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**Swing counties back Trump, despite Wisconsin’s blue flip**

*By WisPolitics.com*

Sawyer County, a Wisconsin bellwether since 1964, got the presidential election wrong this year.

The Northwoods county has backed every winning presidential candidate since 1952, barring its support for GOP candidate Richard Nixon in 1960. It backed President Trump in 2016 as part of the narrow margin that delivered Wisconsin to the GOP.

In 2020, even as Trump narrowly lost the state, the county turned out decisively in his favor once again — though the GOP’s advantage was slimmer than it had been four years prior. 42.7 percent of Sawyer County voters supported President-elect Joe Biden, as opposed to the 38.3 percent that supported 2016 Democratic nominee Hillary Clinton. In 2016, Trump garnered 56.7 percent of the vote; in 2020, that share shrank to 56.2 percent.

Sawyer County was one of many areas across the state to see higher voter turnout this election. Whereas 2016 saw only 9,137 votes cast in the county, that figure increased to 10,510 votes cast for president this November.

Other areas also saw much higher turnout than 2016, particularly Milwaukee County and Dane County.

Two counties that went for Trump last time — Sauk and Door — ended up with Biden. That gave Biden 14 of the state’s 72 counties.

Democratic organizer and longtime Sawyer County resident Louise Ladenthin said she thought the county party’s efforts at voter turnout had been successful, but the writing seemed to be on the wall for Democrats even before results began rolling in.

“Late in the campaign, it seemed like for every Biden sign there were at least four times as many Trump signs,” Ladenthin said.

She thought Sawyer’s rightward swing had to do with changing demographics that have made the county’s rural areas less blue, while the county seat of Hayward has remained red.

“A lot of our young people became apathetic or left [the area],” she said. “And we’ve had an influx of upper-middle-class retirees, who are more conservative or Republican, or more independent and chose to vote Republican for whatever their reasons are.

Jim Miller, the chair of the Sawyer County GOP, also referenced demographic change in accounting for Trump’s narrower margins.

“We’ve really focused on trying to reverse the brain drain of our county, and, and market our community to the Twin Cities, Madison, Milwaukee, some of those areas,” Miller said. “So I think what we’re seeing are the fruits of those efforts. But some of those people that are moving here are also bringing their politics as well.”

Four other swing counties, formerly longtime Democratic strongholds, also backed Trump a second time. Trump’s margins increased in some of these areas, which supported him on a knife’s edge four years ago. In Kenosha County, for example, only 238 votes separated Clinton and Trump as he won the county. This year, Trump emerged on top with 50.7 percent of the vote to Biden’s 47.5 percent, a margin of 2,779 votes.

The southeastern Wisconsin county was briefly the center of the presidential campaign after the high-profile police shooting of Jacob Blake in the city of Kenosha that touched off intense and destructive protests.

Lori Hawkins, the chair of the Kenosha County Democrats, was ill with COVID-19 and unable to speak with WisPolitics.com by phone, but said in a statement the party was focused on flipping voters near the center of the political spectrum.

“We’ve had some successes in every corner of Kenosha County and will continue to learn about what is important to these voters as we go forward,” Hawkins said. “This type of relational organizing is valuable but takes time, and we are invested in the long game.”

Kenosha County GOP chair Erin Decker did not respond to multiple requests for comment from WisPolitics.com.

Former Republican U.S. Rep. Tom Petri thought it was likely the late-summer protests prompted 2020’s wider margins in Kenosha County, and bolstered support for the president elsewhere in the state. Petri until 2015 represented Wisconsin’s 6th Congressional District, which covers Winnebago County. Winnebago County swung to Trump by a healthy margin in 2016, but Petri had told WisPolitics.com before the election he didn’t think the same would be true in 2020 due to the president’s abrasive character.

In fact, GOP support in Winnebago County increased from 49.9 percent to 50.8 percent between 2016 and 2020. Democrats also saw higher levels of support, from 42.5 percent in 2016 to 46.9 percent in 2020, but not by enough to flip the county back to blue.

Neither the chair of the Winnebago County Democrats nor Republicans returned several requests for comment from WisPolitics.com.

Petri said he thought the outcome in Winnebago County had less to do with Trump and more to do with unease about what might result from a Democrat-controlled White House, particularly perceptions about how Democrats would approach law enforcement.

“There was … a lot of concern about some of the policy directions that the Democrats, if they were given unfettered control, might move in,” he said. “I think that caused some people to vote Republican who otherwise might not have done so. This idea of defunding the police, this kind of thing.”

In southwestern Wisconsin’s Crawford County, Democratic county chair Dale Klemme also thought concern about the nation’s prospects under a Biden administration, combined with fears about law enforcement and an overall leftward shift, factored into the historically blue county’s support for Trump. In 2016, 49.6 percent of Crawford County voters backed President Trump, and 53.1 percent of voters supported him in 2020.

“I think the Republicans were successful in putting a socialist label on Biden,” he said. ”You had the Black Lives Matter issue. I think it was a misrepresentation, suggesting that Biden was not a law-and-order person.”

But Klemme found the continued support for Trump confusing.

“The first time it was somewhat understandable, because Trump was an unknown, and he was suggesting that he was going to be an outsider who’s going to drain the swamp,” he said. “Now I drive down the road, I see these banners and it says ‘Trump 2020, No More Bullshit.’ Then that’s all we have for four years.”

Klemme’s Republican counterpart, David Wesener, chalked Trump’s Crawford County success up to the campaign’s early and sustained focus on the region. He noted that Lydia Holt, the Trump campaign liaison, had been tasked with increasing the number of Trump voters in the area, and said her dedication had contributed to the campaign’s success in Crawford County.

“The Trump campaign, in particular, decided that they had to have a presence,” he said. “[Holt] was able to do that. She hustled and she just was a go-getter. We had a presence in Crawford County. And I think that made all the difference.”

But he didn’t think Trump’s second win indicated a rightward swing in the county, referencing U.S. Rep. Ron Kind’s re-election and the relatively strong campaign of Democrat Josefine Jaynes in the 96th Assembly District against incumbent Rep. Loren Oldenburg, R-Viroqua. Jaynes took 43.7 percent of the vote overall, capturing 47 percent of the vote in Crawford County specifically.

“I think that she’s got a future,” Wesener said. ”But I think that with the people in Crawford County, they just weren’t ready to go with an 18-year-old person yet.”

Adams County Democratic Chair Gregory Kobs said his party’s voter-turnout efforts had been very successful. But, he added, it seemed that “we got as many Republicans out as we got Democrats,” he said. Though the Adams Democrats had been primarily focused on turnout among young people specifically, who are more likely to vote blue, he remembered that the same-day voter registration table at his polling place had been crowded with voters that spanned a wide age range.

Kobs said this could account for the president’s even stronger showing this election as opposed to four years ago, not to mention the difficult night for Democratic candidates up and down the ballot. In Adams County, the GOP took 62.3 percent of presidential votes, compared with 58.9 percent four years ago.

“Of course, it’s right that everybody votes and, and I agree with that,” Kobs said. “But we did hurt ourselves in both the Senate and Assembly here.”

Asked whether the second showing of support for the Republican candidate pointed to a rightward turn in Adams County, Kobs said he thought it was mostly due to enthusiasm specifically for Trump.

“I think people were crazy about Trump,” he said. “They couldn’t name a thing that he’s done for them, but they’re just nuts about him.”

Adams County Republican Party Chair Pete Church attributed some of the sustained excitement around Trump to his image as a president for working people.

“We’re not a very well-off county, and the idea of a president that was creating jobs really resonates with people,” Church said.

Church also thought that distaste for contemporary Democratic policy also factored into Adams’ second showing for Trump.

Most of the county chairs attributed the outcome in the state as a whole to high turnout in relatively urban areas. Looking ahead to future elections, Church predicted further political polarization between those urban centers and the state’s rural areas.

“I think you’re going to continue to see conservative-minded people leaving Dane and Milwaukee County, and coming to counties like Adams, because they’re among like-minded people,” he said.

It’s too early to predict how this election will influence the 2024 presidential contest in Wisconsin, but what happens under the Biden administration will likely be a determining factor — and control of the U.S. Senate is key to that.

Given the state of the down-ballot election results, Sawyer County Democrat Louise Ladenthin wasn’t sure how much would actually change.

“I don’t think that just having Biden there is going to make a difference,” she said. “He’s still going to be hogtied.”

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