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SWING STATES

'Now They're Voting Red': A Pennsylvania Fracking Boom Weighs on Biden's Re-Election Chances

Economic churn is pushing voters toward Trump in the Pittsburgh area, potentially overwhelming Democrats' base of college-educated workers

Maron Zitner [Follow](#) and *Kris Maher* [Follow](#) | *Photographs by Nate Millwood for The Wall Street Journal*

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John Sabo and Josh Thieler grew up in Pittsburgh-area communities that were hit hard as 200,000 steel and manufacturing jobs disappeared from the region, upending their parents' generation and leaving main streets pockmarked with empty storefronts.

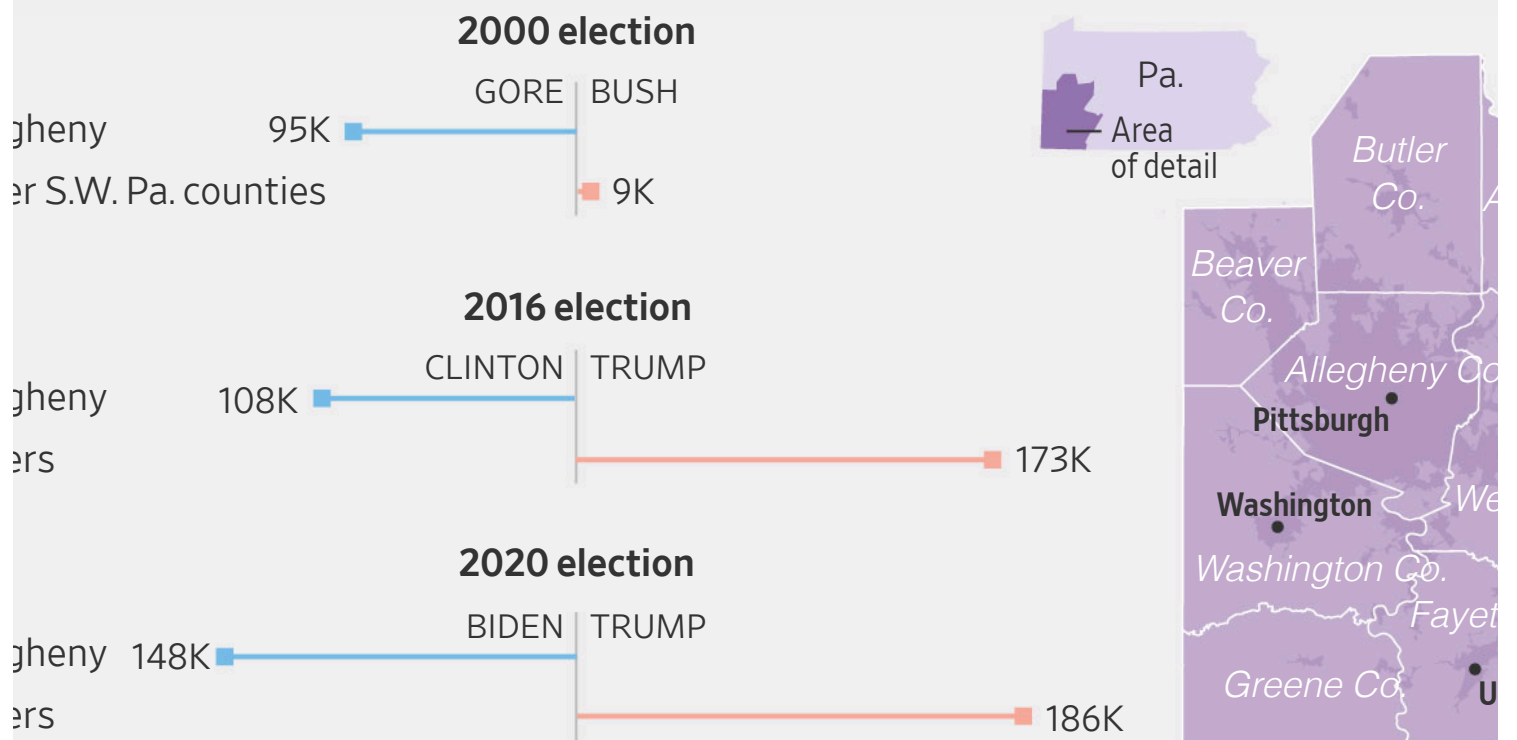
John, the son and grandson of mill workers, says his father rarely found steady work after losing his job in a U.S. Steel mill, leaving Sabo to "know what government cheese tastes like." Thieler spent part of his childhood in a trailer park in a small city that shed nearly half its population as families hunted elsewhere for work.

Today, both men have good jobs in thriving industries. But their paths to a better life have landed them in different sectors of the region's new economy and

nged their political identities, turning one into a staunch Republican and the other into a progressive Democrat.

Pittsburgh is at the center of a class inversion between the two parties that is redefining American politics. Democrats have traded their former blue-collar base of professional-class, metropolitan workers, while Republicans have become overwhelmingly dependent on working-class voters concentrated in far-flung suburbs, small towns and rural areas.

Presidential election margin of victory by county



Source: Dave Leip's Atlas of U.S. Presidential Elections

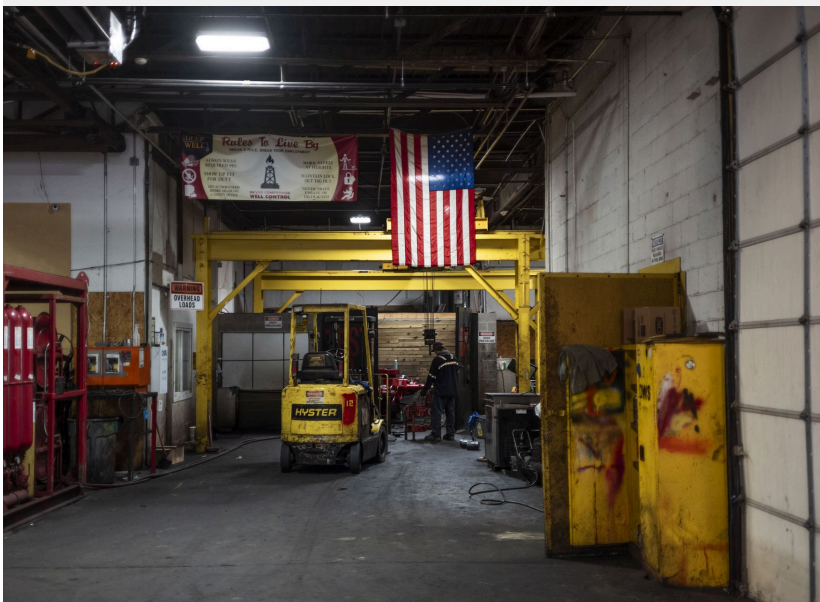
Pennsylvania, the largest 2024 battleground state, President Biden's victory years ago depended in large part on big gains among voters such as Thiele, a ware company manager and former Republican who is now part of the city's civilly Democratic professional class. But those gains have been overtaken by a position from voters like Sabo, who works in the natural-gas industry, a sector that has given a boost to blue-collar workers in rural counties.

se energy-economy voters see Biden as hostile to fracking, which taps natural gas trapped in sedimentary rock deep underground. The sector has drawn billions of dollars in new investment in Pennsylvania, much of it in the state's southwestern tier.

en has been particularly hurt by his decision to cancel the Keystone XL oil pipeline, which local companies say cut into demand for their services; and his order this year to pause new permits to export liquefied natural gas, which could drive drillers of new markets. Many of these voters also believe the president's push for Americans to adopt electric vehicles will undercut jobs tied to fossil fuel



A co-working space in Pittsburgh's Lawrenceville neighborhood.



Deep Well Services' shops in Zelienople.

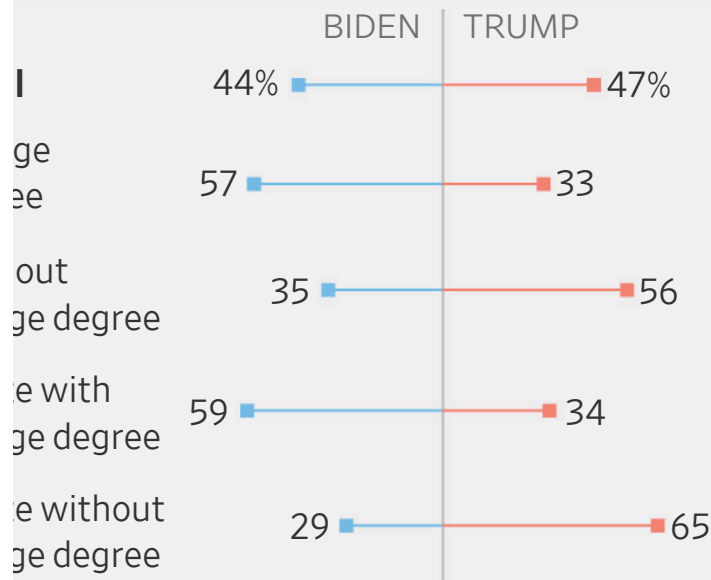
area's reliance on energy jobs helps explain why Democrats look to be losing more voters than they have gained here despite a Biden agenda that's pumping billions of dollars into infrastructure and manufacturing.

Everyone here is aware that it's better for oil and gas if Republicans get elected. Adam Kress, who works with Sabo in Zelienople, 30 miles north of Pittsburgh, says there is little sign that Biden can regain substantial support in seven largely working-class and rural counties that surround the city, every one of which produced a larger vote margin for Trump in 2020 than in 2016. The resistance to Biden's energy policies is making it harder for the incumbent to stop his party's decline among noncollege voters there, forcing the party to wring more votes from its Democratic base elsewhere that, so far, seems dispirited.

John, 45, is a manager in the natural-gas fracking industry, which started booming about 15 years ago. He grew up in a Democratic family but abandoned the party and backed Donald Trump twice, due in large part to what he believes is an antagonistic Democratic approach to fossil fuels. "I will never vote Democrat again. Ever," he says. "It's just not going to happen."

Thieler, 36, started his career in one of the software companies that have transformed Pittsburgh as a high-tech haven. He grew up in Uniontown, about 40 miles south of Pittsburgh, where more than a quarter of people live below the poverty level. Thieler said his father, who worked as a truck driver and window washer, among other jobs, and his mother, a church organist, were staunchly conservative. They opposed abortion rights and gun regulations and favored local schools and chose to home-school him. "Think of any conservative belief, and they had it," he said.

If the 2024 general election were held today, whom would you vote?



Source: WSJ telephone and text-to-web poll of 600 registered Pennsylvania voters conducted March 17-18, 2024. Margin of error: +/- 4 pct. pts.

Thieler voted Republican for president in 2012, but began drifting left after working in the city's high-tech economy. He surrounded himself with colleagues from diverse backgrounds, including many who were politically liberal.

"Right around the 2016 campaign, I was like, 'I've been wrong about everything,'" he said.

Some candidates he backed recently are part of a breed of progressive Democrats new to Pittsburgh, among them Rep.

Summer Lee and Sara Innamorato, the

county official in Pittsburgh's county, who oppose fracking. They say the risks to residents' health and the environment, as well as the effect on climate change, are great, and that the region should prepare for energy jobs to shift toward renewables.

"Having lived in a community where industry packed up and left us, we don't want to be caught flat-footed," Lee said.



Thieler works in his home office in Pittsburgh.

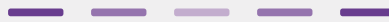


Sabo visits with colleagues at Deep Well Services.

In the 2000 presidential election, Democrats carried this part of the state—Allegheny County and seven neighboring, more working-class counties—by nearly 86,000 votes. By 2020, Biden lost by a net 38,000 votes in those same

ties. Allegheny County, which includes Pittsburgh, produced a far bigger gain for Democrats than it had two decades earlier, a 56% gain. But that was more than erased by landslide losses in the lower-income counties nearby.

Even a small additional shift toward the GOP this year would have big implications for the state that Trump won in 2016 by a mere 0.72 percentage points before Biden flipped it in 2020 with a narrow, 1.2-point win. Giving Democrats hope are the gains they have made in the populous and upper-income suburbs outside Philadelphia, as well as their victories in competitive races in 2022 for Senate and governor. Still, a Wall Street Journal poll of Pennsylvania voters last month found Biden's vice-presidential pick trailing Trump by 3 percentage points.



In Allegheny County, Pittsburgh and its surrounding counties were largely unified in a single economic and political ecosystem of industry, unions and Democratic leadership. Steel mills and manufacturing plants were dotted along the two rivers that converge in Pittsburgh to form the Ohio River, a transportation gateway to the West and South. When steel collapsed, with big job losses coming in the 1980s, the region started losing population.

At its likely peak in 1952, manufacturing employed about 379,000 people and accounted for 40% of all jobs in the region, according to regional economist Christopher L. Tompkins of the University of Pittsburgh. Thousands more jobs were indirectly supported. Today, only 85,000 work in manufacturing, he said.

The fracking industry hasn't filled the vacuum, but it has created high-paying, technical jobs in communities that had little to offer the blue-collar workforce. In Allegheny County, a starting laborer can earn \$85,000 a year right out of high school at

Deep Well Services—“far more than their fathers ever did,” said Sabo, a company president.



training center at Deep Well Services, where a starting laborer just out of high school can earn \$85,000 a year.

These workers can then climb in responsibility to jobs that top out at \$200,000 or even \$250,000 in annual wages, a level now hit by about 60 employees, Sabo said. The work is hard, involving 28 days on the job and then 14 days off as part of rotations that prepare wells to extract natural gas.

Working-sector employees spend money in restaurants, on new homes and in car purchases. Also benefiting are the landowners who receive payments for mineral rights to tap the gas under their property.

Local ties helped Bruce Ryburn in Washington County save a 253-acre farm that his family has operated since 1793. Through the early 2000s, he and other family members would take jobs in steel and other local industries to support the farm.

ere they raise beef cattle, pigs and Belgian horses and grow corn and hay. Ryburn says he borrowed against his 401(k) repeatedly to buy fuel and machinery. In 2012, after gas wells were fracked about a quarter of a mile away, gas royalties peaked at roughly \$360,000 a year to Ryburn and his family, he said. They currently receive about \$60,000 a year, because production has declined, but he expects that to rise as several wells are re-fracked. Ryburn said he has used royalties to buy well over \$150,000 in farm equipment, including a two-year-old tractor for \$64,000.

Everything that comes off the gas wells goes back into the farm," he said.

Many workers in this part of the state say their jobs cement them to Trump and the Republican Party. While they criticize Biden's stances on immigration, social issues and military funding for Ukraine, they often point to decisions that they believe directly affect their livelihoods in explaining their votes.

John, 39, was an apprentice carpenter earning \$42,000 a year—and voting Democratic, as his labor union urged—before he took a job at Deep Well Service. In his second full year there, he said, he earned \$147,000. Within three years, he had paid off more than \$30,000 in debt and put down \$50,000 on a home.



John Sabo leaves for work from his home in Slippery Rock, Pa.



Sabo uses a home sauna after his morning workout.

said he switched to voting Republican partly because he believes GOP policies helped the oil-and-gas industry. “You’re not going to find a lot of blue bumper stickers in the parking lot at Deep Well,” he said.

o, who says his grandfather died in a mill accident, comes from a family of “Blue Dogs,” a fading breed of conservative Democrats. “The Blue Dog Democrats have the same, exact feelings and thoughts as back then, but now they’re voting Republican,” he says. A father of three, he lives on a 15-acre property with a weight room and a rifle range.

city of Pittsburgh rebounded from steel-industry losses with growth at universities and hospitals, or “eds and meds,” as well as from a burgeoning high-tech cluster that drew high-salaried employees to work on robotics, self-driving vehicles and machine learning at companies such as Google and Uber. Language-learning app Duolingo, the city’s first “unicorn,” or startup worth more than \$1 billion, was one of several companies spun out of Carnegie Mellon University, the city’s engineering powerhouse.

Inflow of new workers, many of them foreign-born, has transformed city neighborhoods. In Lower Lawrenceville, once home to one of the nation’s oldest steel mills, the number of residents with a bachelor’s degree has more than doubled from a decade earlier, census data show, and the number with a more advanced degree more than tripled. Incomes rose as well, with median household income topping \$90,000, more than twice the level of a decade earlier, adjusted for inflation.

Lawrenceville neighborhood has become a hipster hangout, with bakeries and breweries replacing a fading stretch of storefronts and bars, where mill workers once gathered after their shifts.



le work from laptops outside at Bakery Square in Pittsburgh.

eler, the progressive Democrat who lives just north of the neighborhood, recalled his childhood in Uniontown, where his great-grandfather once owned a small coal mine that failed. He grew up listening to conservative talk radio and never questioned the Republican politics of his family. But he said that changed after he moved to Pittsburgh and took his first job at a startup in the city that made software to help hospitals track patients.

He credits his political shift to his exposure to more diverse people and issues in the city, including racial injustice and homelessness. Thieler said he first got to know Lee and Innamorato when he marched with them at Black Lives Matter protests in the city in 2020.

Last year, Thieler stopped attending a local Baptist church after finding it too conservative and began volunteering every Sunday, delivering water and other supplies to homeless encampments around the city.

en though I'm not at all inspired by Biden, I'm very inspired by Trump, and anything I can legally do to keep that man from getting into office, I'm all for," he said.

Thieler's first tech job was a steppingstone to his current one at a database software company that provides software to Fortune 500 companies in finance, oil and other sectors. He earns \$230,000 a year as a senior support account manager and works in a home office in front of four computer screens. "I have been dedicated to our platform making sure nothing turns red," he said.



Josh Thieler distributes resources to people recently released from the Allegheny County Jail.



Thieler rehearses with his bandmates in the basement of his home in Pittsburgh.

Pittsburgh neighborhood of East Liberty, home to Duolingo, has seen its own transformation as a tech hub. An old Nabisco factory site nearby now houses several artificial-intelligence companies and the Ascender Pittsburgh incubator, which is fostering startups in education, payroll services and other areas. Google offices are across the street.

Innovation director at Ascender Pittsburgh, Annia Aleman, 33, oversees programs to help entrepreneurs launch companies. She moved with her family to Pittsburgh at age 16 from a small town in Nicaragua, and her father pursued work as a nurse in the city.

Aleman, who has a master's degree in public policy and management from Carnegie Mellon, voted for Lee, more in support of the congresswoman's position on healthcare access and immigration than due to her stance against fracking. "So I she voted for Clinton and Biden in the last two presidential elections and definitely not Trump," she said.

Aleman plans to vote for Biden this year, in part because she supports his efforts to reduce college debt, which were partially blocked by the Supreme Court. "I have student loans and still pay for them," she said.

While many Democrats say they don't recognize the Republican Party that has been reshaped by Trump, others here say it's the Democratic Party that has changed most.

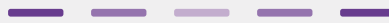
"It used to be a conservative, middle-of-the-road Democratic Party," said Alan Rybak, a Washington County lawyer and member of the Democratic State Committee until 2022. Now, he's a registered Republican.

go to a state committee meeting and feel like a dinosaur,” he said. “With this boom on the fossil fuel industry, which is still big in Washington County, it was like I was swimming upstream.”

Yak marvels at how deep the political divide has become between Allegheny County and those that border it.

“You’d think we’d all think the same way, somewhat,” he said. “We’re all from the same area, generally, within 20 miles of each other.”

Paul Overberg contributed to this article.



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