some Native American communities in states like New Mexico and Montana.[27]

These shifts came despite Democrats' massive turnout operations and economic messaging under "Bidenomics." Kamala Harris had attempted to recapture parts of Biden's 2020 coalition, focusing on suburban women, union households, and communities of color. But turnout was down in key urban strongholds, and support among first-time and younger voters weakened. According to exit polls, Trump carried a majority of first-time voters, up from just 32% in 2020, and won a majority of men under 40.[28] The final result was decisive: Trump won the Electoral College and the popular vote, flipping back all seven swing states and delivering a broader margin than in 2016. As National Review observed, "Trump flipped Pennsylvania entirely without reference to counties more rural than the national average"—his gains came instead from dense, mixed-income suburbs and blue-collar cities that had once formed the core of the Democratic coalition.[29] That coalition now appears fractured, and the populist right firmly entrenched in many working-class Rust Belt communities.

Viewed historically, many of these political transformations operate within a three-act narrative: (1) an age of industrial prosperity and union-led Democratic loyalty, (2) a painful era of deindustrialization that loosened those loyalties, and (3) a realignment in which cultural and economic resentments pushed much of the white working class toward the Republican Party. This thesis investigates the unresolved questions at the heart of that transformation. Despite

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[27] Cortellessa, Eric. "How Trump Won." *TIME*, Nov. 7, 2024.
[28] Ibid.
[29] McLaughlin, Dan. "Where Trump Won: The Rust Belt." *National Review*, Nov. 26, 2024.

broad structural trends, Rust Belt counties have not moved in unison—some have swung decisively toward the Republican Party, while others remain competitive. Through a comparative analysis, I explore how local institutions, civic infrastructure, and economic narratives mediate political behavior. In doing so, I show how community-level forces can either accelerate or resist national patterns of realignment—and why the Rust Belt remains a critical, if volatile, determinant of American electoral outcomes.

Methodology and Research Design

This project adopts a mixed-methods design to examine political realignment in three Rust Belt counties—Beaver County, PA; Monroe County, MI; and Rock County, WI—with a focus on how deindustrialization, institutional erosion, and civic disaffiliation have shaped electoral outcomes. These counties were selected for their shared industrial heritage and demographic similarities, but divergent partisan trajectories: Beaver as a Republican stronghold, Monroe as a recent GOP flip, and Rock as a resilient Democratic outlier.
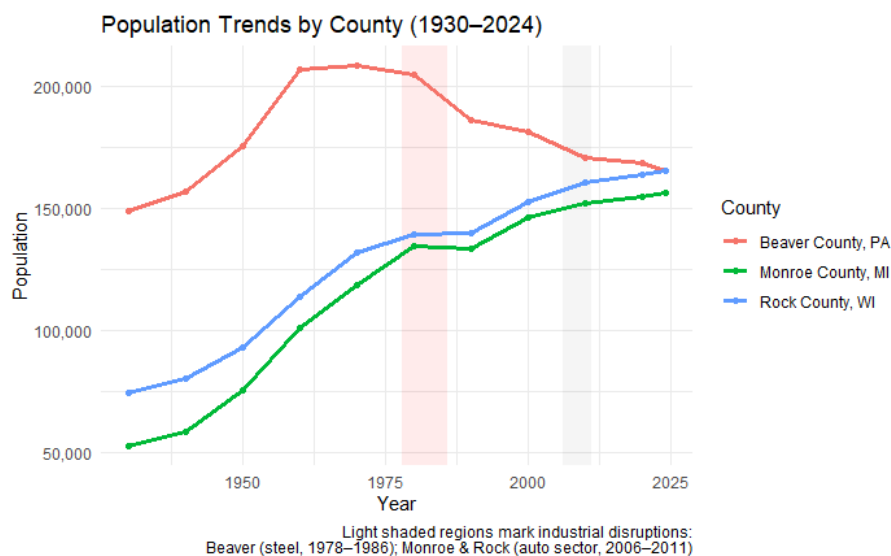
Although each county experienced economic shocks at different moments—steel industry collapse in Beaver during the 1980s, auto sector decline in Monroe and Rock during the late 2000s—their present-day profiles have largely converged. All three are majority white, have comparable educational attainment rates, similar income levels, and aging populations with limited youth replenishment.[30] Population trends, once shaped by different regional booms, have now stabilized near parity. These common baselines allow for a more controlled comparison of political change, aligning with Stephanie Ternullo's emphasis on "white, working-class New Deal counties" that once shared strong Democratic loyalties but diverged under pressure from economic and institutional disruption.

This divergence, I argue, cannot be the product of economic decline or cultural transformation alone, but the result of their interaction—shaped further by the distinctive organizing strategies of local Democratic and Republican actors. The overarching hypothesis of this study posits that economic grievances created by deindustrialization and the erosion of organized labor provided the foundation for political reordering, but the precise path of that realignment was mediated by local political culture, institutional legacies, and partisan outreach.

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[30] U.S. Census Bureau, "QuickFacts: Beaver County, Pennsylvania," U.S. Census Bureau, "QuickFacts: Monroe County, Michigan," U.S. Census Bureau, "QuickFacts: Rock County, Wisconsin."

Specifically, I expect that the decline of union membership and wage stagnation weakened

Democratic loyalty and voter turnout, while local Republican actors seized the moment to fill the

vacuum—either by amplifying cultural grievances or by claiming to speak more directly to

working-class discontent. The strength and strategic choices of local Democratic Party

organizations, by contrast, determined whether realignment was resisted or hastened.

Population Trends by County (1930–2024)

Light shaded regions mark industrial disruptions:
Beaver (steel, 1978–1986); Monroe & Rock (auto sector, 2006–2011)

In Beaver County, I hypothesize an early realignment pattern, where the collapse of the

steel industry in the 1980s and the associated decline of United Steelworkers' organizing power

allowed cultural conservatism and anti-establishment narratives to take hold. The shift, while

gradual, became electorally evident by 2008, when Republicans began winning the presidential

vote even as party registration still leaned Democratic. The weakening of local union

infrastructure, compounded by environmental policy backlash and rising anti-urban sentiment,

accelerated a process of partisan inversion. Qualitative interviews and local media analysis

reveal how institutions that once anchored Democratic mobilization have in many cases been

supplanted by Republican-aligned cultural narratives and alternative community networks.
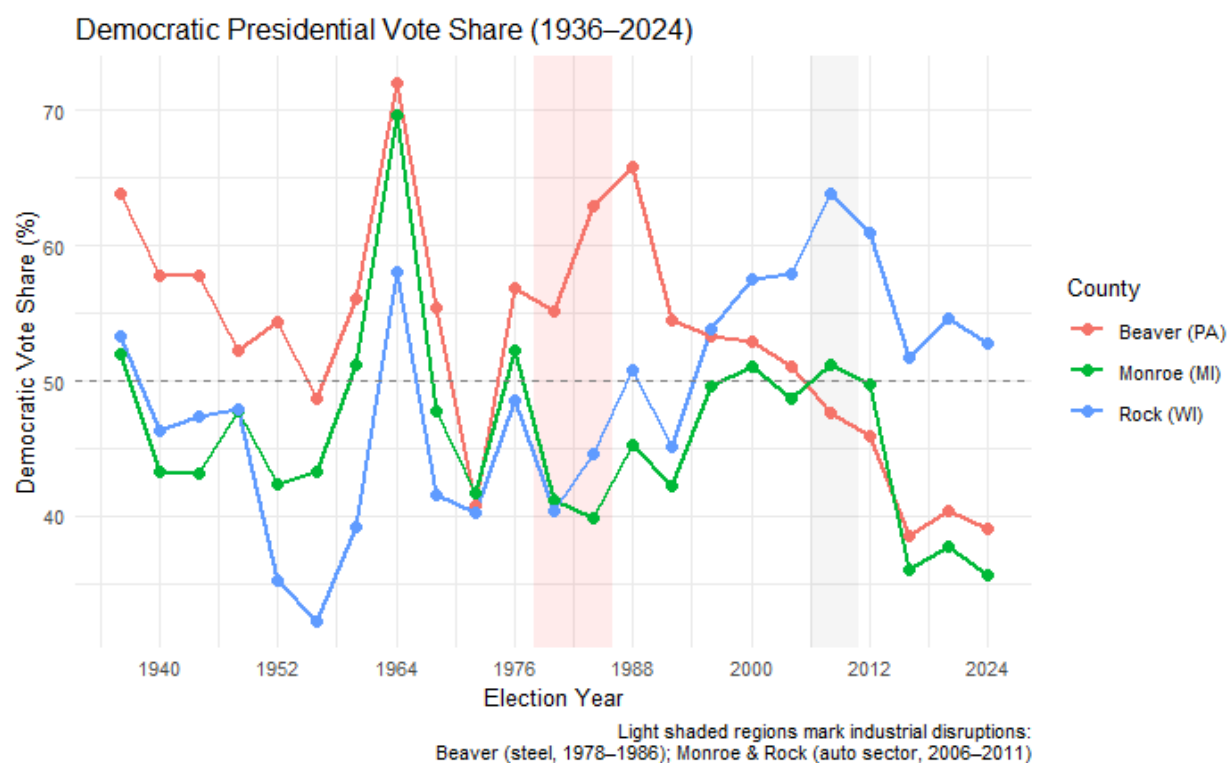
Monroe County, by contrast, is an example of a delayed realignment. Although also a manufacturing-heavy and union-stronghold region, Monroe's transition from Democratic to Republican dominance did not crystallize until the 2016 election cycle. This suggests that the continued presence of AFL-CIO influence[31] and residual Obama-era enthusiasm delayed the switch. However, auto-sector attrition, economic stagnation, and an absence of new economic investment created a slow-burning sense of abandonment. Conversations on the ground suggest that while Monroe residents maintained economic frustrations under Obama, these grievances were reframed through Trump's economic populism. I find evidence of declining union political clout and increasing support for Republican candidates who harnessed both cultural and economic discontent.

Rock County, meanwhile, presents a case of Democratic resilience. Despite suffering a major economic shock in 2008 with the preliminary closure of the GM Janesville plant, the county has not undergone the same degree of partisan realignment. I hypothesize that this is due in part to the persistence of public-sector union organizing and backlash to Wisconsin's aggressive Republican-led attacks on labor (e.g., Act 10). The narrative of economic reinvention under a service-sector economy and the survival of institutional memory around union mobilization helped Democrats maintain an edge. Importantly, I also examine why Rock County flipped Democratic in 1988 after decades of voting Republican at the presidential level—demonstrating not only its resilience but the unique local circumstances that enabled the initial shift.

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[31] The American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO) is the largest federation of unions in the United States. In many industrial counties, its influence has historically been channeled through the United Auto Workers (UAW), one of its most powerful affiliates, particularly in regions dominated by automobile manufacturing.

To test these hypotheses, I employ a mixed-methods approach integrating quantitative and qualitative data. The quantitative component draws from historical time series, economic datasets, and high-resolution electoral geographies. I constructed a longitudinal dataset from 1936 to 2024, tracking presidential vote share. These data establish the electoral baselines and inflection points in each county—Beaver's rightward shift by 2008, Monroe's break in 2016, and Rock's more complex arc of resilience and partial reversion. Importantly, I do not treat these shifts as binary flips but as temporal processes layered atop structural transformations.

Democratic Presidential Vote Share (1936–2024)

Light shaded regions mark industrial disruptions:
Beaver (steel, 1978–1986); Monroe & Rock (auto sector, 2006–2011)

The core analytic contribution lies in the spatial dimension. I conducted precinct-level mapping of presidential vote share in 1984, 2000, and 2024, geolocated against the spatial footprint of major industrial closures. By disaggregating electoral outcomes geographically, I uncover patterns of internal divergence: in Beaver County, for instance, the collapse of union-heavy towns like Aliquippa yields a sharper realignment than other urban regions; in

Monroe, precincts near the Ford complex behave differently than rural outskirts. In Rock County, Janesville's electoral resilience is analyzed relative to outlying, more politically fluid townships. These spatial patterns are not solely descriptive. They serve as quasi-experimental proxies for economic exposure and institutional embeddedness.

While I do not employ formal causal inference models, I use design-based inference logic to isolate likely mechanisms. I compare geographies that are demographically similar but staggered in their industrial decline; I track intra-county variation as a proxy for "treatment intensity"; and I examine sequencing—does union contraction reliably precede voter disengagement or partisan switch? The goal is not to reduce complex processes to a single variable, but to map plausible pathways linking material decline to political transformation.

Economic variables are collected across comparable time spans in what is largely the post-industrial era. These include inflation-adjusted weekly wages, union membership rates, employment by sector, labor force participation, and population change. I also integrate social health metrics, particularly "deaths of despair" indicators such as opioid overdose and population aging, to assess long-term community distress. Each of these variables is tracked over time and visualized alongside electoral trends to assess temporal correspondence. Key turning points—e.g., the J&L Steel collapse in Aliquippa, the decline of auto supplier work in Dundee, or the Janesville GM shutdown—are treated as moments of "treatment" for subsequent political change.

To complement the quantitative backbone, I conducted over 40 semi-structured conversations across the three counties during the spring of 2025. These conversations—held with everyday residents, union members, retired factory workers, small business owners, and local political operatives from both major parties—were informal and observational in nature.

All responses were anonymized using pseudonyms, with no personally identifiable information recorded or retained. Conducted in public or community spaces such as diners, gas stations, libraries, bars, town centers, and municipal offices, these interviews were not intended to constitute a representative sample but to capture prevailing sentiment and reflect the diverse political and economic identities within each community.

While each conversation was open-ended, most touched on a common set of themes. People reflected on their personal history in the area, their economic outlook, and their engagement with politics. Many spoke about work—what jobs used to exist, what remains, and how things have changed. Others reflected on how often they vote, how their views on parties have shifted, and whether they still feel represented. I also asked about the role of local institutions—churches, unions, schools—and how they shaped, or used to shape, civic life. These conversations were shaped more by curiosity than by formal protocol, allowing residents to tell their stories on their own terms.

Recurring narratives included those of betrayal ("the Democrats left us"), institutional hollowing-out ("we don't have anything like we used to"), and cultural disorientation ("people care more about others than us now"). These motifs were especially strong among older, white, working-class men, though younger and more politically disengaged respondents expressed similar economic grievances. Across counties, there were subtle but telling differences: Rock residents often cited organized resistance (e.g., anti-Scott Walker mobilizations), while people in Monroe emphasized disappointment and disengagement. In Beaver, the predominant tone was one of cultural redefinition—conservative media, church networks, and Trump-era patriotism became primary vehicles of political identity.

To understand how these narratives were reinforced or contested, I examined local media archives to trace how economic decline was framed over time. In Rock, coverage of Walker-era protests elevated union voices and sustained a public discourse around collective action. In Beaver, media narratives often mirrored national conservative messaging, portraying government as indifferent and elites as corrupt. In Monroe, local reporting reflected economic drift and quiet disillusionment, rarely offering a unifying narrative or mobilizing frame. These differences in discourse help explain political choices but also the emotional registers attached to them—whether anger, fatigue, or alienation.

Finally, historical and archival research provides a foundation for understanding longer-term trajectories. I traced the rise and decline of organized labor across the counties using union newsletters, campaign flyers, and party organizing records. In many cases, I traced the hollowing out of Democratic operations at the county level—whether party offices that closed, labor endorsements that ceased, or campaign activity that dwindled as membership declined. I also examined the attempted substitutions: were churches, civic associations, or veterans' groups stepping into the vacuum left by unions? While nationalized media narratives helped shape political identity, the presence—or absence—of locally grounded institutions made a crucial difference in how residents interpreted change. Where those institutions remained active or were revived, they served as a counterweight to grievance-based messaging and offered alternative frameworks for understanding and responding to economic decline.
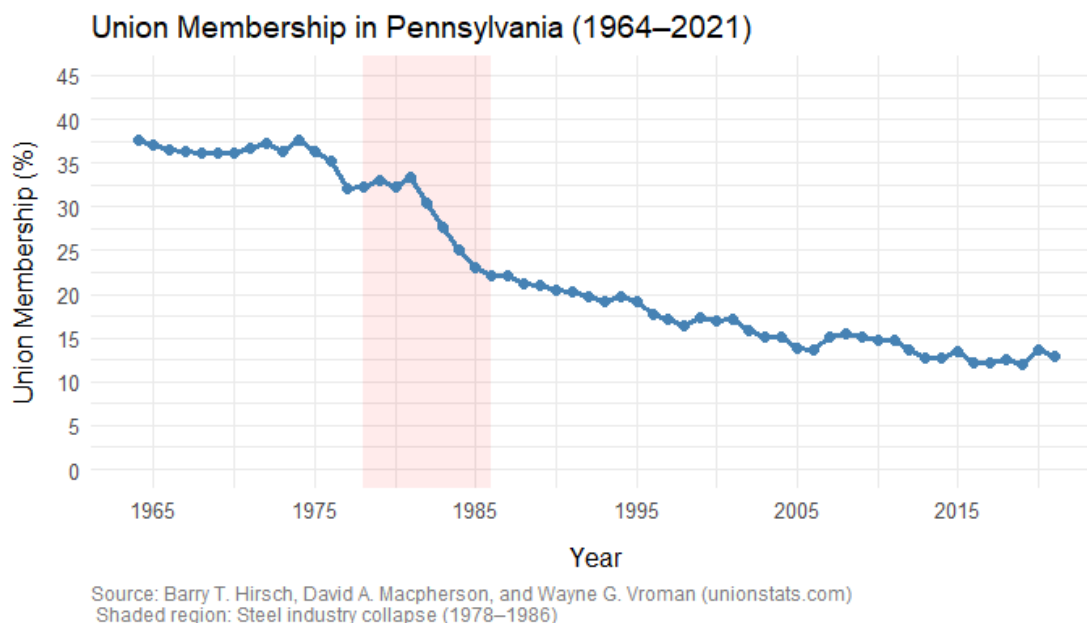
Taken together, these sources form the basis for a comparative, place-based explanation of political realignment. This project does not treat voters as wholly rational actors, nor does it reduce political change to cultural symbolism alone. Rather, it examines how shifts in material conditions created an opening for new narratives to take root. The critical difference across

counties lies not only in what happened to them, but in how those changes were understood, mediated, and mobilized on a local level.
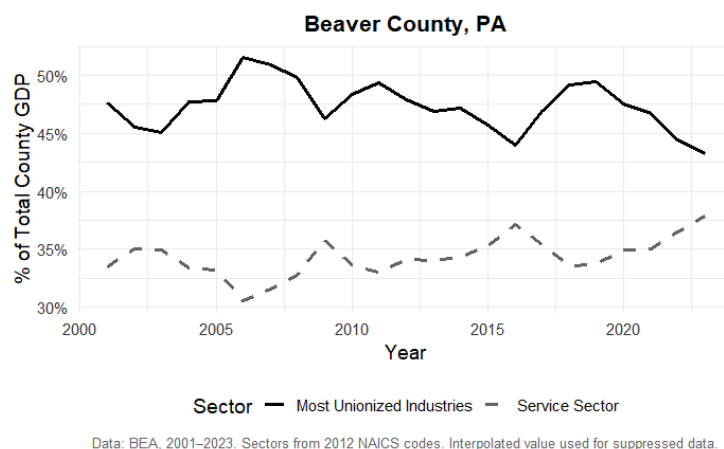
Beaver County, Pennsylvania

Beaver County's modern political identity took shape during the New Deal era, when organized labor began to anchor local life. The Jones & Laughlin (J&L) Steel mill in Aliquippa—then the country's fourth-largest steel producer—dominated the town's economy and exerted immense control over its workforce. That changed in 1937, when the U.S. Supreme Court upheld the constitutionality of the National Labor Relations Act (Wagner Act) in *NLRB v. Jones & Laughlin Steel Corp*. In the wake of the decision, J&L was forced to rehire union-supporting workers and recognize the Steel Workers Organizing Committee. In May 1937, steelworkers at the J&L Aliquippa Works held the first National Labor Relations Board-supervised union election in the American steel industry. This moment anchored Beaver County firmly in Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal coalition. For decades to follow, union halls were community pillars and reliable engines of Democratic voter mobilization. "We were union Democrats through and through," said Frank, the son of a steelworker from Aliquippa. Under the New Deal realignment, Democratic candidates routinely won Beaver County with lopsided margins—at times exceeding 60% of the vote. An extensive labor infrastructure, from steelworkers in Aliquippa to electrical workers in Ambridge and nurses in Monaca, underpinned this dominance. Labor's strength was reflected statewide: in the mid-1950s, roughly one in three Pennsylvania workers carried a union card. Even by 1964, nearly 38% of wage earners in

Pennsylvania were union members. Beaver County's identity as a union bastion—pro-worker, pro-Democrat, and economically secure—seemed unassailable.

Union Membership in Pennsylvania (1964–2021)

Source: Barry T. Hirsch, David A. Macpherson, and Wayne G. Vroman (unionstats.com)
Shaded region: Steel industry collapse (1978–1986)

The late 20th-century brought ferocious headwinds to this union stronghold. Deindustrialization swept the Rust Belt, and Beaver County's steel-based economy crumpled. In 1984, LTV Steel (successor to J&L) abruptly announced the closure of most of the Aliquippa Works, dealing a crushing blow to the county's industrial core. Over just fifteen years, the Aliquippa mill's workforce plummeted from over 10,000 in the early 1970s to under 2,500 by the time of its shuttering. "That mill closing took everything, tax base was gone" recalled Jim, a former millwright from Aliquippa, describing a cascade of consequences: shop closures, falling home values, and an exodus of young families. By 1987, the City of Aliquippa was officially in financial distress, entering Pennsylvania's Act 47 program for near-bankrupt municipalities. It would remain under state oversight for 36 years. Neighboring steel towns like Ambridge and Beaver Falls suffered similar fates in the 1980s, grappling with double-digit unemployment and

shrinking tax bases. Union leaders fought to soften the blows—lobbying for retraining programs, organizing food drives for laid-off workers—but their leverage waned as one plant after another closed.
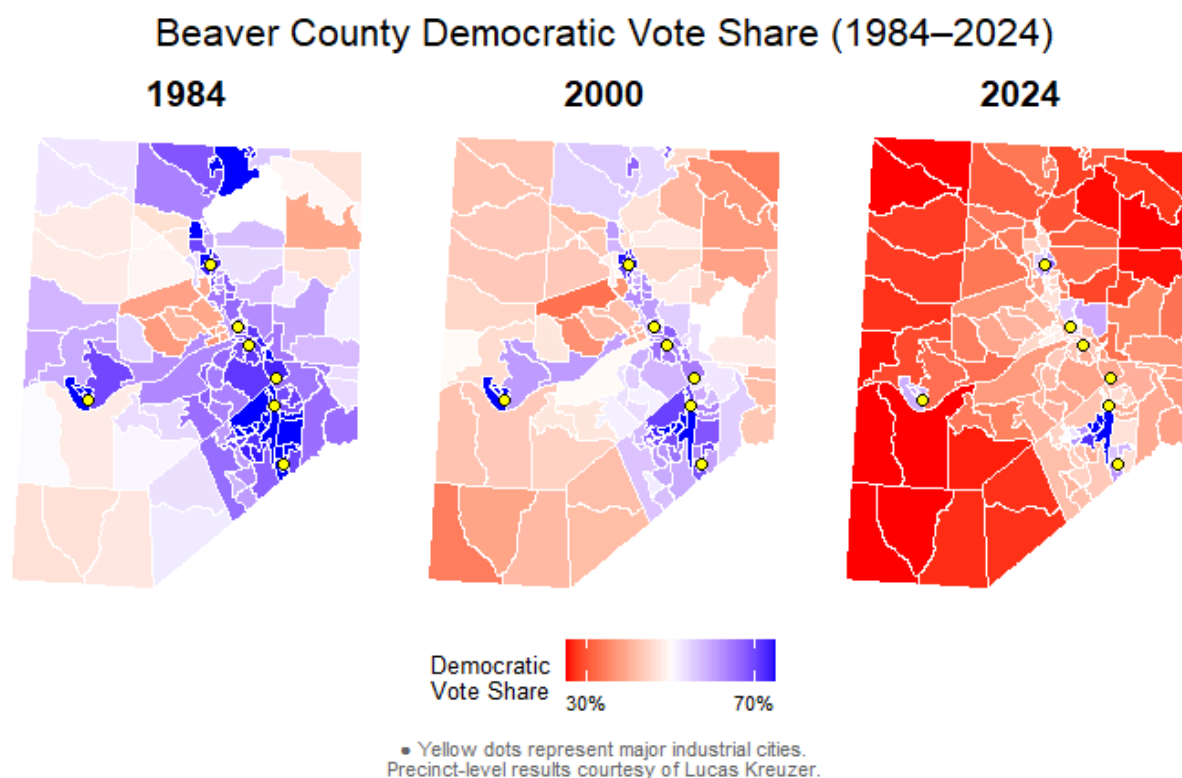

Data: BEA, 2001–2023. Sectors from 2012 NAICS codes. Interpolated value used for suppressed data.

The once-dominant manufacturing sector withered. In 1980, manufacturing had contributed nearly one-third of Pennsylvania's nonfarm jobs; by 2000, that share was half as large. Union membership eroded in tandem. Statewide, union density fell from about 25% in the early 1980s to 13% by 2000.[32] The collapse was even more dramatic in the private industrial unions: Pennsylvania's manufacturing union membership collapsed from 456,000 in 1983 to just 69,000 in 2022.[33] Beaver County's labor movement saw its ranks thinned by mill closures, outsourcing, and retirements without replacement. "We lost an entire generation of union workers," lamented Linda, a retired nurse from Monaca, who came from a self-described "union family." The economic base of the county shifted toward services, logistics, and a fledgling energy sector. In 2001, over 45% of Beaver's GDP still came from the three most unionized industries (manufacturing, construction, and transportation/utilities). This meant cuts were felt widely by the population. By 2023 that figure had fallen, while the service sector's share rose

[32] Barry T. Hirsch, David A. Macpherson, and Wayne G. Vroman, *Estimates of Union Density by State, 1964 - 2000*, Monthly Labor Review (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics), July 2001.

[33] Stephen Herzenberg, Claire Kovach, and Maisum Murtaza, *The State of Working Pennsylvania 2023*, Keystone Research Center, August 2023.

(mirroring trends in similar Rust Belt counties). In short, deindustrialization gutted the unionized

blue-collar economy that had long bound Beaver County to the Democratic Party. The stage was

set for political upheaval.

Beaver County Democratic Vote Share (1984–2024)

• Yellow dots represent major industrial cities.
Precinct-level results courtesy of Lucas Kreuzer.

The political realignment unfolded unevenly across decades, visible in both county-wide

tallies and neighborhood-level maps. In 1984, even amid a national Reagan landslide, Walter

Mondale carried Beaver County with nearly 63%—a testament to residual New Deal loyalties. A

precinct map of that election shows an expanse of blue-shaded townships and mill towns, with

only a few Republican pockets on the rural fringes. But by 2000, Democrat Al Gore's margin in

Beaver had shrunk to about 53-45%. The 2000 precinct map reveals a patchwork: the river towns

and older communities like Aliquippa, Beaver Falls, Monaca, and Ambridge still mostly blue,

but many suburban and exurban precincts shifting pink or light red as middle-class voters edged

toward the GOP. Fast forward to 2024 and the transformation is nearly complete: Republican candidates won almost 60% of the presidential vote in Beaver County, a mirror image of the Democratic dominance two generations earlier. The 2024 precinct map is awash in red. Nearly all the outlying townships and boroughs now vote solidly Republican (shades of 70-80% GOP red in some areas), while the Democratic vote is largely confined to a few small blue islands. Notably, the overlaid yellow dots on the map mark the locations of Beaver County's historically industrial cities—Aliquippa, Ambridge, Monaca, Beaver Falls, Midland, Rochester, and Conway. In 1984, these sites of unionized steel and manufacturing labor formed the geographic heart of Democratic support. Over time, however, as these industrial plants shut down or drastically downsized, their surrounding precincts began to splinter politically. By 2024, only the most demographically diverse or institutionally resilient areas (e.g., Aliquippa and central Beaver Falls) remain blue, while others have faded into the broader red tide.

As one long-time Democratic committeeman put it, "It's like watching a slow tide turn. First the hills went red, then the valleys." Beaver County voted Democratic in every presidential contest from Franklin D. Roosevelt through Bill Clinton, with only one exception (1972). But after 2000, Republicans carried the county in five of the next six presidential races. The partisan registration rolls also flipped. In 2008, Democrats enjoyed a hefty 60%-30% registration advantage locally, reflecting generations of union families registering D. Yet by January 2024, Republican registrants ever so slightly outnumbered Democrats (roughly 48,229 to 48,039).[34] That crossover marked the first time since before the New Deal that Beaver County had more Republicans than Democrats on its books. The erosion of Democratic registration was gradual but relentless—a net loss of over 22,000 Democrats between 2008 and 2016 alone, accelerated by waves of party-switching in the Obama and Trump years. Each retiree who passed away or

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[34] Pennsylvania Department of State, Voter Registration Statistics by County, January 2024.

moved south, each blue-collar voter who changed their registration out of frustration, steadily chipped away at the old Democratic machine. As Linda observed in our conversation, "I used to phone-bank and our list was all Democrats. When I called my old coworkers in 2016, half of them say, 'I'm Republican now.'" The once-formidable Beaver County Democratic Committee struggled to stem the bleeding; by 2020 its local precinct chair network had dwindled and several ward offices sat vacant. Meanwhile, Republicans achieved milestone after milestone. They won a majority on the county commission in 2015 for the first time since the 1950s, and are capturing more town offices long held by Democrats. The local GOP wave even penetrated down-ballot offices like prothonotary and sheriff, indicating a deep realignment rather than transient attraction to individual candidates. In short, Beaver County's partisan landscape underwent a seismic shift: what began as a slow trickle in the Reagan era swelled to a flood by the Trump era, leaving an electoral terrain almost unrecognizable compared to a generation earlier.

Analysts often attribute Rust Belt realignment to broad forces like globalization or national party messaging. But on the ground in Beaver County, the Republican takeover was also driven by deliberate grassroots strategy and the decay of local Democratic organization. Long before national Republicans targeted white working-class voters, Beaver County's GOP operatives were testing outreach methods in union country. In my conversations, a high-ranking Beaver's Republican Committee member described a patient, methodical effort to register disaffected Democrats: "We knew we had the numbers and with the demographics here… we just needed to get them to switch." Throughout the 2010s, local GOP volunteers set up booths at county fairs, gun shows, and high school football games—anywhere blue-collar residents gathered—with slogans ready: "Vote Your Values, Not Your Party." Churches were a key conduit: conservative evangelical networks in the area, growing since the 1980s, provided

ready-made community hubs for Republican organizers. Bill, a local GOP volunteer from Center

Township, recalls standing outside his church after Sunday services in 2016 with voter

registration forms: "I'd ask, 'Has the Democratic Party left you behind? It's okay to come on

over.' We got dozens of signatures some weeks." Such one-on-one outreach was critical in

eroding ancestral party ties. Many Beaver Democrats weren't automatic liberals; their loyalty

had been rooted in union identity and New Deal tradition. As those bonds frayed, Republicans

offered a new home emphasizing "faith, family, and patriotism," according to Bill. The local

GOP also capitalized on messaging that linked economic grievances to cultural themes. In

interviews, disaffected Democrats frequently mentioned feeling "abandoned" economically

while also disdaining the national Democrats on social issues. "I never left the Democratic Party.

They left me," said Charles, a laid-off steelworker from Beaver Falls who became a fixture at

Tea Party rallies in Pennsylvania. Charles cites his union background with pride but bristles at

contemporary Democrats: "All they talk about is climate change and identity politics. Our jobs

are gone, man. Trump at least spoke to that. He talked about unfair trade and has ideas with

tariffs, and he also stood up for our flag." This intertwining of economic and cultural appeal was

a hallmark of GOP inroads in Beaver. Beginning with broader Pennsylvania's Reagan Democrats

in the 1980s and accelerating with Trump populists in the 2010s, Republicans reframed the local

narrative: Washington (under Democratic rule) was blamed for plant closures, onerous

environmental regulations, and trade deals that hurt steel, while local Republicans positioned

themselves as champions of the common man's values—on guns, religion, and work

ethic—stepping into the void left by retreating Democrats.

Equally important was the deterioration of the Democratic Party infrastructure in Beaver

County. The decline of unions meant the decline of the Democratic "ground game" on a

systematic level. For most of the 20th century, unions had provided the organizational muscle—canvassing, voter registration, get-out-the-vote operations, candidate recruitment for local offices, and a pipeline of issues that resonated with working families. As those unions shrank or at least struggled to channel political support, the Democratic Party lost its community presence. By the 2000s, labor councils that once coordinated county-wide campaigns were defunct or absorbed into regional bodies. A local Democratic activist, Tina, noted that progressive organizers tried to "swim upstream" in the 2000s by nurturing partnerships with what remained of the labor movement. They rallied around issues like opposing Social Security privatization and raising the minimum wage, hoping to remind voters of Democrats' working-class bona fides. But these efforts were swamped by the broader currents of disillusionment. As older union Democrats retired or passed away, younger generations "swam against the current from past generations" and registered Independent or Republican. The county Democratic Committee itself fell into internal disputes and drift. "There was a complacency, a sense that people had to vote Democrat because their parents did," reflects Marcy, a former Democratic organizer. "Meanwhile, the Republicans were out there giving people a reason to vote for them." By the late 2010s, Republicans ran unopposed for many local offices that Democrats once contested. GOP yard signs proliferated even in formerly Democratic neighborhoods, met with little organized pushback. In interviews with longtime residents, a recurring theme was the absence of Democratic outreach: "I used to see union guys handing out leaflets at the plant gate," says one Aliquippa retiree, "but in 2020 I didn't see anyone from the Democrats. They were too busy hiding in Biden's basement. The only campaign knock on my door was a young Republican volunteer. I hadn't seen a Democrat come by in the past five years." The hollowing out of local Democratic institutions—unions, party clubs, even ethnic

social clubs that had aligned with Democrats—created a vacuum that the Republican grassroots machine filled.

Underneath the statistical realignment and organizational changes was a profound cultural and institutional reshaping of political identity in Beaver County. The collapse of the steel economy and the unions did more than change voters' pocketbooks. It changed how people saw themselves and whom they trusted. Economic grievances that went unaddressed in the 1980s and 1990s gradually morphed into cultural resentments by the 2000s. As past literature has indicated, under similar economic circumstances, residents felt a loss of dignity and place. Some channeled their frustration into the culture wars that gained salience in the vacuum. For instance, the county's once-dominant Catholic and mainline Protestant traditions (which had aligned with pro-labor, New Deal politics) gave way to a rise in evangelical and fundamentalist influence. Local evangelical churches in Beaver County grew in membership and political clout, with active members taking hard-line stances on issues like abortion. By the 2010s, right-to-life organizing and pro-Second Amendment events were commonplace. This mirrored trends in similar Rust Belt communities: sociologists have noted that as the labor movement's social influence waned, other institutions—particularly churches—stepped into the breach, providing alternative networks of solidarity and identity.

In Beaver County, many lifelong Democrats experienced an attitudinal shift: pride in being a "union man" or "union family" faded, while identities around faith, gun ownership, and nationalism moved to the forefront. "When the steel mills were running, our pride was in our work," explained Craig, a high-ranking Republican official. "After the mills closed, people around here started clinging to whatever gave them pride—for some it was their church, for others the military or their hunting land. These are hard-working, god-loving people who don't

want to be rich. They just want to be heard." Local political actors adeptly tapped into these sentiments. The Republican Party, especially in the Trump era, recast itself as the champion of the forgotten blue-collar American, not through unions and wages but through cultural affinity—promising to "take down big government" and "bring back jobs" while also vowing to protect gun rights and halt perceived cultural decline. Many in Beaver came to see the national Democratic Party as aloof or hostile to their values, an image reinforced by media and GOP messaging. As one disillusioned Democrat-turned-Republican put it in our conversation, "Democrats used to stand for the worker. Now it feels like they look down on us, like we're all a bunch of backward hicks because we go to church and own guns." Such feelings were not universal. Plenty of Democrats remained, often anchored in the more diverse or college-educated segments of the population—but they were widespread enough to tip the balance.

Crucially, trust in institutions also shifted. During Beaver County's Democratic heyday, local institutions like union groups, federal and state governments, and civic clubs were highly trusted. Over time, many of those institutions either disappeared or lost credibility. For example, Aliquippa's city government—once a source of patronage jobs and community programs—became nearly insolvent by the 2000s, operating under state-appointed financial managers during its Act 47 distress period. The sense that "government can take care of us," a legacy of New Deal thinking, eroded after years of municipal layoffs and service cuts. Nowhere is this clearer than on Franklin Avenue (see image, right), once a bustling

commercial strip. Today, it is still lined with boarded-up storefronts, shuttered diners, and the

decaying remnants of past investment—a daily visual reminder of promises unkept and

institutions in retreat. Reflecting on Aliquippa's exit from Act 47 and the beginning of what he

calls it "renaissance," Mayor Dwan Walker celebrated survival against the odds: "we're changing

the environment of our downtown. It's important to change what people see."[35] His words

captured both the pride and the weariness of a community that felt abandoned by larger forces.

Many residents, particularly whites without college degrees, cemented their locus of trust to

more immediate institutions—their church, their family, perhaps a local business—rather than

government or unions. This made them more receptive to anti-establishment and anti-elite

political appeals. Conversations with voters repeatedly surfaced a narrative of betrayed trust:

"Neither party cared about us when the mills left. I guess they're trying to fix up downtown but

this stuff takes time" says Roger, a retired teamster. "But at least Trump wasn't a regular

politician. I figured I'd roll the dice on him shaking things up." This mix of desperation for

change and distrust of traditional leaders marks the culmination of Beaver County's political

transformation. From a high-trust, union-guided Democratic faith in federal programs during the

New Deal, the county's ethos evolved into a low-trust, populist skepticism of national

institutions, which the Republican Party harnessed.

      Throughout Beaver County's journey from blue to red, federal and state policies provided

important context—sometimes ameliorating local distress, but often fueling further political

realignment. The collapse of steel in the late 1970s and early 1980s coincided with the Reagan

administration's free-market approach and the decline of federal intervention in industrial policy.

Local Democrats in Beaver argued for programs to revive manufacturing. They pointed to the

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[35] Soboroff, Jacob. "We Went Back to Aliquippa, PA after Eight Years and Saw a City on the Rebound from Industrial Decline." *NBC News*, Facebook video. November 2, 2022.

Wagner Act legacy and wanted Washington to once again bolster unions and industries as in FDR's time. But apart from short-term trade relief and retraining grants, few substantive measures arrived to save Big Steel. In the 1990s, globalization accelerated (exemplified by NAFTA in 1994), which many Beaver residents later came to view as a nail in the coffin of regional manufacturing. The fact that NAFTA was signed by a Democratic president (Bill Clinton) blurred party lines on economic stewardship, making it easier for Republicans to court union voters by highlighting such trade deals. Federal stimulus programs and aid occasionally reached Beaver. For example, the Obama administration's 2009 stimulus funded infrastructure projects like bridge repairs and a wind energy training initiative at the local community college. More recently, President Biden's American Rescue Plan Act has bolstered the restoration efforts Mayor Walker spoke of in Aliquippa.[36] Yet these investments, while helpful, did not fundamentally alter the economic trajectory or public mood. Some older residents contrast this with the New Deal's visible legacy (dams, post offices, the Aliquippa housing projects) and lament that modern Washington seems impotent by comparison.

The energy sector provided a new wrinkle: Pennsylvania's shale gas fracking boom in the 2010s and the construction of the Shell petrochemical "cracker" plant in Beaver County promised a partial industrial revival. State and local Republican officials strongly backed these developments, touting them as proof that conservative, pro-business policies could bring jobs. Indeed, the Shell plant brought a surge of construction jobs, with approximately 8,500 workers involved at its peak. However, a 2025 analysis by the Ohio River Valley Institute revealed that, despite the plant's presence, Beaver County experienced declines in population, gross domestic product, and employment since the project's announcement in 2012.[37] Economic gains failed to

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[36] Ibid.

[37] Reid Frazier, "Report: Beaver County population, employment decline despite taxpayer-backed chemical plant," *The Allegheny Front*, February 7, 2025.

meet expectations, and the plant even sparked environmental concerns as it racked up fines for pollution violations.[38] Democrats argued this showed the need for stronger regulation and diversified investment (for instance, former Governor Tom Wolf's administration steered some state grants to Beaver for workforce development and opioid treatment programs). But Republicans used the situation to double down on cultural appeals: when promises of an economic "windfall" fell short, the narrative shifted to blame environmental "over-regulation" and to extol the plant as at least a stand against Green New Deal-style policies. Nationally and locally, policy debates became symbolic—a means to signal which side you were on in the culture war, rather than purely technocratic discussions of outcomes. In Beaver County's political discourse by the 2020s, one hears as much about who is championing a policy (a populist outsider versus a career politician) and what values it represents (freedom vs. socialism, etc.) as about the material benefits. This environment further weakened Democrats, whose brand had become linked (fairly or not) to urban elites and big government in the eyes of many rural and small-town Beaver voters. Even when Democratic policies might have helped locals (e.g., the Affordable Care Act's expansion of black lung benefits for ex-miners or federal funding to clean up industrial brownfields), they did not translate into political credit. Instead, Republicans effectively connected with voters over intangible factors like respect, identity, and voice.

Beaver County did not flip overnight; it transitioned over half a century, through fits and starts, as local conditions and local choices interacted with national currents. Crucially, the agency of community leaders and ordinary residents shaped that path. Decisions by local actors—whether steelworkers rejecting or embracing a union, church leaders mixing religion with politics, or party organizers knocking on doors—accumulated into a new local political

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[38] Kiley Bense, "Beaver County Residents Say Shell's Ethane Cracker Plant Has Become a 'Shockingly Bad Neighbor,'" *Pennsylvania Capital-Star*, May 16, 2024.

reality. As Stephanie Ternullo notes in her analysis, places that began with similar New Deal profiles diverged based on such local responses to external shocks. In Beaver's case, a robust union culture initially buffered against realignment, but its weakening in the face of economic collapse left a void that new actors filled. The county's journey emphasizes that economic grievance alone did not produce the partisan shift; rather, grievance converted into political action through cultural narratives and institution-building (or dismantling). The legacy of union decline is profound: by severing many residents' last strong link to the Democratic Party, it freed voters to be swayed by the GOP's appeals on other grounds—nearly a decade before Trump came on to the political scene. Beaver County today is far removed from the one that fervently backed FDR and JFK. Yet echoes of the past remain—in the wistfulness of a union retiree's voice, in the infrastructure still bearing New Deal insignias, in the persistence of a few Democratic enclaves amid the Republican sea. These remind us that realignment is never absolute. For now, though, Beaver stands as a prominent example of the Rust Belt's reddening—a county that once symbolized organized labor's clout and now exemplifies the GOP's inroads into blue-collar America. In this evolution lie lessons about the power of local experience in shaping political destiny, and about the inseparability of economic and cultural forces in the realignment of American party politics.
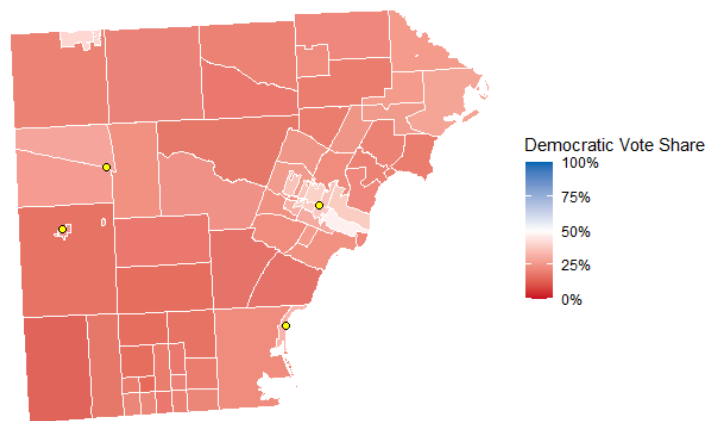
Monroe County, Michigan

Situated on Michigan's southeastern corner along the Ohio border, Monroe County has long straddled the industrial backbone of the Midwest. For much of the 20th century, it was a Democratic-leaning union stronghold, bolstered by automotive and steel-related manufacturing and a robust presence of organized labor (notably the United Auto Workers, UAW). Even as deindustrialization and union decline swept through the Rust Belt in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, Monroe's political allegiance remained stubbornly blue—until 2016. In that year's presidential election, Monroe delivered one of the nation's largest swings from Barack Obama to Donald Trump, abruptly flipping to solid Republican support after decades of Democratic preference. This chapter explores how Monroe County's "delayed realignment" was driven by cumulative economic grievances. A steady erosion of union jobs and economic security finally reached a tipping point: Monroe's voters, increasingly disillusioned with the status quo, realigned toward the Republican Party when promises of populist economic restoration emerged.

Democratic Vote Share by Precinct (2000)
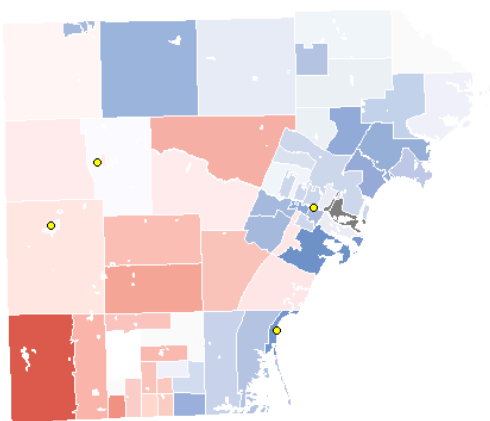
Data: Harvard Elections, TIGER/Line 2000, Stanford GeoServices

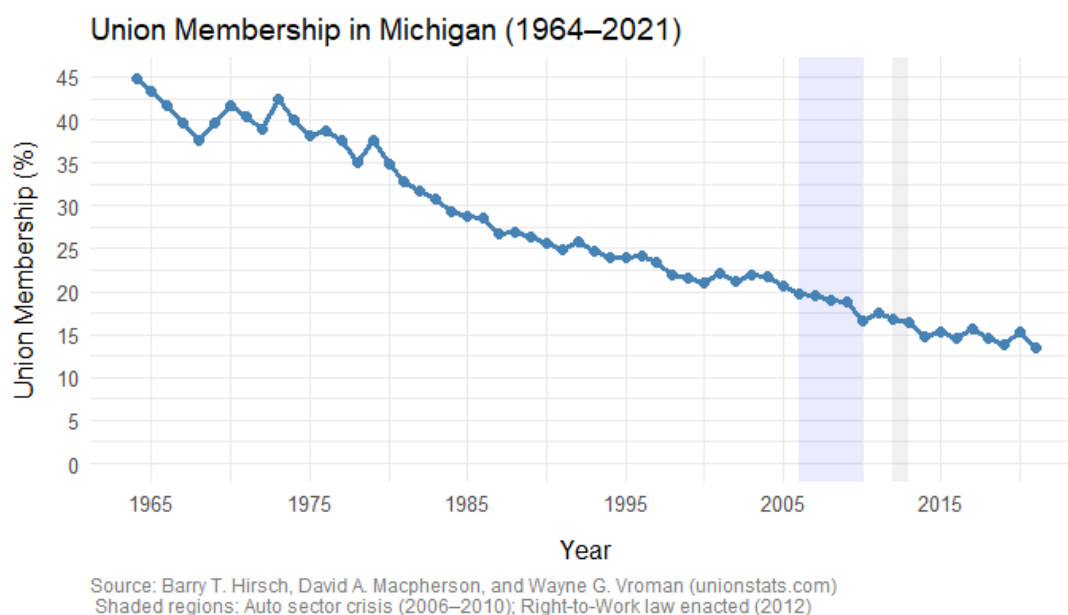**Democratic Vote Share by Precinct (2024)**

Democratic Vote Share
100%
75%
50%
25%
0%

• Yellow dots represent major industrial cities. Data: Monroe County Clerk, Michigan GIS, Stanford GeoServices.

Spatial voting patterns across the last 24 years show how Monroe's political geography shifted in tandem with industrial decline. For example, Democratic vote share shrank in factory towns and union-heavy precincts as jobs disappeared. As the maps illustrate, Monroe remained competitive in 2000, with a clear Democratic advantage in industrial areas—especially along the Detroit River and U.S. 24 corridor. But by 2024, even those former strongholds had flipped red, with the county becoming more Republican than Beaver despite realigning later. Structural decline is certainly relevant in this calculus. However, what is most compelling is the speed and success of GOP messaging in culturally resonant terms. While Beaver's shift played out over decades, Monroe's occurred with stunning rapidity—particularly after 2016—suggesting that Republican appeals to identity, grievance, and post-industrial resentment resonated forcefully once union and party infrastructure eroded. The visual progression from patchy blues in 2000 to near-universal reds in 2024 signals a completed realignment, electorally and spatially, with Democratic support now confined to isolated pockets that once formed the backbone of the party's base.

Monroe County's political DNA was forged in the factories. For most of the postwar era, this community was a bastion of organized labor and Democratic voting, much like its neighbor to the north, Detroit. A large Ford Motor Company plant on the River Raisin, a cluster of auto parts suppliers, and a coal-fired power station provided thousands of well-paying, unionized jobs. Generations of Monroe families could count on a union card to secure a middle-class life—and they tended to vote accordingly. As recently as the 1980s, Monroe County delivered lopsided margins for Democratic candidates; it was part of the "Blue Wall" of union-heavy counties that Democrats could reliably count on. Indeed, Monroe's loyalty ran so deep that when Joe Biden won the presidency in 2020 without carrying Monroe County, it was noted as a
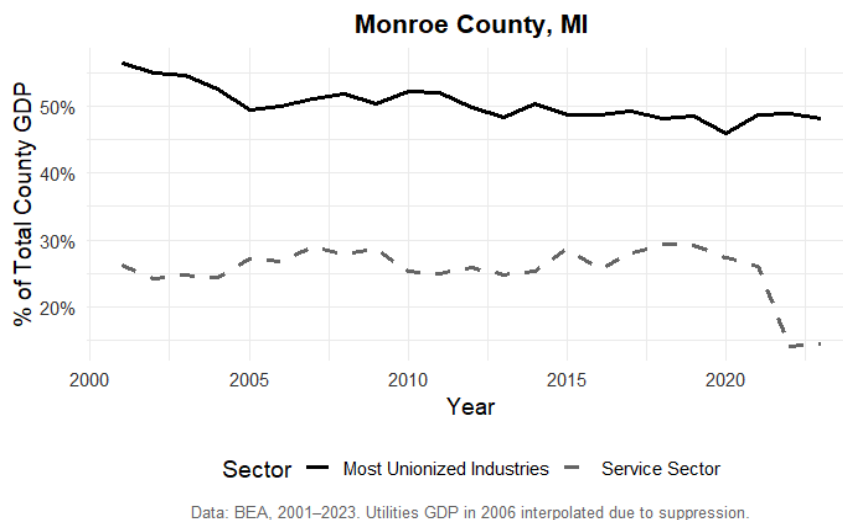
historical anomaly—Biden became the first Democrat since 1948 to win the White House without winning Monroe.

Beneath the tradition, economic and social forces chipped away at the foundation. Union membership in Michigan has been on a long decline, mirroring state-wide and national trends. In the late 1970s, over one-third of Michigan's workers were union members; by 2016, that rate had plummeted to just above 10%. Monroe was no exception. UAW Local 723, which represented workers at the Monroe auto parts plant, saw its ranks thin over time, especially as older workers retired and few new union jobs appeared to replace them. "We had the place packed back in the day," recalled Robert, a retired UAW millwright who spent much of his career at the Ford plant. "It's been a falling number, just a handful of guys. The younger folks don't really show up either." The fading of union culture meant the fading of a key identity marker that had long tied Monroe's working-class voters to the Democratic Party. As Robert put it, "Back then, being a union man meant you voted Democrat, no question. It was in our blood. That's not true now and it's not unique to Monroe." Several people pointed to Michigan's 2012 adoption of a right-to-work law as a symbolic turning point in the decline of labor's influence. Right-to-work (which allowed employees to opt out of paying union dues) undercut unions' financial and organizing strength. Megan, a public school teacher, noted that after 2012 it became harder to mobilize political volunteers: "The union used to get out the vote—phone banks, door knocks—especially for Democrats who supported labor. After right-to-work, our membership fell and so did participation." Statewide data bear out this impact. As that allegiance eroded, other influences, namely economic frustration and cultural resentment, were poised to fill the gap.

Union Membership in Michigan (1964–2021)

Source: Barry T. Hirsch, David A. Macpherson, and Wayne G. Vroman (unionstats.com)
Shaded regions: Auto sector crisis (2006–2010); Right-to-Work law enacted (2012)

If weakening labor institutions provided the kindling, economic decline provided the

spark for Monroe's political realignment. As the chart below shows, union-heavy

sectors—manufacturing, construction, and utilities—have consistently comprised over 45% of

Monroe's GDP from 2001 to 2023. But this apparent stability belies a more troubling reality: the

county's economy remains heavily reliant on industrial sectors that have been hollowed out.

These industries still generate significant output,[39] but they do so with fewer workers, weaker

unions, and declining political clout. The local economy has not diversified in a way that

replaces the stability and bargaining power once provided by high-wage, unionized employment.

Other services, retail, and healthcare grew modestly in importance, partially filling the void left

by industrial decline. Their reactions to the COVID-19 pandemic, as understood in the chart

below, further emphasize their more precarious nature.

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[39] Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, "Real Gross Domestic Product: All Industries in Monroe County, MI (REALGDPALL26115).

Monroe County, MI

Sector — Most Unionized Industries — Service Sector

Data: BEA, 2001–2023. Utilities GDP in 2006 interpolated due to suppression.

Over these two decades, Monroe's manufacturing sector steadily withered. Several body blows hit the county in succession. The most catastrophic was the 2006 - 2010 auto industry crisis. As automotive manufacturers veered toward insolvency and the Great Recession swept the nation, Monroe's largest industrial employer was dealt a fatal wound. In 2008, the Monroe Ford plant (an auto parts and stamping facility) was shuttered, ending a manufacturing legacy dating back to 1929. The closure wiped out approximately 1,200 remaining jobs at the plant (down from a peak of over 3,000 decades earlier), and it struck at the heart of the community.[40] "That was the end of an era," said Steve, 55, a former line worker who was laid off when the plant closed. Steve had been hired during the 1990s when jobs at the Ford facility were still considered gold-standard employment. "After it was gone, a lot of folks had nowhere to go." The ripple effects were immediate: local businesses that depended on workers' spending saw sales plummet, and Monroe's modest downtown found itself dotted with empty storefronts and even an abandoned shopping mall on the outskirts

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[40] Chris McGreal, "'I'd Like to Vote Democratic': The Swing Voters Who Want a Reason Not to Back Trump Again," *The Guardian*, January 19, 2020.

Steve's experience was echoed by many. Susan, 50, who works at a diner in Monroe City, recalled the late 2000s as "the hardest years I've ever seen. People just vanished, either left town to find work, or they didn't have money to eat out. We cut back staff, hours, everything," she said. Recovery from the Great Recession was halting and uneven in Monroe. While the Obama administration's auto bailout in 2009 saved assembly plants in Detroit and Toledo, it offered little solace to Monroe's shuttered facility (which belonged to Ford, a company that avoided bankruptcy but was restructuring aggressively). Some laid-off Monroe workers eventually found jobs at other auto plants, often commuting long distances, but many took pay cuts to work in retail, warehousing, or left the labor force altogether. The net result was a sense of economic stagnation. Monroe's unemployment rate spiked into double digits in 2009, and though it later fell, good-paying jobs remained scarce.[41] As Dave, 61, a former tool-and-die maker, put it: "The factories that closed never truly got replaced. We got a few distribution centers and a lot of dollar stores. It's work, but it's not the kind of work that built this town."

Still, signs of revitalization are visible. This photo (right) of downtown Monroe shows a main street that has seen both decline and modest renewal: some storefronts remain empty, but many buildings have been remodeled and reopened. Compared to Franklin Avenue in Beaver, Pennsylvania—where economic disinvestment is more visibly entrenched—Monroe's commercial core hosts a greater number of active businesses, hinting at efforts to re-anchor the downtown economy.

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[41] U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. "Economy at a Glance: Monroe, MI."

Notably, Monroe's economy retains a significant utilities sector due to the Monroe Power Plant (one of the largest coal-burning plants in the Midwest) and the Enrico Fermi nuclear generating station. These facilities prop up output statistics, but they employ relatively few people and thus do not alleviate joblessness for displaced factory workers. The overall picture from 2000 to 2024 is one of a community transitioning into a post-industrial economy without achieving broad prosperity. Monroe's total real GDP grew only modestly, and much of that growth was concentrated in sectors that didn't rebuild the middle class.[42] "It's like we're treading water," commented Karen, 45, a Monroe real estate agent. "Young families aren't moving in for new jobs. A lot of people who can, leave for opportunities elsewhere. Those who stay love the community, but they wish there were more here." That picture may soon shift again. In 2023, DTE Electric agreed to shut down the Monroe coal-fired power plant by 2032—three years ahead of schedule—as part of a settlement with environmental, labor, and business groups.[43] The decision, which also includes a conversion of the Belle River coal plant to natural gas, is projected to prevent over 21.2 million tons of carbon emissions. Yet for Monroe, it also signals a coming economic rupture: one of the region's last major industrial-era employers will soon be gone, raising more questions about what kind of economy—and politics—will fill the void.

Through the early 2000s, despite these clear economic warning signs, Monroe County continued to vote Democratic in major elections. In the 2000 presidential race, for example, Democrat Al Gore carried Monroe County (albeit by a slim margin), even as he narrowly lost Michigan's statewide vote. In 2004, John Kerry likewise eked out a win in Monroe. President Barack Obama's 2008 campaign—which emphasized hope and economic change—resonated strongly; Obama won Monroe County comfortably, buoyed by union households and voters

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[42] Ibid.

[43] Nina Ignaczak, "DTE Agrees to Shut Down Coal-Fired Monroe Plant in 2032, Three Years Ahead of Schedule," *Planet Detroit*, July 12, 2023.

optimistic that a Democrat in the White House would prioritize saving the auto industry. Even in 2012, after four difficult years and a slow recovery, Monroe gave Obama a second term (though by a reduced margin). This Democratic persistence is striking given that many similarly situated Rust Belt counties had already drifted Republican by the 2000s.

Monroe, in contrast, "stayed blue" longer—a testament to the enduring power of union identity and perhaps the delayed effects of deindustrialization among its voters. Why did Monroe's political realignment lag behind its economic decline? Contemporary accounts suggest a few reasons. First, the local Democratic Party and unions maintained a strong get-out-the-vote operation through the 2000s. UAW retirees and labor activists continued to knock on doors and remind their neighbors which party had historically been the friend of the working class. "We would phonebank every election—remind people that Democrats are the ones who fight for their rights," said Betty, a retired UAW affiliate. "A lot of folks here had parents or grandparents who told them never to trust the Republicans after what Reagan did to the air traffic controllers. So there was this ingrained thing: even if times are tough, don't vote against the party of labor." That ingrained loyalty gave Democrats a buffer in Monroe that blunted Republican gains for a time.

Secondly, national Democrats did take some actions that addressed Monroe's economic pain, at least symbolically. The 2009 auto bailout is a prime example. While Monroe's specific Ford plant still closed, the bailout of GM and Chrysler prevented an even worse industrial collapse in Michigan. Many Monroe residents work at or have relatives in the giant GM Toledo Transmission plant just across the Ohio line, or at Chrysler's Dundee Engine plant in western Monroe County; those facilities were saved by federal intervention. Obama frequently reminded voters of this fact in 2012.[44] This goodwill helped Democrats hold on a bit longer. Local

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[44] Chris Isidore, "Obama: Auto bailouts worked," *CNN Money*, February 28, 2012.

Democratic candidates also stressed their labor credentials. State Representative Bill LaVoy, a Democrat from Monroe, ran as a pragmatic pro-union Democrat and won office in 2012. LaVoy maintained a long tradition of Democrats representing the area in the state legislature. It is also important to note that Republicans, until the mid-2010s, did not aggressively court Monroe's working-class voters on economic grounds. Per Phil, a Republican organizer in Monroe, "the local GOP tended to emphasize tax cuts, small government, and traditional values. This was stuff that resonated in wealthier or more conservative parts of Michigan, but not with a union household worried about factory layoffs." Many Monroe residents viewed Republicans as the party of "the bosses," not the workers, according to him. As late as 2012, Monroe County's GOP support came mostly from its farming townships and a growing contingent of exurban commuters in places like Bedford Township at the Ohio border. But the blue-collar core of the county remained Democratic, if only by default. The old alignment, forged in the era of FDR and sustained by union culture, still held—until it suddenly didn't.

By 2016, the strain between Monroe's Democratic voting habit and its deteriorating economic reality snapped. Donald Trump's presidential campaign targeted places exactly like Monroe—predominantly white, working-class counties hurt by deindustrialization—with a message of rage against the status quo and promises to bring jobs back. Monroe County's response was dramatic. After voting twice for Obama, Monroe swung to Trump by a decisive margin. Hillary Clinton received roughly 38% of Monroe County's vote to Trump's 58%, a swing of nearly 25 percentage points from the previous election. Local Democrats were stunned. Longtime party stalwarts lost their races as well: Bill LaVoy, the Democratic state representative, was swept out in the same wave. The county that had been a dependable (if narrowing) Democratic bastion became, overnight, a GOP stronghold.

The delayed realignment had arrived with a vengeance. My discussions with Monroe voters help explain why 2016 was the breaking point. Economic disillusionment had accumulated to a critical mass. Trump's blunt appeals tapped into grievances that had been simmering for years. "Everybody knew he was out of the box, but they were so mad at the status quo," said Steve, the former autoworker. "We'd given the politicians plenty of chances. Trump at least talked about our jobs." Steve, a lifelong Democrat, ultimately could not bring himself to vote for Trump. He abstained from voting in 2016, voted for Joe Biden in 2020, then abstained again in 2024. "I just feel like so much of it isn't about party for me but it doesn't even matter. Neither side gave me a good option [in 2024]." Many of his neighbors disagreed. They cited Trump's attacks on trade deals like NAFTA, which he blamed for factory closures, and his promises to punish companies that offshore jobs—similar trends to those observed in Beaver, PA. This rhetoric resonated deeply in Monroe. Indeed, Trump carried Monroe County's union households, a shocking development that signaled how thoroughly economic anger had cut crosswise through traditional party loyalties.

Another theme was dissatisfaction with the Democratic Party's direction. "We would've voted Democratic," admitted Phil and his wife Lisa, "but some of what they're talking about is just crazy." Their remarks about "crazy" ideas alluded to perceptions that national Democrats were prioritizing social or environmental issues over bread-and-butter economics. In conversations, Monroe voters frequently brought up issues like LGBTQ+ issues, immigration, or an overall sense that Democrats had become too "Hollywood" and "out of touch." While economic grievance was the main driver, these cultural resentments greased the slide. As one local Republican activist explained: "We've always been pro-little guy and pro-gun here. The Democrats started talking about gun control and climate change, and meanwhile our jobs were

still leaving. People here don't want to hear about electric cars or bathrooms—they want to hear about factories reopening." Trump, for all his controversies, spoke to Monroe's sense of abandonment, and many voters, like Phil and Lisa, felt they "didn't have reason not to vote for Trump again" in 2024.

Republicans, both at the state and local levels, generated the momentum that has brought Monroe to this point. Organizational investments in formerly Democratic precincts paid off. Local GOP chapters, in coordination with state-level strategists, partnered with civic groups and conservative advocacy organizations like Americans for Prosperity to conduct door-knocking campaigns and tailored public responses.[45] These efforts were not generic—they were specified to local economic and cultural anxieties. In union-heavy neighborhoods, Republican canvassers framed right-to-work not as anti-union but as "worker freedom," emphasizing individual choice over collective bargaining. They also highlighted social issues: Monroe's churches became conduits for conservative messages on topics like abortion, which Republicans used to peel off traditionally Democratic Catholic voters. Nationally, the Trump campaign in 2016 deployed a visceral form of economic populism that coincided with local narratives being pushed by Republican organizers. In Michigan, Trump held rallies in working-class areas (though not Monroe City itself, he visited nearby Toledo, OH and suburban Detroit repeatedly) and ran ads about ending bad trade deals and bringing back manufacturing. Many Monroe residents recall Trump's fervor at a 2024 Detroit rally: "Detroit was decimated as if by a foreign army," blaming NAFTA and China's WTO entry for the collapse of Michigan's industrial base. "Our factories were left in ruins," he continued, promising that under his leadership "our flag will fly proudly once more over the gleaming new factories," and that wealth would return "into the hands of our

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[45] Americans for Prosperity-Michigan. "AFP-MI to Slotkin: Cost-of-Living Crisis Is Not a Win for Workers." *Americans for Prosperity*, September 2, 2024.

great workers."[46] Such language—dramatic and nationalistic—struck a deep chord in communities like Monroe, where the memory of plant closures and job losses remained vivid. Republicans effectively crafted a new coalition that included disaffected blue-collar Democrats.

This is Monroe's story: a decades-long Democratic voting bloc was pried loose, one worker at a time, until Republicans achieved a majority. Congressman Tim Walberg, a Republican who began representing Monroe after 2012 due to redistricting, focused heavily on the county's job issues. Walberg would frequently visit Monroe, lament the factory closures, and place blame on "Obama-era regulations" or "unfair trade." He acknowledged the area's stubbornly high unemployment as "a hard pill to swallow," using it as a talking point for why new Republican policies were needed.[47] This consistent on-the-ground presence by GOP figures helped legitimize the Republican Party in the eyes of Monroe voters who historically mistrusted the GOP. Republicans also benefited from amplifying a narrative of cultural decline and blaming Democrats for it at the local level. Right-wing media that became popular in Monroe (talk radio, Fox News, social media groups) often portrayed Democratic leaders as hostile to the values of "real Americans" in places like Monroe. Over time, this culture war angle hardened partisan identities as Republicans "adopted similar messages in how we were doing outreach," according to Phil. By 2024, many Monroe Republicans were voting for Trump because they saw themselves as belonging to a "MAGA" political culture distinct from the "liberal" culture of Ann Arbor or Detroit. This identity component means that even if Democrats propose good economic plans, breaking through the hardened perception might be difficult.

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[46] Donald J. Trump. "Remarks at a Campaign Rally in Detroit, Michigan." The American Presidency Project, October 18, 2024.

[47] Alexandra Hutzler and Ken Tarbous. "This Battleground County Flipped for Trump in 2016, but Times Are Tough There Now." *Newsweek*, September 15, 2020.

It is important to note that political realignment has policy consequences and vice versa. After Republicans secured power, policies like the 2017 tax reform and deregulation were implemented, which had mixed effects on Monroe. Some businesses, like Don and Lisa's machine shop, saw immediate benefits, while many workers saw little direct change. In Michigan, the Republican-led legislature (until 2018) largely ignored union pleas to repeal right-to-work or raise the minimum wage, policies that might have tangibly helped Monroe's working class. Instead, GOP governance focused on business climate and budget cuts. Whether these policies ultimately address Monroe's core issues is debatable. By the 2024 election, Monroe still faced economic headwinds, and ironically, the Democratic Biden administration's initiatives—such as the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act—promised potentially more concrete help (funds for road repair, broadband, etc.) to places like Monroe. This raises an interesting scenario that parallels Franklin Ave in Beaver, PA: Monroe's voters realigned based on past grievance, but going forward their well-being may depend on bipartisan or even Democratic-led solutions to issues of stagnation. As of 2024, Michigan has repealed the right-to-work law (under a Democratic state government), a development welcomed by unionists like Rose who hope it will "rebuild labor ties and strength." It remains to be seen if that policy change will translate into any political shift in Monroe. The county's example suggests that once a realignment occurs, reversing it is challenging. Cultural and identity factors then start to lock it in. Yet, Monroe's own history shows that political loyalty is not immutable; it lasted for decades under one configuration and then changed in a handful of years. Should the Republicans fail to deliver economic revival, or should Democrats find a message that resonates (perhaps leveraging the county's desire for investment and good jobs), Monroe could see another chapter in its political evolution.

In the context of the Rust Belt as a whole, Monroe County exemplifies how local factors mediate national trends. The overarching forces of globalization, automation, and political realignment affected many states, but Monroe's local union history, industry mix, and community networks shaped a unique timeline of response. As the Rust Belt's political map continues to evolve, Monroe's experience offers a cautionary tale to political leaders: economic neglect can carry political costs, but simply harnessing discontent without solving underlying problems may be only a temporary recipe for loyalty. Monroe is a reminder that the realignment is not a one-time event but an ongoing process, with potential for further shifts if conditions change again.

Rock County, Wisconsin

Sitting on the southern edge of Wisconsin, Rock County's political evolution has been markedly different from that of many Rust Belt peers. For most of the 20th century, Rock was a Republican bulwark in presidential elections. From 1940 through 1984, it voted for the GOP nominee in every presidential race except the 1964 landslide of Lyndon B. Johnson. This enduring Republican allegiance stood in contrast to places like Beaver County, PA, or Monroe County, MI, which had swung solidly Democratic in the extended New Deal era. FDR nonetheless had managed to carry it in 1936 (the first Democrat to do so in that century) as part of an unprecedented national sweep. While industrial communities in Pennsylvania and Michigan forged early loyalty to Democrats at this time, Rock County's voters remained reliably Republican for decades thereafter.
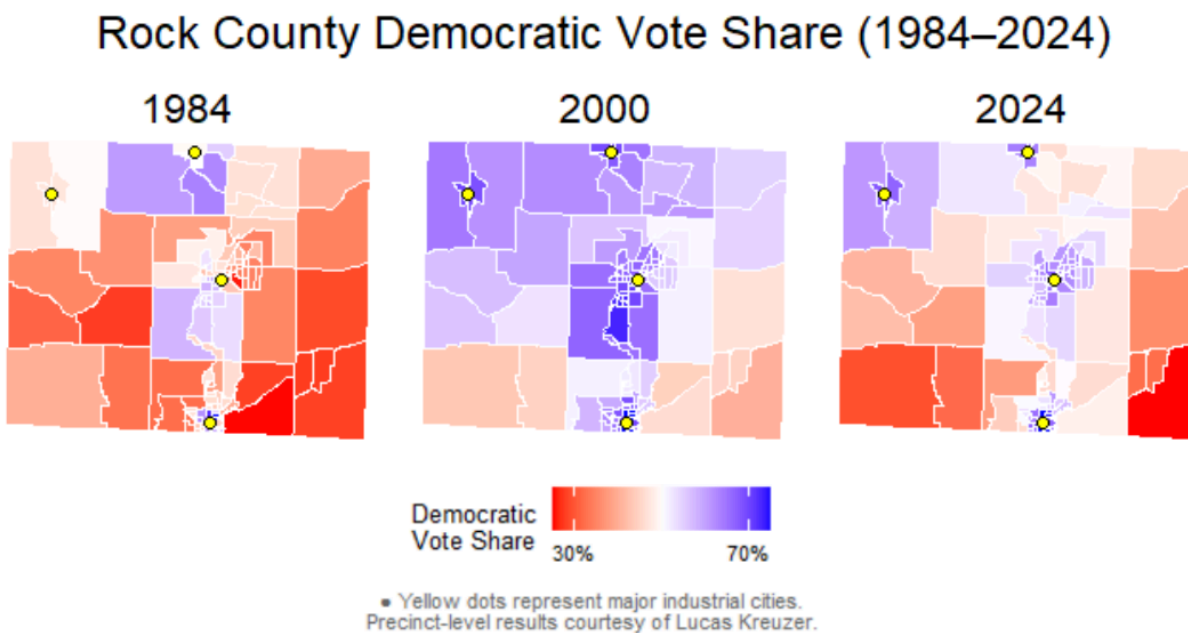
This makes Rock County's alignment all the more striking. Like Beaver and Monroe, Rock County in the mid-20th century was heavily shaped by unionized manufacturing, anchored by the General Motors plant in Janesville and a constellation of blue-collar jobs in public education, construction, and related industries. But unlike its Rust Belt peers, Rock remained politically distinct. A stronger agricultural presence, a sizable professional middle class, and longstanding cultural ties to Wisconsin's brand of moderate Republicanism helped sustain GOP dominance. It was not until the Reagan era's end—amid farm crises and manufacturing declines—that Rock County's working-class voters broke their Republican habit. The 1980s farm downturn hit Wisconsin hard,[48] eroding rural Republican loyalties and nudging Rock County toward the Democrats. By 1988, with economic anxieties mounting, Michael Dukakis carried Rock County by roughly 1,400 votes, or about 2.4 percentage points, signaling that a

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[48] U.S. Department of Agriculture, Research, Education & Economics Information System. *The Long-Run Effects of the 1980s Farm Crisis on the Social Capital of Midwestern Communities*. Accession No. 1023329.

Democratic realignment had finally arrived in this corner of the Rust Belt. Dukakis's win

inaugurated a new pattern: from 1988 through 2024, Rock County consistently voted Democratic

for president.

Rock County Democratic Vote Share (1984–2024)

- Yellow dots represent major industrial cities.
Precinct-level results courtesy of Lucas Kreuzer.

The late-20th-century partisan turn in Rock County was subtle but significant. Democrats

built a new coalition centered in the county's two cities—Janesville and Beloit—while

Republicans retained strength in the rural townships. "Everyone knows, even today, the Dems in

those two cities are carrying the county," expressed Nico, an affiliate of the County's Republican

Party. For much of the 20th century, local Democratic victories were rare. Party infrastructure

was weaker than in neighboring union bastions, and GOP candidates dominated most

countywide races. What changed in the 1980s was not a wholesale shift. It was a gradual

transformation rooted in the strength of organized labor, public-sector unions, and demographic

changes in urban neighborhoods. Rock's belated flip placed the county on a different political

timetable—one shaped less by Roosevelt-era realignment and more by post-Reagan urban liberalism.

By 2000, the electoral map had shifted to a dominant blue. The Democrats (Al Gore in this case) won Rock County, and the spatial divide weakened. Beyond Janesville and Beloit, other industrial or semi-industrial cities such as Evansville and Edgerton played supporting roles in attaining Democratic dominance. Evansville's manufacturing base and Edgerton's concentration of union households in the northwest corridor helped bolster turnout and extend the urban Democratic coalition into Rock's western periphery. Together, these cities helped Democrats control Rock County and recalibrated it to a similar political trajectory as other Rust Belt areas. Nonetheless, Janesville's UAW autoworkers and Beloit's mix of industrial and service workers stood at the center of this dependable base. A few farming towns and exurban communities still favored George W. Bush, but "they were weak," according to Pamela, a retired democratic organizer. Compared to 1984, Democrats in 2000 had expanded their vote share in the urban core and seemed to be pushing out to the county's edges. In the years to come, partisan divides increasingly aligned with population density and education levels: city dwellers (many with ties to unionized factories, public schools, or hospitals) leaned Democrat, while farmers and exurban commuters remained reliably Republican.

Fast forward to 2024, and the electoral map shows what Nico called a "political boomerang still coming back." Democrats carried Rock County in 2024, but their strongholds shrank largely to high-turnout city precincts, while the GOP made inroads in areas that once leaned blue. In Janesville, the Democratic vote was now concentrated in the older central neighborhoods—these precincts, home to many union retirees, public employees, and younger progressive professionals, were painted light blue. Beloit also stayed Democratic, with its

racially diverse electorate turning out strongly in favor of Kamala Harris. However, formerly competitive or Democratic-leaning precincts of Janesville's turned red. Middle-class suburban neighborhoods on the city's north and east sides, which two decades ago split their tickets, voted Republican in 2024. As many of them had interests in the collapsed auto industry, they reflected the national swing of many white suburban voters toward the GOP during the Trump era. In the rural townships and small villages—Clinton, Orfordville, and others—the map shows a return to shades of red last seen in 1984. Many of these areas, which historically voted Republican anyway, gave enhanced majorities to the GOP in 2024, galvanized by cultural issues. This expansion outlines the county's vulnerability: the Democratic coalition here, though still substantial, is geographically limited, raising alarms for party organizers that Rock County could slip away if city turnout falters or the GOP margin in rural areas grows just a bit more.
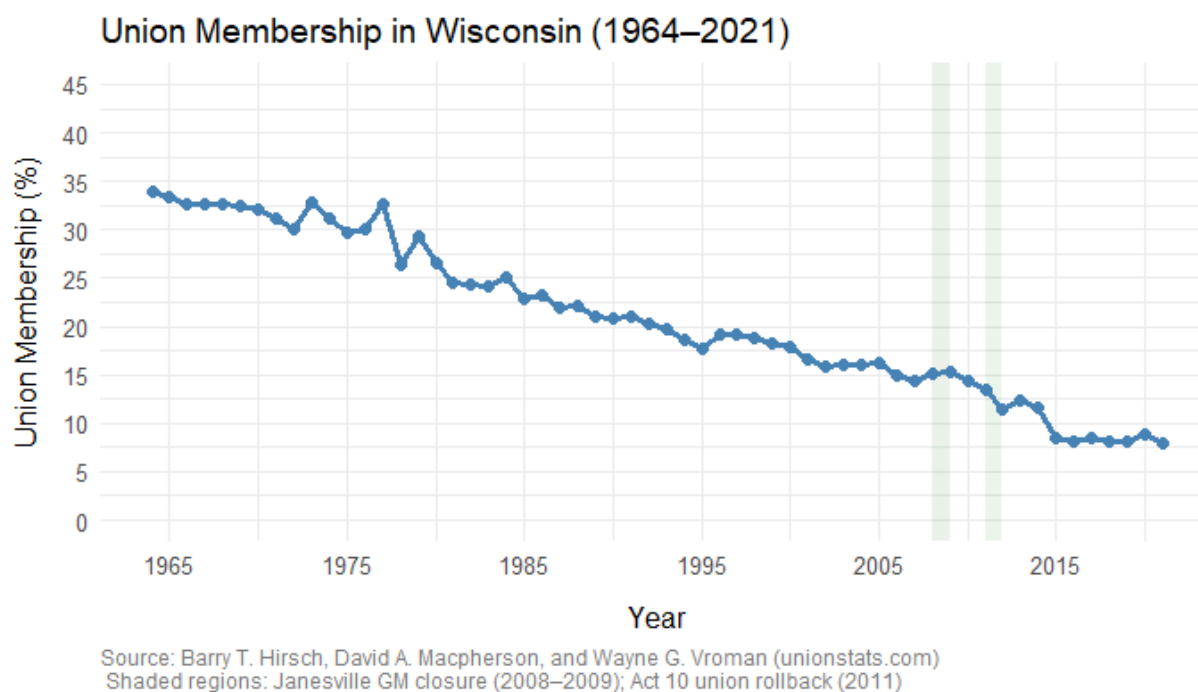
Rock County's politics is best understood through its economic background. In the late 20th century, its economy was anchored by manufacturing and union jobs—most notably, the General Motors (GM) assembly plant in Janesville. The GM plant, opened in 1919, at its peak employed over 7,000 workers assembling Chevrolet trucks and SUVs.[49] Around this core orbited dozens of suppliers (like the nearby Lear seating factory) and a robust constellation of unionized jobs that sustained a prosperous blue-collar middle class. This industrial base fostered a strong union culture: UAW Local 95, representing Janesville auto workers, was a powerful presence that bargained for wages and shaped community identity. Oral histories recount how Local 95's activism in the 1960s and '70s—from organizing drives in 1937 to strikes in 1972—made "union" a household word in Rock County.[50] Union membership across the county (spanning UAW, AFL-CIO affiliates, AFSCME, and others) reached its height in the mid-20th century and

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[49] Amy Goldstein, "What Is Janesville, Wisconsin, Without General Motors?" *The Atlantic*, April 18, 2017
[50] "Janesville GM 1937 Strike," *Wisconsin 101: Our History in Objects*.

began to decline thereafter. In the 1970s, Rock County's union density followed Wisconsin's

high statewide average—about one in three workers held union cards. The chart below shows

how union membership across Wisconsin has steadily eroded since then, from over 30% in the

early 1960s to below 10% today. Per union organizers on the ground, Rock is said to have

followed a similar trajectory: even before the shuttering of the Janesville GM plant in 2009 and

the passage of Act 10 in 2011, union strength had begun to wane. These two events, highlighted

in the chart, catalyzed an accelerated collapse in labor organization—undermining wage

protections and the infrastructure that once tied working-class residents to the Democratic Party.

Union Membership in Wisconsin (1964–2021)

Source: Barry T. Hirsch, David A. Macpherson, and Wayne G. Vroman (unionstats.com)
Shaded regions: Janesville GM closure (2008–2009); Act 10 union rollback (2011)

As mentioned, the economic restructuring of the 2000s dealt a heavy blow to this

labor-driven prosperity. The most pivotal event was the closure of GM's Janesville plant in

2008—a watershed moment from which the community is still recovering. In the midst of the

Great Recession, GM announced it would halt production in Janesville just two days before

Christmas 2008, ending an 85-year run of continuous operations.[51] The shutdown was devastating: roughly 9,000 jobs vanished in 2008 - 09 in Rock County when one counts the assembly workers, parts suppliers, and downstream businesses that folded or cut back. Unemployment in Janesville spiked above 13.4% in the months after, the highest in generations, and local bankruptcy filings and foreclosures skyrocketed.[52] The GM plant became an empty shell, eventually sold off and demolished. Longtime autoworkers faced gut-wrenching choices: take transfers to distant GM plants in Indiana or Texas (uprooting families that had lived in Rock County for decades), accept buyouts and early retirements, or try to retrain for a new career in a much harsher job market. "Everyone just left," recalls Reynold, a former line worker who took a buyout in 2007. "It didn't help, it just added to the problems and maybe delayed reality if you took the money had a few bucks at the end." The psychological toll of the plant closure reverberated through union offices and living rooms alike—several people described it as a collective "trauma" that fundamentally altered how residents thought about their future, even if they were not immediately affected by the plant closure.

In the wake of GM's closure, Rock County's economy gradually shifted toward the service sector and diversified industries. Local leaders, including a coalition of business figures like banker Mary Willmer and Beloit billionaire Diane Hendricks, launched "Rock County 5.0," an initiative to attract new employers and "move beyond Janesville's automotive identity."[53] Over the 2010s, there were some successes: distribution centers, food processing plants, and health care facilities expanded in the county. Janesville became a regional retail hub (with a large shopping corridor and service jobs to replace some factory work), and healthcare and education rose as major employers (MercyHealth hospital in Janesville, Beloit Memorial Hospital, and area
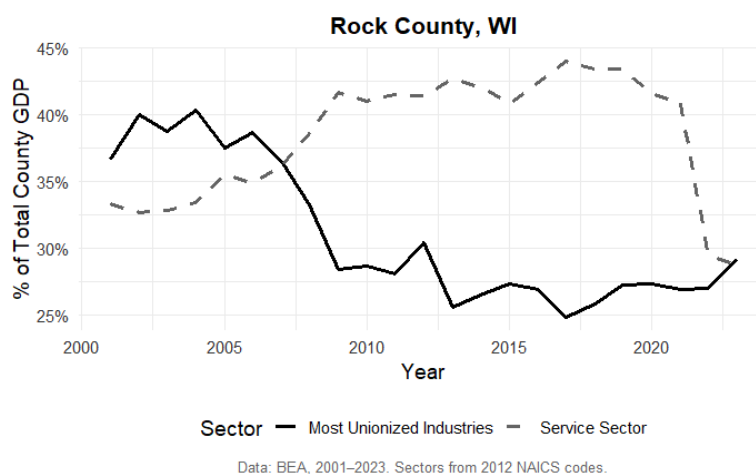
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[51] Amy Goldstein, *Janesville: An American Story* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2017).
[52] Ibid.
[53] Ibid.

school districts now rank among the top job providers). The sectoral GDP data (2001 - 2023) reflect this restructuring: Rock County's output from manufacturing declined sharply after 2008, while service industries (health services, education, retail trade) grew their share. For instance, by 2020 manufacturing accounted for a significantly smaller portion of the county's GDP than it did in 2001, whereas sectors like professional services, healthcare, and logistics saw steady gains. In absolute terms, Rock County's economy rebounded in the 2010s—total GDP in the county climbed from about $7.8 billion in 2019 to over $10.5 billion by 2023, buoyed by growth in new industries.[54] But this growth masked the fact that many of the new jobs paid lower wages than the union manufacturing jobs they replaced. Jacob, a former supervisor at the GM Plant, lamented, "For a long time, I was making less than I was back then. I didn't have choice, the job market is a rough place." As of 2017 Rock County had nearly 25% fewer manufacturing jobs than it did before the plant shut down, and local wages sagged accordingly.[55] The shift from $30-an-hour assembly line jobs to $12-an-hour retail positions profoundly affected household incomes and, by extension, political attitudes.

Rock County, WI

Sector — Most Unionized Industries — Service Sector

Data: BEA, 2001–2023. Sectors from 2012 NAICS codes.

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[54] Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, "Total Gross Domestic Product for Rock County, WI," FRED, *Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis*.
[55] Amy Goldstein, "What Is Janesville, Wisconsin, Without General Motors?" *The Atlantic*, April 18, 2017

By the mid-2010s, service-sector employment in Rock County had overtaken the once-dominant unionized industries as the largest contributor to local GDP. This shift distinguishes Rock from its Rust Belt peers like Beaver and Monroe, where union-heavy sectors still hold a larger economic share. As shown in the chart above, the service sector surpassed unionized industries around the time of the Great Recession and maintained that lead through the 2010s. While the dramatic drop in service-sector GDP after 2020 may partly reflect data volatility in the post-pandemic period—likely to be revised or rebound in future years—the long-run trend is clear: Rock County's economic base has been restructured.

This transformation is visible on the ground. A mid-day photo (right) of downtown Beloit, the county's second-largest city, shows a bustling commercial strip: shops are open, sidewalks are active, and nearly every parking spot is taken. Unlike the more uneven recoveries seen in downtown Monroe or Beaver, Beloit exhibits signs of a service economy that is locally embedded. Independent boutiques, restaurants, and professional services fill the storefronts, suggesting that Rock's pivot away from manufacturing was not only statistical but spatial—one that reshaped the downtown core into a walkable, lived-in hub of activity.

One consequence was a weakening of organized labor's influence. Union membership plunged in Rock County after 2008, both from the loss of private-sector unions (UAW Local 95 shrank to a fraction of its former size) and later from deliberate policy changes. In 2011, Wisconsin's Act 10 (championed by Republican Governor Scott Walker) virtually eliminated collective bargaining rights for most public employees. The effect on union density was dramatic

and immediate. Statewide, union membership dropped by 5.5 percentage points in a single year after Act 10, one of the largest declines in the country.[56] Wisconsin's public-sector unionization rate fell from roughly 50% in 2011 to just 37% in 2012—an unprecedented collapse in union ranks.[57] Rock County, with its many teachers, government workers, and university staff, felt this acutely. The American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) locals and the teachers' unions in Janesville and Beloit saw membership rolls halved or worse as automatic dues collection ended and annual recertification hurdles pushed many out. "The giant lobby days once organized by AFSCME are long gone," expressed its executive director.[58] By 2021, union membership in Wisconsin was down around 8% of the workforce (from well above 20% in the 1980s), and Rock County mirrored that decline. A county that once proudly called itself a "union town" found itself with a much diminished labor voice. Labor halls that were once packed with volunteers for Democratic candidates had emptier parking lots. Laura Dresser, a labor economist in Janesville, lamented that Wisconsin is where "the bottom falls out."[59] After Act 10, that proved true. Decades of union political clout vanished virtually overnight.

As manufacturing dwindled and unions receded, the ideas of Democratic Party being the guardian of the working class came under strain. Yet interestingly, Rock County's Democrats did not collapse. They adapted. The torch of Democratic support passed to other groups, especially educators, healthcare workers, and retirees. Teachers and school staff in Rock County remain a core Democratic constituency, arguably even more so after Act 10, as they became galvanized to defend public education and labor rights in the absence of formal bargaining power. "It's not bargaining, but it is having the ability to talk with your administrators and your school board and

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[56] Shawn Johnson, "A Decade after Act 10, It's a Different World for Wisconsin Unions," *Wisconsin Public Radio,* February 11, 2021.
[57] Craig Gilbert, "The politics of Wisconsin's declining union membership," Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, February 9, 2013,
[58] Shawn Johnson, "A Decade after Act 10."
[59] Ibid.

be part of conversations," one local teacher-activist said of her union's new role post-Act 10.[60]

Educators channeled their frustrations (over Act 10, budget cuts, or curriculum mandates) into

political action, from lobbying to school board elections, reliably backing Democratic candidates

who supported public schools.

Healthcare workers, too, emerged as a pillar of the Democratic coalition. Hospitals like

MercyHealth in Janesville employ thousands of nurses, technicians, and support staff—many of

whom are acutely aware of issues like Medicaid expansion, public health funding, and

reproductive rights. These workers often lean Democratic, seeing that party as more supportive

of healthcare investment and worker protections. Julie, a nurse at Beloit Hospital, shared that she

votes Democrat "because I see what patients and coworkers go through. We need leaders who

fund healthcare and value front-line workers." Such sentiments are commonplace in this growing

service economy.

Perhaps most intriguingly, I encountered more retirees and older residents with union

backgrounds who have remained loyal Democrats, even as the jobs they once held disappear. I

had less luck in Beaver or Monroe. "A lot of UAW retirees still live in Rock County," according

to Mary-Anne, a volunteer for the Democratic Party and the "proud daughter" of a UAW

affiliate. "They're still drawing pensions secured by their past union contracts." These retirees

carry the institutional memory of the local labor movement. They tell their children and

grandchildren stories of the 1970s strikes, of President JFK visiting Janesville in 1960, of voting

for Democrats like William Proxmire and Russ Feingold, who championed labor. This living

memory has helped sustain Democratic identification in many families. For example, a UAW

retiree in Janesville might volunteer each election not just out of habit, but "because we

remember who stood with us, not some New York billionaire," as Mary-Anne's husband put it.

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[60] Ibid.

Such retirees often remain Democratic stalwarts and high-propensity voters. Their continued

participation has buttressed the Democratic base even as the county's workforce changes.

Notably, Rock County consistently has among the higher voter turnouts in Wisconsin, and the

highest among the three counties being compared here. However, their influence will naturally

wane with time, placing pressure on Democrats to win over younger cohorts.

Meanwhile, the Republican base in Rock County has also undergone an evolution.

Historically, Rock County Republicans were a mix of farmers, small-business owners, and

conservative professionals (bankers, managers)—often moderate in tone, aligned with the Lee

Dreyfus or Tommy Thompson style of Wisconsin Republicanism. In recent years, however,

national GOP trends have swept into Rock County's GOP as well. The new Republican energy

comes from those without union ties—younger tradesmen, ex-urban commuters, evangelical

churchgoers, and culture-war oriented voters. As union influence waned, some blue-collar

workers who might once have been "union Democrats" drifted toward the Republican Party,

attracted by messages on guns, religion, or simply feeling that Democrats no longer deliver for

the working man. The closure of GM in some ways freed a subset of former union households to

consider the GOP, especially once economic resentment could be channeled by figures like

Donald Trump. Rock County thus saw a phenomenon of "cultural conservatives vs. labor

loyalists" emerge within the working class.

Beyond individual attitudes, Rock County's trajectory has been shaped by broader

institutional forces and political strategies. In the past decade, state-level policies and local party

efforts have created a new battleground in the county. One major catalyst was Wisconsin's Act

10, which I discussed for its impact on unions, but not for the ripple effect on local Democratic

organizing. In response to Act 10, Rock County became a hotbed of protest. Busloads of

teachers, nurses, and municipal workers from Janesville and Beloit went to Madison during the

2011 Capitol protests, and some of the largest local rallies in memory took place on Janesville's

courthouse lawn in solidarity.[61] Although the protests did not stop the law, they seeded a network

of activists who later funneled their energy into electoral politics. A prominent example of this

was campaigning for the 2012 recall election against Scott Walker. Rock County voted

overwhelmingly for Walker's opponent in the recall, reflecting the anger in this union-dense

area, even as Walker survived statewide. After Act 10, the local Democratic Party saw a surge of

interest from newcomers like Rebecca and Janet, two teachers who had otherwise been apolitical

for much of their lives. However, with unions constrained, the party had to find new ways to

fundraise and mobilize. They increasingly leaned on alliances with issue groups such as

environmentalists, women's rights organizations, and civil rights advocates to supplement what

unions used to provide in terms of ground game. The Democratic Party of Rock County also

professionalized: they opened a year-round office in downtown Janesville (instead of temporary

election-season offices), signaling a commitment to constant presence.[62] This helped maintain

that high voter turnout previously mentioned as well.

Meanwhile, Republicans have not been idle. Recognizing the opportunity that lay ahead

for Rock to follow suit with other Rust Belt counties, the GOP focused on chipping away at

margins and winning down-ballot posts. A clear strategy has been in the school board and local

government races. For instance, in Janesville's school board elections in 2022 and 2023,

conservative candidates campaigned on themes of "parental rights" and opposition to critical

race theory or certain sex education topics. They received organizational and financial support

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[61] Howard Ryan, "Wisconsin: 'As Long as It Takes,'" *Labor Notes*, February 16, 2011.
[62] Democratic Party of Rock County. "Our Office," https://www.rockcountydems.com/office.

from national conservative groups.[63] This bore fruit: by 2023, the Janesville School Board had a

mix of members that included vocal conservatives who immediately pushed for changes in

district policies. In Beloit, a different dynamic unfolded. "Despite unprecedented involvement by

outside groups, major political parties on both sides and even rightwing billionaire and GOP

megadonor Diane Hendricks, conservative candidates lost, as voters rejected hyperpartisan,

negative school board politics."[64] Despite varied success, these nationally-charged but

locally-focused challenges have legitimized the GOP's efforts to influence policies affecting

teachers' contracts and curriculum choices. Their persistence is paying off. On April 1, 2025,

outsider candidates Juan Romero and JoAnne Ruch took down incumbent Gregg Schneider by

focusing on "distrust" with the district and concerns over school values.[65] It is no coincidence

that their rhetoric on departing from the status quo parallels that of political candidates running

for higher offices within the county.

Another local battleground has been the issue of abortion and the courts. When the U.S.

Supreme Court overturned Roe v. Wade in 2022, Wisconsin reverted to an 1849 law banning

abortion in almost all cases. This immediately became a mobilizing issue for Democrats,

according to Pamela, the retired democratic organizer. Janesville's streets saw rallies with signs

"Janesville for Reproductive Freedom," and Beloit activists opened a new Planned Parenthood

advocacy office. In the April 2023 Wisconsin Supreme Court election, which was essentially a

referendum on abortion policy and political control of the court, Rock County delivered a strong

liberal vote. The liberal candidate, Janet Protasiewicz, carried Rock County by a decisive margin

and flipped the court's balance. This outcome was celebrated by local Democrats as proof that

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[63] Corrinne Hess, "Wisconsin School Board Races Attract Attention from National Conservative Groups," Wisconsin Public Radio, March 24, 2025.
[64] Ruth Conniff, "Conservatives' School Board Push Yields Mixed Results in Tuesday Elections," *Wisconsin Examiner*, April 6, 2022.
[65] "Newcomers Take Top Two Spots in Beloit School Board Balloting," *WCLO*, April 1, 2025

even if some union voters had drifted, new issues like abortion rights could galvanize a broad coalition. To Pamela, this episode proved "that public education and abortion are now as salient as traditional labor issues in motivating some voters." Both major parties have adapted, according to her: Democrats talk as much about "protecting our schools and our freedoms" as they do about "good jobs and wages" when campaigning here, while Republicans emphasize "parental control in education and the sanctity of life" alongside taxes and crime. The institutional debate has thus moved into cultural institutions (schools, clinics, courts) as much as economic ones.

On the partisan infrastructure front, local party organizations have waxed and waned. The Rock County Democratic Party, benefiting from a Democratic-leaning populace, has generally been the larger of the two local parties. They pride themselves on a strong volunteer base in the cities—every election, dozens of volunteers of all ages staff phone banks and canvass around the county. Democrats also leverage events like the Rock County 4-H Fair and Janesville's Labor Fest to meet voters where they are. Republicans, for a long time, struggled in the county—the presence of figures like Paul Ryan (a Janesville native) helped them in terms of visibility and fundraising, but rank-and-file activity was lower. That has changed somewhat post-2016: the Rock County GOP now has an energized base of Trump supporters who hold flag-waving rallies on overpasses and organize parade caravans through the rural areas. Most politically active voters I spoke with could recall such instances. Their county fair booths feature big "Make America Great Again" banner. GOP Chairpersons have made a point to recruit candidates for every local seat (even in heavily Democratic wards) to give voters a choice and force Democrats to expend resources. The Republican strategy, according to one party official, is to "keep whittling away." Even if they lose the county by 5 points in a presidential race, that is better than

losing by 10, because it could swing a close statewide outcome. Indeed, Donald Trump's relative

success in Wisconsin in 2016 and 2024 was because he narrowed Democratic margins in

counties like Rock. (Clinton, Biden, and Harris won Rock County with 52%, 55%, and 53%,

respectively, down from Obama's 61% in 2012) Republicans eye that trend hopefully;

Democrats, warily.

What makes Rock County especially unique is the interplay of its history and present. It

has a deep institutional memory of both sides: the heritage of old-line Midwestern

Republicanism and the later legacy of labor-backed Democratic activism. This gives the

community a somewhat cosmopolitan political identity despite its small-city and rural makeup.

This dual memory also fosters a bit more cross-party civility at the local level than in some

places. As Amy Goldstein noted, the community often pulled together regardless of party. For

instance, Republican Congressman Paul Ryan and Democratic State Senator Tim Cullen

cooperated closely to try to save the GM plant in 2008. That bipartisan cooperative spirit is part

of Rock County's political culture, a legacy of being a small community where everyone knows

each other despite partisan differences.

Rock County's political trajectory has been a story of a union alignment delayed, then

achieved, and now defended. The county's history of GOP allegiance and late conversion to the

Democratic column set it apart from Beaver and Monroe in the Rust Belt pantheon. And now,

having been part of the Democratic "blue wall" in Wisconsin for several cycles, Rock County

finds itself a battleground within a battleground. Its vote is increasingly crucial to offset

Republican gains elsewhere, even as it copes with its own internal shifts. High voter engagement

and long memories of what each party has meant to this community provide Democrats with a

fighting chance to keep Rock County blue. But as the currents of cultural realignment lap at its

borders, Rock County must continuously recommit to that Democratic identity or risk being swept into the red column. This duality, a proud Democratic stronghold with an undercurrent of Republican resurgence, makes Rock County a valuable case study in Rust Belt politics. As Pamela aptly noted, "Rock County has changed a lot, but it hasn't forgotten where it came from." The coming years will test how much of that collective memory can anchor the county against the changing tides of political realignment.

Cross-County Analysis

The political landscapes of Beaver County, Pennsylvania; Monroe County, Michigan; and Rock County, Wisconsin—once united by their working-class, industrial identities and Democratic loyalties—have diverged markedly. The fragmentation of these communities' political alignments is best understood from a shared collapse of economic security and civic infrastructure, compounded by varied local responses. Across all three counties, the erosion of unionized manufacturing jobs and the stagnation of real wages created conditions ripe for disaffection. Yet it was the presence—or absence—of organizing institutions, political adaptation, and community leadership that determined the shape and speed of partisan realignment. In Beaver County, a swift collapse of the steel industry and labor institutions gave rise to early Republican gains, as cultural conservatism filled the vacuum left by Democratic retreat. In Monroe County, a slower unraveling of auto-based employment and civic cohesion culminated in a decisive rightward shift only after 2016, catalyzed by Trump's populist appeal and Democratic organizational atrophy. Rock County, by contrast, absorbed its own economic shocks while preserving a partial Democratic infrastructure—anchored by public-sector unions

and localized mobilization—which blunted the GOP's rise and maintained, if tenuously, a blue foothold. These cases reveal that political realignment in the Rust Belt is not necessarily a product of structural decline, but of how that decline is met—whether by renewed investment in civic life or by the hollowing out of solidarity. What follows is a comparative exploration of how economic collapse, institutional retreat, and the politics of presence have shaped these counties' pathways through the postindustrial age.
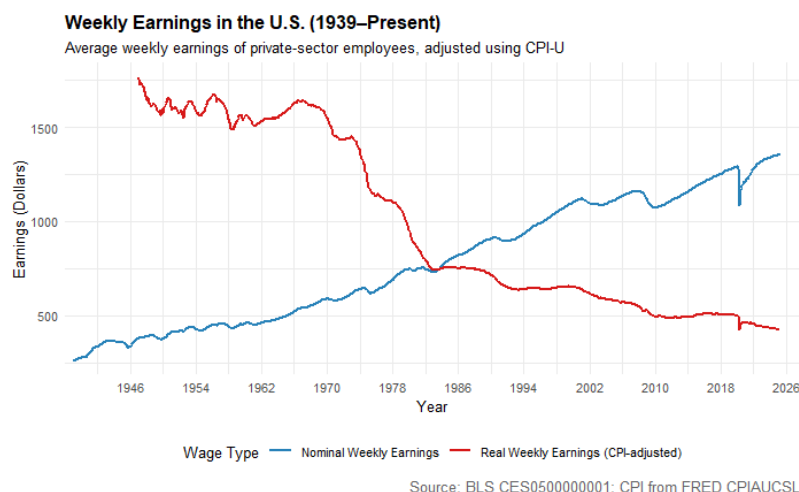
Material Decline Beneath the Surface: Realities of Stagnation

At first glance, the post-1990 wage trajectory in Beaver (PA), Monroe (MI), and Rock (WI) Counties tells a reassuring story: nominal weekly earnings have increased steadily, with paychecks climbing from around $550 to well over $1,200 by 2023. However, this apparent growth is illusory. When wages are adjusted for inflation using the Consumer Price Index (CPI-U), real weekly earnings in all three counties reveal a different and far more troubling reality: stagnation, followed by decline. The attached charts illustrate this divergence starkly:

1. The blue line tracks nominal weekly earnings—the paycheck amount in current dollars.
2. The red line tracks real earnings—the actual purchasing power of those paychecks after adjusting for inflation (1982 - 84 CPI base).
3. What becomes immediately clear is that while nominal wages rose consistently, real wages either plateaued or fell, eroding workers' ability to afford basic necessities like housing, food, healthcare, and transportation.
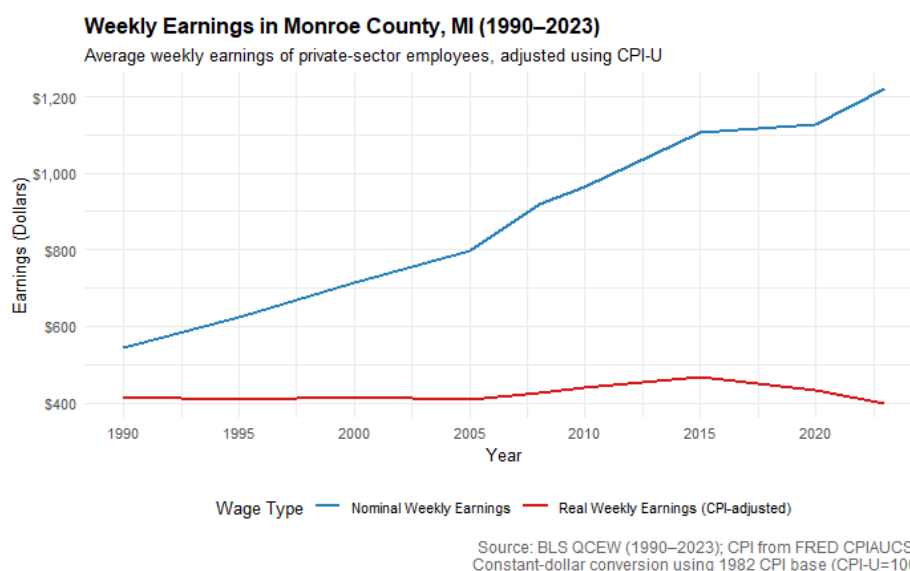
This pattern is not unique to the Rust Belt. National data on real wages since 1973 show a similar decline. Yet, on the shorter time scale, the consequences are magnified in communities that once depended on high-wage, unionized industrial work. In each of these counties, deindustrialization destroyed the sectors that once undergirded middle-class life—and no equivalent economic replacement ever took root.

Weekly Earnings in the U.S. (1939–Present)
Average weekly earnings of private-sector employees, adjusted using CPI-U

Source: BLS CES0500000001; CPI from FRED CPIAUCSL

In every county, nominal wages (the actual dollars in a paycheck) rose over time. This growth line is unbroken and even accelerated after 2015. Yet the inflation-adjusted wage—what those dollars actually buy—tells a starkly different story:

Weekly Earnings in Beaver County, PA (1990–2023)
Average weekly earnings of private-sector employees, adjusted using CPI-U

Source: BLS QCEW (1990–2023); CPI from FRED CPIAUCSL
Constant-dollar conversion using 1982 CPI base (CPI-U=100)
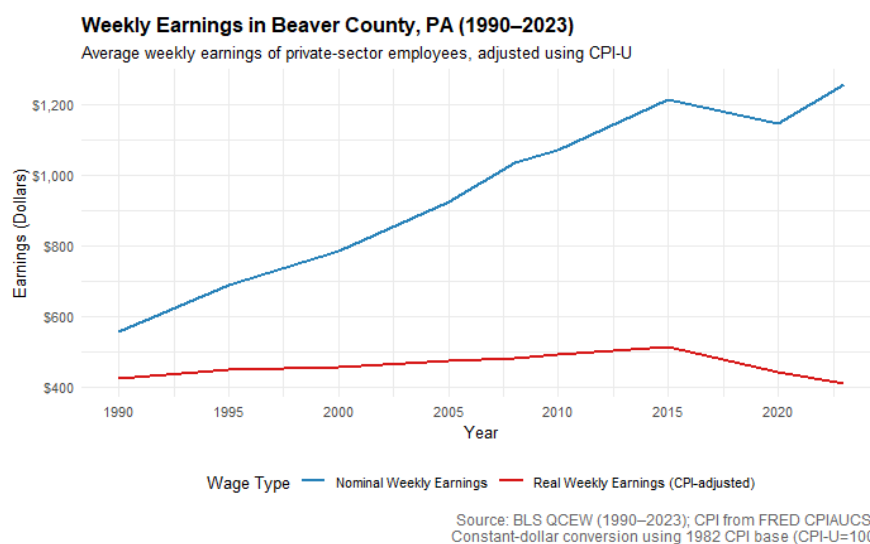
In the chart above, Beaver's real weekly earnings hovered around $430 for most of the period between 1990 and 2015. After a brief uptick, earnings began to fall sharply post-2018, dropping to just above $400 by 2023. This drop occurred despite a steady rise in nominal wages, illustrating how inflation masked the erosion of real income. Beaver's early industrial collapse, particularly in steel and manufacturing, left few real high-wage options in its wake, and the county's economic center of gravity never shifted to new growth industries. The result is a striking mismatch between perceived progress and lived experience.

Weekly Earnings in Monroe County, MI (1990–2023)
Average weekly earnings of private-sector employees, adjusted using CPI-U

Source: BLS QCEW (1990–2023); CPI from FRED CPIAUCSL
Constant-dollar conversion using 1982 CPI base (CPI-U=100)

Monroe tells a similar story, but with a slower burn. Real wages ranged from $420 - 460 throughout the 1990s and early 2000s. A modest bump during the late Obama years gave way to a precipitous fall after 2016, hitting above $400 by 2023. As unionized manufacturing jobs vanished, lower-wage sectors like logistics and warehousing failed to replace them in income or benefits. Monroe residents may have received more paychecks—but, like their distant neighbors in Beaver, they could buy less with them.

Weekly Earnings in Rock County, WI (1990–2023)
Average weekly earnings of private-sector employees, adjusted using CPI-U

Wage Type — Nominal Weekly Earnings — Real Weekly Earnings (CPI-adjusted)

Source: BLS QCEW (1990–2023); CPI from FRED CPIAUCSL
Constant-dollar conversion using 1982 CPI base (CPI-U=100)
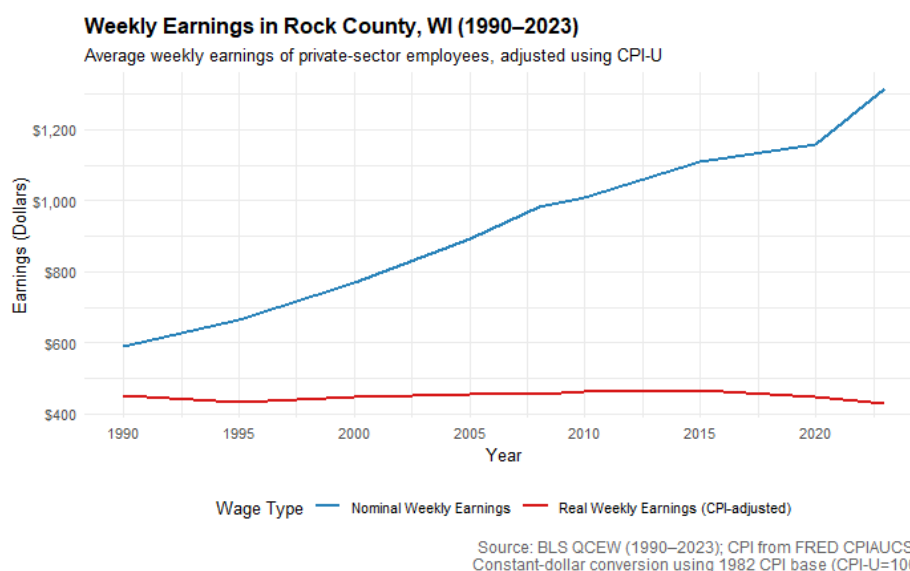
Despite its diversified labor market, Rock also followed this deflationary path. Real earnings in Rock plateaued around $450 for decades, peaking just shy of $480 in the mid-2010s, then sliding to below 1990 levels by 2023. The 2008 closure of the GM plant in Janesville tells only part of this story. While new jobs emerged in health care, retail, and education, they did not match the wage structure of the old auto economy. This shift is visible in the slow drift downward of real earnings, which fails to match the optimism that proximity to urban hubs in Madison and Milwaukee might otherwise suggest. In fact, the same could be said for Beaver's proximity to Pittsburgh and Monroe's to Detroit.

What unites these three counties is a shared disconnect between headline economic metrics and household realities. Officially, wages rose. But real purchasing power did not. This erosion of economic stability, quietly underway for decades, exploded into political relevance after the Great Recession—and even more so after 2016. Importantly, the wage charts trace a collapse of faith in the economic promise of hard work.
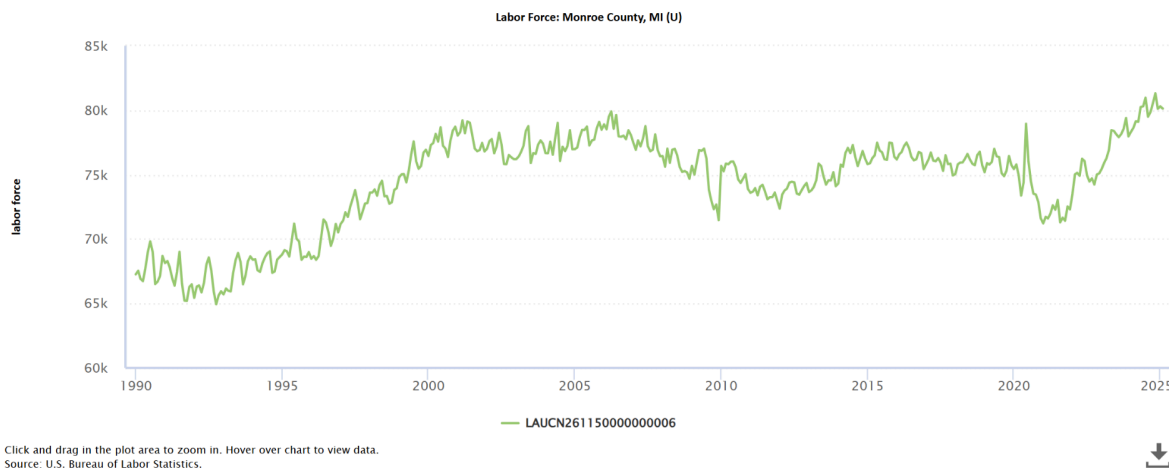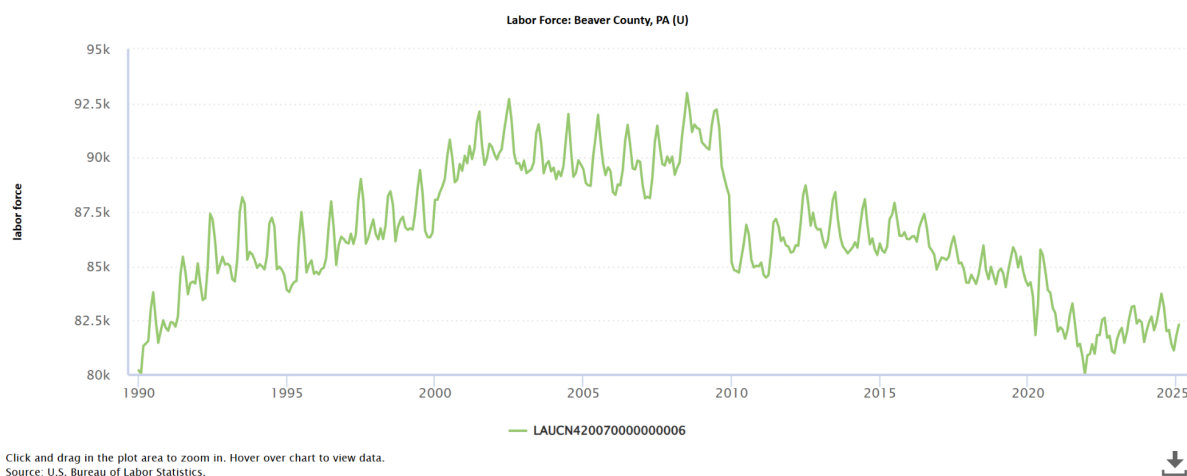
This disillusionment was compounded by a cultural contradiction: residents were told the economy was recovering, but their own experiences told a different story. Residents in each county mentioned the Biden-Harris administration's narrative of "kitchen table" promises coming into tension with their material realities. "The media keeps talking about all these jobs Biden created," extolled Carrie, a single mother in Beaver, "but they conveniently forget to mention how this is old stuff coming back from before the pandemic. And to put a cherry on top, they don't mention inflation kicking me in the butt either. You know who does talk about that? My family, my neighbors, people all around me who don't blindly follow their party." Local paychecks felt lighter—not heavier. As a result, many residents in Beaver and Monroe turned to populist politics as an outlet for their frustration. They served as personal channels for Trump's message. Though often disconnected from economic policy, they offered a more emotionally resonant diagnosis that struck a chord with Carrie and her neighbors: you've been betrayed.
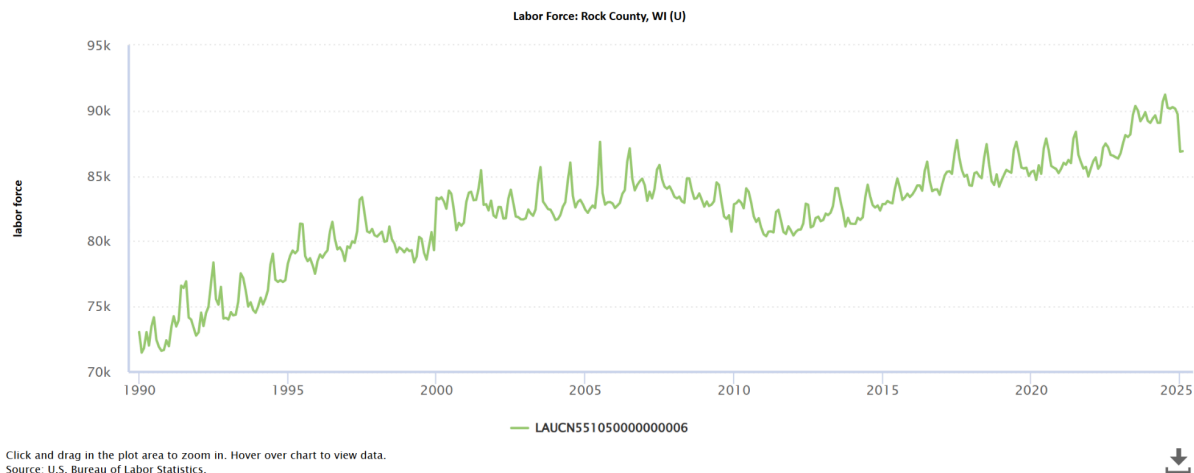
Structural Unemployment and Labor Mismatch

Beneath the surface of Rust Belt realignment lies a subtler but no less devastating transformation: a mismatch between the jobs available and the skills that remain. As industrial jobs vanished, they left behind workers trained for a world that no longer exists—and communities unequipped to build a new one. Retraining programs, workforce initiatives, and educational reform have offered partial remedies, but the scale and coordination needed to reconnect workers to stable careers have largely fallen short. The result is persistent underemployment, hidden unemployment, and a labor force that continues to shrink in both numbers and cohesion.

The charts below offer a sobering visualization of this mismatch. In Beaver County, PA, labor force participation peaked in the mid-2000s around 92,000, then began a steady and precipitous decline following the 2008 recession. By 2023, fewer than 83,000 residents were counted in the labor force—a drop of nearly 10% whose causes are intensified by declining population trends. Monroe County, MI, followed a different trajectory: labor force participation rebounded post-2010, but largely due to the growth of precarious low-wage jobs in logistics and healthcare, not a resurgence of industrial strength. In Rock County, WI, participation grew slowly but steadily, aided by proximity to college towns and service-sector growth—but as we will see, that growth masked deeper forms of inequality and detachment.

These trends mirror what labor economists have long warned: when stable, high-wage jobs vanish, many displaced workers do not seamlessly reenter the workforce—they drop out

Labor Force: Beaver County, PA (U)

LAUCN420070000000006

Click and drag in the plot area to zoom in. Hover over chart to view data.
Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Labor Force: Monroe County, MI (U)

LAUCN261150000000006

Click and drag in the plot area to zoom in. Hover over chart to view data.
Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Labor Force: Rock County, WI (U)

Click and drag in the plot area to zoom in. Hover over chart to view data.
Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

altogether. Structural unemployment takes hold, not just in raw joblessness, but in the slow

erosion of attachment to the labor market. Men in their 50s who once earned $25/hour in a union

plant often do not retrain to become $14/hour warehouse loaders. They retire early, go on

disability, or leave the workforce entirely. Younger workers, watching this unfold, lose faith in

the value of career ladders that no longer exist.

In Beaver County, the collapse of steel in the 1980s decimated traditional trades and

eroded the very institutions that once shepherded workers into those roles. As labor demand

contracted, the county never fully recovered a functional employment pipeline. Community

colleges and technical schools began offering certifications for jobs that did not exist in

necessary volumes, leading one Democratic organizer to remark: "Trade school is great and we

can teach HVAC all day, but if nobody's hiring HVAC techs here, it's pointless." Manufacturing

knowledge faded without succession plans, while new sectors—healthcare, public

services—often excluded displaced workers by virtue of educational requirements that extended

past a single certification.

Monroe County cements the clear risks of economic monoculture. Its Ford plant once

offered union-backed security, pensions, and clear upward mobility. When the plant downsized

and eventually shuttered, no parallel industry stepped in to fill the void. Instead, a patchwork of jobs emerged in food service, warehousing, and elder care. While these jobs provided employment, they offered little stability or long-term growth. One Monroe woman, juggling three part-time jobs, described the situation bluntly: "There's no future here anymore unless you leave." Even as Monroe's labor force rose numerically, the quality and structure of employment declined—mirroring national concerns about "low-road" labor markets dominating post-industrial communities. That said, the county also serves as a counterpoint to more simplified connections between labor force participation and receptiveness to GOP messaging.

In Rock County, local efforts to pivot toward retraining the workforce were more robust. Blackhawk Technical College, located in Janesville, was touted by figures like Paul Ryan as a national model for workforce development.[66] And to some extent, it worked: healthcare and education absorbed parts of the displaced GM workforce. But even here, cracks remain. The workers most in need—those without advanced degrees, those older than 50, those living in rural townships—often lacked the transportation, digital literacy, or child care access needed to make retraining viable. Julie, the nurse at Beloit Hospital, put a finer point on it: "I don't really know a lot of people going to Blackhawk. A lot of the nurses you'll find here are from out of state. I'm from Illinois, and I'm here because the gas is cheaper and the taxes are lighter." Her comment reveals an uncomfortable truth—Rock's new economy isn't necessarily built around local labor. Health systems, in particular, increasingly rely on commuting professionals, traveling nurses, or out-of-state applicants drawn by cost-of-living calculations, not community investment.

The structural mismatch between labor supply and demand now functions as a chronic condition. While official unemployment figures may look manageable, they obscure deeper forms of economic alienation. Underemployment, involuntary part-time work, and discouraged

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[66] Amy Goldstein, *Janesville: An American Story* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2017).

workers have become permanent features of the post-industrial landscape. This explains why so many residents in these counties express a visceral disconnect between macroeconomic optimism and personal experience.

One Monroe retiree described it as "a lottery system of survival"—some people land decent jobs, but many do not, and nothing feels earned or stable. In Beaver County, workers with skills in welding or machine repair now commute over an hour to Youngstown or Pittsburgh. In Rock County, even amid service-sector growth, officials worry that localized "job deserts" persist—places where people are willing to work but can't access the labor market in a meaningful or upwardly mobile way. This sustained dislocation—between what work means, where it exists, and who it is accessible to—forms the emotional and material core of Rust Belt realignment. When stable employment becomes inaccessible and the structures that once made it navigable have eroded, disillusionment festers. Politics in such a context becomes less about party affiliation or policy platforms and more about voice, resentment, and a longing for recognition.

In this vacuum, as we will explore next, the collapse of collective institutions—unions, churches, civic groups—has left few intermediaries to convert grievance into solidarity. Instead, grievance becomes free-floating, ready to be channeled by whoever offers a compelling target and a sense of belonging.
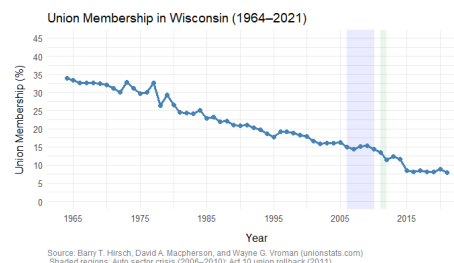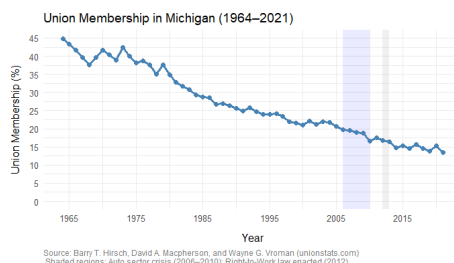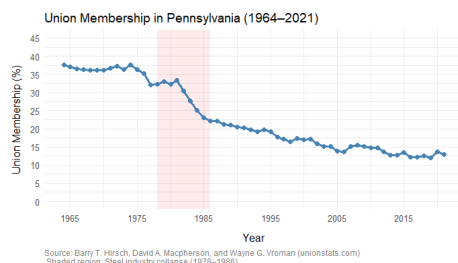
Collapse of Collective Institutions

It was the collapse of civic institutions—especially unions and churches—that severed the community fabric. In Beaver, Monroe, and Rock Counties alike, these two forces once offered social cohesion and moral grounding. They even offered organizational capacity. They could turn grievance into politics, membership into turnout, and economic identity into civic solidarity. Their decline may prove just as politically consequential as the loss of jobs.

## Union Decline: From Power Base to Memory

Across all three states, union membership has collapsed by more than two-thirds since the 1960s. In Pennsylvania, union density fell from nearly 40% in the mid-1970s to below 13% by 2021. The sharpest drop-off came after the steel industry collapse between 1978 - 1986, as the shaded region in the Pennsylvania union membership chart makes painfully clear. That same steep decline haunted Michigan, where union membership was once among the highest in the nation—hovering near 45% in the 1960s—but tumbled under 15% by the 2020s, further battered by the 2006 - 2010 auto sector crisis and the enactment of Right-to-Work legislation in 2012. In Wisconsin, the same structural decline was accelerated by a uniquely aggressive political blow: Act 10 in 2011, which curtailed collective bargaining rights for public-sector employees, devastating union infrastructure statewide. Each county tells a variation on this theme, which was covered in-depth during their respective chapters. The respective state-level graphs are included here again:

Union Membership in Pennsylvania (1964–2021)

Source: Barry T. Hirsch, David A. Macpherson, and Wayne G. Vroman (unionstats.com)
Shaded region: Steel industry collapse (1978–1986)

Union Membership in Michigan (1964–2021)

Source: Barry T. Hirsch, David A. Macpherson, and Wayne G. Vroman (unionstats.com)
Shaded regions: Auto sector crisis (2006–2010); Right-to-Work law enacted (2012)

Union Membership in Wisconsin (1964–2021)

Source: Barry T. Hirsch, David A. Macpherson, and Wayne G. Vroman (unionstats.com)
Shaded regions: Auto sector crisis (2006–2010); Act 10 union rollback (2011)

These shifts matter because we cannot conceptualize unions as economic vehicles alone—they were political infrastructures. Union halls trained civic leaders, hosted candidate forums, and organized mass canvassing. They transformed workplace solidarity into electoral turnout. Their collapse meant the loss of what Pamela, the democratic organizer from Rock, called "the pipeline from grievance to governance." Without unions, there are fewer structures to convert working-class frustration into coordinated political expression.

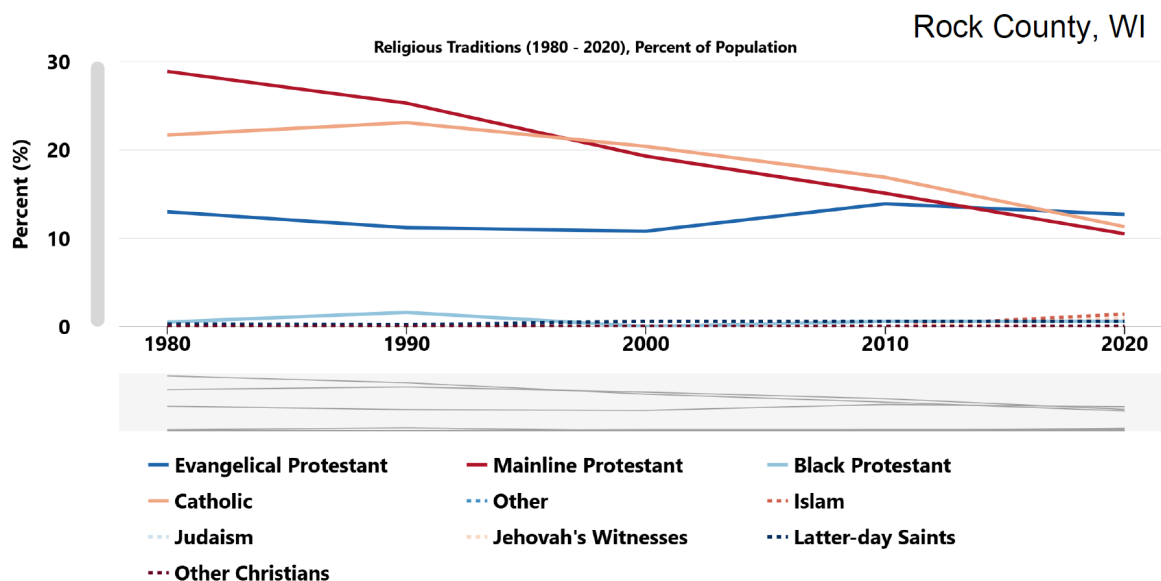## Religious Retreat: From Community to Isolation

Parallel to union decline is a quieter—but equally impactful—erosion of religious infrastructure. The graphs below, drawn from the Association of Religion Data Archives (ARDA), trace congregational membership from 1980 to 2020 in each county. Their trajectories reveal a shared trend: a collapse of institutional religious affiliation, especially among Catholics and Mainline Protestants—the two traditions most deeply woven into the civic fabric of postwar working-class life.

Beaver County, PA

Religious Traditions (1980 - 2020), Percent of Population
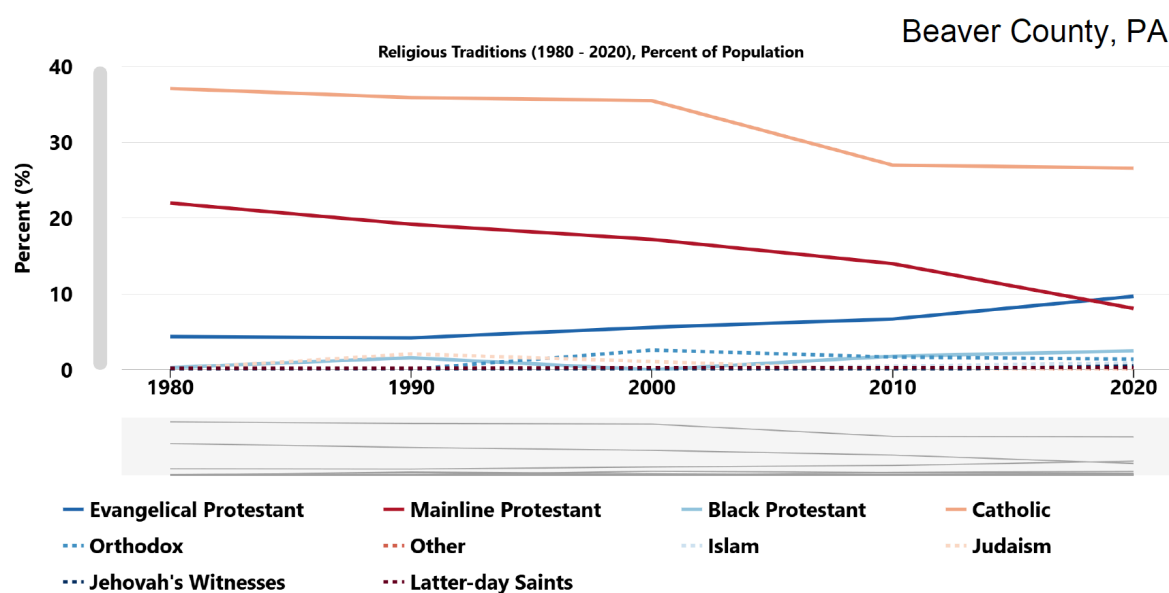
In Beaver County, Catholic adherence fell from over 37% of the population to under 30%, while Mainline Protestant traditions declined from 22% to around 9%. Evangelical Protestantism grew modestly—from 5% to nearly 10%—but not nearly enough to replace the institutional vacuum. However, its growing membership can be understood as an exacerbating variable to broader Republican shifts as its growth corresponds with the county's 2008 realignment.

Religious Traditions (1980 - 2020), Percent of Population — Monroe County, MI
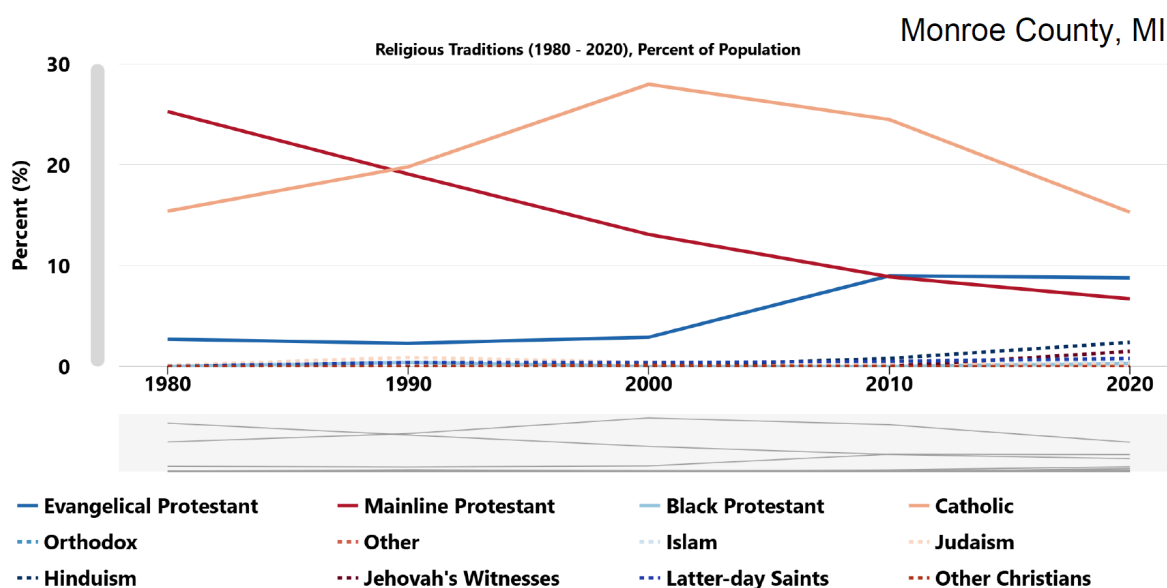
Monroe County saw even sharper shifts. Mainline Protestantism collapsed from 26% to under 10%, and Catholicism, after peaking around 2000, declined steadily thereafter. Evangelicals increased from a low base to around 9%, but they remain a minority force. Notably, many Catholic parishes in Monroe were historically ethnic (e.g., Polish, Hungarian) and tied to UAW locals. The unraveling of both labor and ethnic Catholic institutions hollowed out traditional Democratic networks.

Religious Traditions (1980 - 2020), Percent of Population

Rock County, WI

Legend:
- Evangelical Protestant
- Mainline Protestant
- Black Protestant
- Catholic
- Other
- Islam
- Judaism
- Jehovah's Witnesses
- Latter-day Saints
- Other Christians

In Rock County, the trend is similar: a slow, steady disintegration of both Mainline Protestant (from 29% to around 12%) and Catholic (from 22% to 13%) traditions. Evangelicals plateaued around 13-14%. Notably, Rock retained slightly more religious adherence overall, possibly contributing to its stronger civic resilience—but the overall pattern remains one of steady disaffiliation. Higher levels of religious affiliation in the early-mid 20th century offer further explanation for the county's right-leaning politics between 1940 and 1988.

Like unions, churches once provided more than moral instruction. They offered structure, routine, and a sense of mutual responsibility. Church basements doubled as food pantries, voter education sites, and planning rooms for community initiatives. Religious leaders were often key validators in political conversations—especially in tight-knit ethnic and working-class communities. With their decline, towns lost not only faith traditions but also the scaffolding of trust and cohesion. Residents no longer shared a common civic language. As Lisa of Monroe put it: "People used to see each other at church every week. It feels like it's disappearing and like nobody knows each other."

But the story is not one of collapse. In many cases, religious affiliation did not disappear—it shifted. While institutional church attendance declined, new forms of spiritual practice, parachurch networks, and issue-based mobilization took hold. Evangelical congregations, even if smaller, proved politically agile. In all three counties, conservative churches became vehicles for GOP messaging on abortion, religious freedom, and education. In Monroe, for instance, Catholic identity—though diminished—was reactivated through Republican-aligned mailers and church-based mobilization around cultural issues, according to Republican organizers. In Beaver, growing evangelical influence helped fuse economic grievance with social conservatism. In Rock, even secular civic groups like food pantries or tenant coalitions filled partial gaps left by faith institutions.

The loss of churches as physical gathering spaces mirrored broader infrastructural erosion. Without shared civic reference points, voters turn to nationalized grievances, often filtered through partisan media. "Fox News is like a kind of Church I'd say," explained Brandon, a self-described "reformed Trumper." What Brandon points to goes deeper. His insight parallels Arlie Russell Hochschild's observation that Fox serves as an "extra pillar of political culture," offering its audience not only stories but emotions—fear, anger, and nostalgia—structured around familiar identities and grievances.[67] But it would be reductive to attribute Rust Belt realignment solely to nationalized grievance politics. While Fox and Facebook loom large, they interact with—and are often mediated by—local partisan structures. National narratives do not erase the influence of the place; they are channeled, interpreted, and often intensified by local parties, churches, and civic groups.

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[67] Arlie Russell Hochschild, *Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right* (New York: The New Press, 2016), 126.

In this context, Monroe and Beaver Counties fell into the orbit of Trump-style populism not merely because Fox News was available, but because the collapse of local Democratic intermediaries left no competing channels to frame economic pain through collective solidarity. Rock County, again, is the exception that proves the rule. Its continued, if diminished, Democratic presence owes much to the residual strength of public-sector unions, teachers' associations, and civil society institutions. The Rock County Democratic Party maintained a year-round office, hosted community forums, and coordinated with nonprofit groups to sustain visibility and voter engagement. These efforts helped frame national Democratic messages in local terms—healthcare access, education funding, infrastructure investment. While the results weren't uniform, they provided a bulwark against the complete collapse of civic connection.

Still, even in Rock, fractures are visible. As Brandon's comment suggests, national media increasingly shape the baseline emotional and political landscape. The challenge is not rebuilding civic institutions alone—it is competing with 24/7 partisan narratives that offer easy answers and a strong identity. What these cases reveal is that disaffection has not led to apathy—it has led to fragmentation. Voters are engaged, but in uneven and often polarized ways. Place still matters, but its influence depends on whether local institutions survive to mediate national politics. In Monroe and Beaver, resistance collapsed with Democrats while the Republican Party stepped up. In Rock, it persists—but tenuously.

Social Breakdown: The Depths of Despair

While economic decline and institutional collapse define the broad architecture of Rust Belt realignment, it is in the deeply human consequences—addiction, aging, and civic estrangement—that we witness the lived reality of unraveling. The story of social decay unfolds as an accumulation of slow-burning crises, each compounding the others. The opioid epidemic, youth flight, and demographic aging offer powerful evidence of how economic collapse reshaped not only the workforce, but the fabric of daily life.

The Opioid Epidemic as a Social Indicator

Opioids did not appear in a vacuum. They filled a void left by vanishing jobs, fraying communities, and institutional retreat. The crisis, while national in scope, took particularly devastating root in deindustrialized regions.
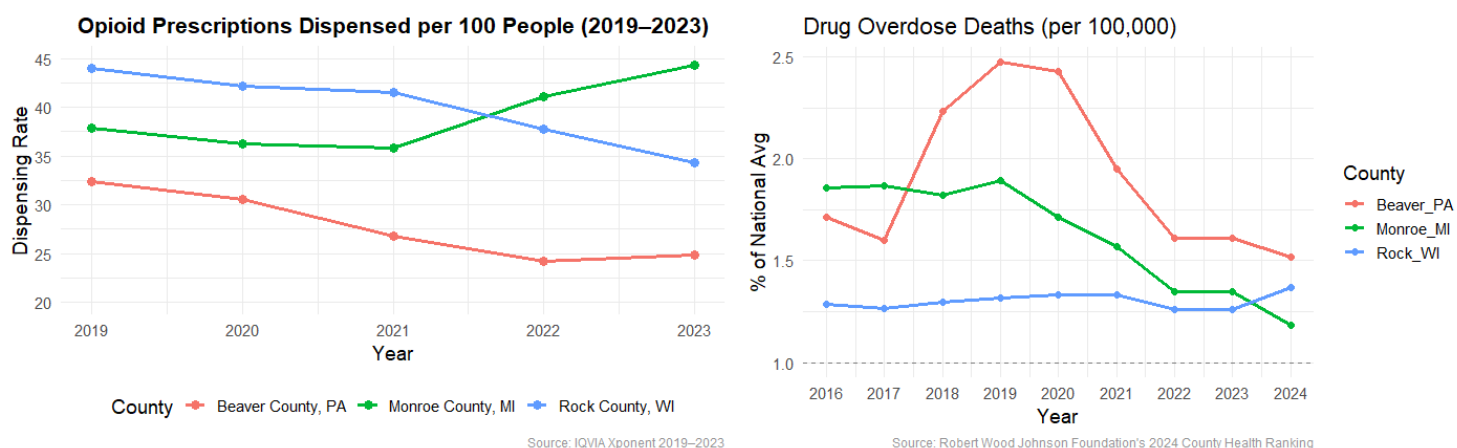
The two charts above offer complementary perspectives on this unraveling. The first—opioid prescriptions dispensed per 100 people—reveals contrasting trajectories across the three counties. Beaver County, Pennsylvania shows a steady and significant decline in prescribing, falling from roughly 34 to 26 prescriptions per 100 residents between 2019 and

2023. Rock County, initially the highest prescriber, also trended downward, from 45 to 36 over the same period. In contrast, Monroe County, Michigan reversed course: after a brief decline, its dispensing rate increased markedly, surpassing Rock by 2022 and rising to nearly 44 per 100 residents by 2023. This divergence hints at deeper fractures in local response and vulnerability. Monroe's late surge suggests that post-pandemic stressors—economic, institutional, or cultural—may have heightened reliance on pharmaceutical coping even as national scrutiny on opioids intensified.

The second chart, drug overdose deaths as a percentage of the national average, adds critical texture. Beaver County's overdose death rate peaked dramatically between 2017 and 2020, reaching 2.5 times the national average. Although the rate has declined since, Beaver remains well above the national baseline, indicating the long tail of early crisis exposure. Monroe County followed a different arc: while its overdose rate was relatively stable from 2016 to 2020, it began falling after 2021, even as prescription rates rose. Rock County, by contrast, maintained relatively stable and lower-than-average overdose rates throughout the period, suggesting that while prescribing was historically high, it did not translate into overdose mortality at the same magnitude.

The divergence between the two charts reveals a deeper truth: what matters is not necessarily the availability of opioids, but the broader civic and institutional context into which they are introduced. In Beaver, early and intense overdose mortality coincided with long-term industrial collapse and fragile civic infrastructure. Monroe's rising prescription rate—paired with falling mortality—may reflect a shift in which opioids are increasingly used not as agents of addiction, but as substitutes for mental health services, pain care, and social stability. And Rock,

while once a heavy prescriber, may now benefit from stronger institutional guardrails—be they in public health, union networks, or civic engagement—that have kept mortality lower.

As Stephanie Ternullo notes in her comparative study, "while postindustrial social problems present themselves differently… all [communities] struggle with similar challenges related to economic precarity, the result of decades of public and private disinvestment. But… community leaders work to address those challenges within different organizational contexts."[68] The same is true here. The burden of addiction, economic stress, and demographic aging weighs heavily on all three counties—but how that burden is borne varies dramatically depending on what civic infrastructure remains. In Beaver, it often falls on grandparents and small-town funeral directors. In Monroe, it circulates through informal channels and political resentment. In Rock, unions, clinics, and local officials still shoulder part of the load.

These local differences matter for political behavior. Where institutions have collapsed, voters report greater distrust, detachment, and anger. Where some civic scaffolding endures, politics may still feel flawed but not entirely lost. The opioid crisis, then, becomes more than a measure of health. It is a barometer of civic endurance. It can show us who is suffering. Yet it also shows who still has something—someone—to turn to. That variation helps explain why these counties realigned politically and why they did so in distinct ways.
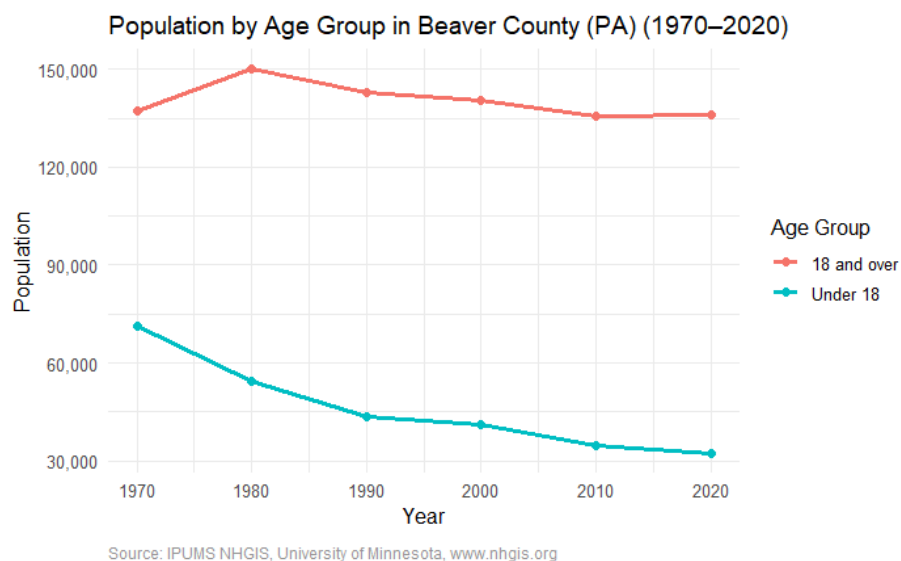
Demographic Decline

If the opioid crisis laid bare the psychic pain of the postindustrial Midwest, demographic decline reveals its slow civic erosion. Across Beaver, Monroe, and Rock counties, population aging and youth out-migration have depleted the institutional capacity necessary for
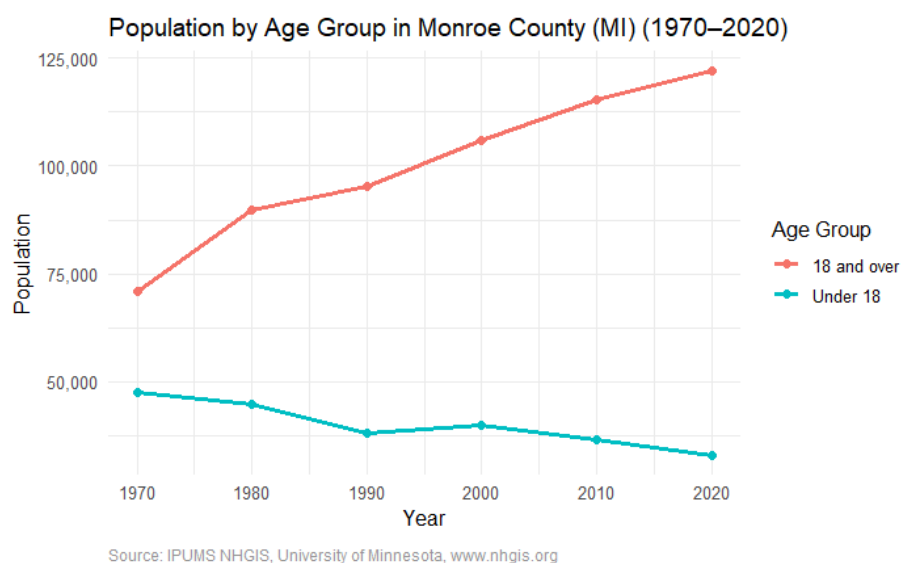
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[68] Stephanie Ternullo, *How the Heartland Went Red: The Political Transformation of the Midwest* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2024), 64.

renewal—leaving behind older electorates, hollowed-out communities, and weakened civic scaffolding. The data make this transformation unmistakable.

Population by Age Group in Beaver County (PA) (1970–2020)

Source: IPUMS NHGIS, University of Minnesota, www.nhgis.org

In Beaver County, the collapse in the youth population is "depressing," as organizers from both parties described. In 1970, over 70,000 residents were under the age of 18; by 2020, that number had fallen below 30,000—a 57% drop. While the adult population declined more modestly, the loss of young people reshaped the county's demographic structure, draining schools, volunteer organizations, and civic pipelines of future leaders. Bill, the GOP volunteer,

Population by Age Group in Monroe County (MI) (1970–2020)

Source: IPUMS NHGIS, University of Minnesota, www.nhgis.org

explained, "All my kids moved away to find work. It leaves just us older folks and an empty town." The absence of opportunity in Beaver severed the generational continuity that once sustained the institutions of democratic life. While both parties express interest in educating and retaining a workforce, neither offered a plan to do so for Beaver without relying on larger, nearby urban centers, namely Pittsburgh.

Monroe County, Michigan, avoided such an acute collapse but still saw significant slippage. While the adult population grew steadily from around 70,000 in 1970 to nearly 125,000 by 2020, the number of children declined by over 10,000 in that same period. This divergence reflects broader regional patterns: aging in place without meaningful generational renewal. The auto sector's volatility, especially after the closure of the local Ford plant, played a central role. As blue-collar jobs disappeared, younger families either relocated for work or raised their children under increasingly precarious economic conditions. "I don't blame these kids," said Annette, a retired librarian who happened to be visiting the Monroe County Historical Museum. "If I was starting my family now, I'd have to ask why do it here, where there is little chance of my kids doing better than me?"
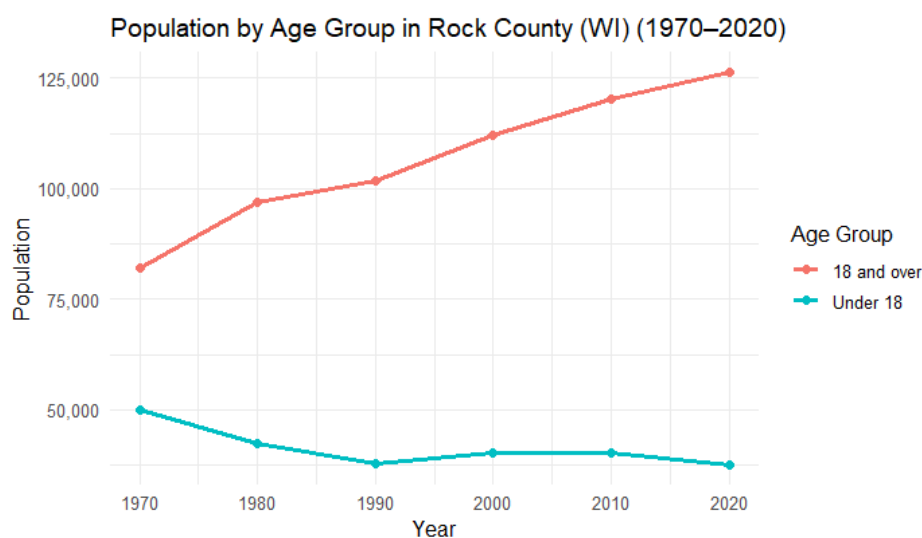
Source: IPUMS NHGIS, University of Minnesota, www.nhgis.org

Rock County tells a similar story. The under-18 population has declined steadily since 1970, falling by roughly 15,000. Though the adult population grew, buoyed perhaps by proximity to college towns. Nevertheless, the loss of children and young adults has quietly undermined the county's civic engine. Aging populations now form the backbone of public life: volunteering in food pantries, voting in every election, attending town halls. Without a younger generation to train, mentor, and succeed them, the infrastructure of community begins to fade.

The consequences of this demographic shift are everywhere. PTA boards go unfilled. Volunteer fire departments struggle to recruit. Rotary Clubs, youth leagues, and church choirs wither. Civic life becomes less participatory and more passive. In electoral terms, aging electorates vote more reliably, but often with priorities shaped by nostalgia and fear of loss rather than long-term investment. Younger voices—more diverse, more mobile, more precarious—are absent or silent.

The decline of youth populations in these counties means more than just fewer students in schools. It marks the unraveling of the social fabric that once animated local politics and collective action. When demographic decline combines with economic precarity and institutional collapse, the result is dislocation, a loss of purpose. In such contexts, political extremism and cultural grievance thrive—not because residents are ideologically rigid, but because they are searching for something, anything, that explains the silence where their communities used to be.

Conclusion

This project set out to explain why some deindustrialized, demographically similar Rust Belt counties have undergone deep partisan realignment while others have remained in the Democratic fold. Utilizing a mixed-methods approach—including historical data, precinct-level mapping, field interviews, and local media analysis—I hypothesized that political divergence in Beaver County (PA), Monroe County (MI), and Rock County (WI) could be best explained by the interaction of economic structural change, the erosion of organized labor, and the local presence—or absence—of durable political organization. In all three counties, deindustrialization and institutional decline created the preconditions for political transformation. But crucially, realignment was not an automatic result of economic pain or demographic shifts. Rather, it was mediated by what happened next: who organized, who retreated, and who filled the void.

Beaver County exemplifies the hypothesis of early realignment through union erosion and cultural conservatism. As the steel mills closed and United Steelworkers' organizing power declined in the 1980s, the Democratic Party's local apparatus atrophied. Without the mobilizing machinery of union groups, Democrats struggled to sustain visibility or relevance. "After the mills went down, the Democrats kind of went down with them," Craig, the high-ranking Republican, explained. Into that vacuum stepped conservative activists who offered a new structure—rooted in churches, gun clubs, and culture-war campaigns—that redefined political identity in the area. School board battles over sex education, local rallies around "faith and family," and anti-elitist messaging helped reconstitute a new political coalition from the remnants of economic collapse. The data support this trajectory: even as Democratic registration held a slim majority into the 2010s, presidential vote share flipped decisively Republican by 2008 and only deepened with Trump's ascent.

Monroe County followed a similar path, but on a delayed timeline. The UAW and other auto-related unions had been the backbone of Democratic strength there for decades. But by the late 2000s, Monroe's union halls were diminished and the local Democratic club had lost its reach into working-class neighborhoods. When national politics took a polarizing turn, Monroe's Democrats were caught flat-footed: they lacked deep connections in the community and failed to counter the narratives coming from the right. Republicans seized the opening in Beaver and Monroe by mounting a culture-focused appeal that resonated with residents' sense of loss and dislocation. With Democrats retreating, GOP organizers became the loudest (and often the only) political voice in many communities. They tapped into the economic grievances, to be sure—Trump's rallies in these areas hammered on jobs, trade, and factories moving overseas—but just as importantly, local Republicans activated social and cultural issues as rallying points. In Beaver County, for example, Republican campaigns began zeroing in on culture war themes at the school board and county council level. Conservative activists organized around opposition to things like new sex education curricula, "critical race theory" in schools, or gun control measures, framing these as threats to the community's values. This strategy drew in people who had never been politically active before—often through churches or gun clubs—and built a new grassroots network on the right.

In Monroe, the pattern was similar: Tea Party and later Trump-aligned groups filled the void left by declining unions, organizing around patriotism, faith, and opposition to perceived liberal elitism. They hosted "Back the Blue" rallies, Second Amendment nights, and church-sponsored voter drives that blended social fellowship with politics. By the mid-2010s, residents of Monroe were far more likely to hear from a Republican activist at their door or see a flyer for a conservative prayer breakfast than to have any equivalent outreach from the

Democratic side. The result was that many working-class whites in Beaver and Monroe who had once reflexively voted Democrat began to feel a cultural affinity with the GOP. Lacking strong counter-messaging or personal contact from Democratic campaigns, they were swayed by Republicans' invocation of God, country, and community pride. Donald Trump's fiery rhetoric in 2016—attacking immigrants, denouncing "socialism," and promising to restore lost jobs—"resonated… in places like [Beaver], where local organizations no longer provide coherence to local civic life, Craig emphasized. In short, where the presence of the Democratic Party and allied institutions faded, a new conservative presence took root, redefining local politics.

Rock County, Wisconsin charted a different course largely because the local response to these same structural pressures took a different form. Rock certainly suffered industrial decline—most famously the shutdown of the Janesville GM plant in 2008, which eliminated thousands of jobs. It too saw union membership fall and experienced the opioid scourge and youth out-migration. However, Rock County retained a stronger progressive infrastructure and a capacity for political adaptation that the other two counties lacked. Crucially, when organized labor was attacked and weakened in Wisconsin, it spurred a burst of activism that actually revitalized parts of the Democratic coalition in Rock. The catalyst was the 2011 Act 10 legislation. Rock County, with its large population of teachers, nurses, and government workers in Janesville and Beloit, became a hotbed of resistance during the mass protests at the state capitol. Many local public employees who had never been deeply involved in politics were galvanized by Act 10's threats to their unions. They forged new alliances—teachers with construction trade unionists, retirees with young social workers—to fight back. The county Democratic Party, rather than shrinking in the 2010s, opened its doors to these new volunteers

and refocused on local concerns. Organizers in Rock worked to register displaced factory workers, mobilize college students, and support emerging service-sector unions at the area's hospitals and retail distribution centers.

In effect, Rock County Democrats strove to replace the old union-centric model with a "big tent" coalition of anyone willing to fight for progressive causes—be it expanding Medicaid, funding public schools, or resisting right-to-work laws. This sustained presence on the ground made a difference. Voters in Rock were continuously exposed to an alternate narrative to the GOP's: one that blamed corporate offshoring and state budget cuts (not immigrants or minorities) for local woes, and that emphasized community solidarity. While Republicans continue to make inroads, sustained Democratic organizing meant that those efforts met resistance. The contrast between a county where progressive forces maintained a foothold and ones where they receded underscores a fundamental point: realignment was not preordained by economic distress alone; it was contingent on political agency at the local level. Where unions and community organizations endured (or new ones emerged), they continued to provide residents with a lens to view their problems as systemic and solvable through collective action. In Rock, many working-class voters still saw themselves as part of a "working-class coalition" and identified with the Democratic Party as the vehicle for that coalition—largely because local unions and Democratic activists kept that identity alive. In the absence of those community ties, politics became more a battle of raw appeals to anger and identity, which the Republicans won. In Beaver and Monroe, little comparable counterforce existed by the 2010s to rally people around a progressive vision or even just keep them in the Democratic fold. Democrats nationally wondered why these blue-collar areas swung to the GOP and sometimes pointed to messaging missteps—focusing too much on social/cultural issues or neglecting "bread-and-butter"

economics. But the experience of these counties suggests that the problem was less about the national message than about the local presence. Without face-to-face engagement and institutional groundwork, even resonant economic messages had nowhere to take root. Conversely, Republicans' cultural appeals gained traction not simply because of their content, but because of the persistent presence of conservative organizers in the community once other voices had faded.

Ultimately, the political evolution of Beaver, Monroe, and Rock counties in the post-industrial era can be understood as a story of presence versus absence amid shared economic pain. All three counties were battered by storms of industrial collapse, stagnant real wages, civic disintegration, and social crisis. However, partisan realignment was not an inevitable outcome of these structural forces. Rather, it was mediated by who showed up to engage with citizens at the local level once those storms hit. Beaver County shifted to the Republicans largely because the institutions and party operatives that might have kept it Democratic melted away—a politics of absence that left former Democrats open to new affiliation. Monroe County, after years of similar institutional decay, also flipped red when Republicans moved aggressively into the void with grassroots organizing and culture war narratives. Rock County, on the other hand, remained in the Democratic column because progressive organizers refused to abandon the field—they adapted, fought back, and maintained a politics of presence in community life. The divergent trajectories of these counties thus illuminate how economic insecurity and institutional erosion set the stage for political change, but local political strategy determines the script. In places where community bonds and party networks can be rethreaded, decline does not automatically breed reactionary politics. In places

where they cannot, an "ever-reddening" realignment fills the vacuum.[69] The lesson, in the end, is that the future of such post-industrial communities is profoundly shaped by human agency at the local level. Realignment was forged, not fated: it depended on whether organizers, activists, and institutions were present to offer beleaguered residents a sense of belonging and hope, or whether they were absent when people went looking for answers. The fates of Beaver, Monroe, and Rock County were not decided by the forces that tore them down, but by the people and politics that attempted to build something new from the wreckage.

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[69] Stephanie Ternullo, *How the Heartland Went Red: The Political Transformation of the Midwest* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2024), 199.