

Trade-Fatigued Rust Belt Fueled Trump's Stunning Win

Alex Lawson

Law360, New York (November 9, 2016, 5:11 PM EST) -- Among the most shocking developments in Donald Trump's rise to the White House on Tuesday were his gains in traditionally Democratic strongholds like Wisconsin, Michigan and Pennsylvania, where experts say his protectionist bombast resonated with a beleaguered working class that has soured on trade liberalization.



For all of his spectacle, Donald Trump was essentially proposing the sorts of aggressively protectionist policies that have gotten Rust Belt Democrats elected for decades. (AP)

It will take many weeks of research to ascertain exactly how much the former real estate tycoon's contentious trade proposals influenced the Rust Belt, but Tucker Ellis LLP attorney and Ohio's Cuyahoga County Republican Party Chairman Robert S. Frost said he believed the messaging had a deep and profound effect on the regional electorate.

“The economy has been going gangbusters, the U.S. has been expanding its trade

relationships ... but there are people here who [were] working, at many times, very skilled jobs that they took a great deal of pride in,” Frost told Law360. “**They felt like they were left behind in this economy**, and Donald Trump spoke right to that in places like Youngstown to Detroit to Milwaukee.”

Preliminary exit-polling from CNN appears to back up Frost’s hypothesis, displaying a high correlation between a **pessimistic view of free trade and support for the Republican nominee**.

Those polls show that half of Michigan’s voters are of the opinion that free trade takes away jobs, with those trade skeptics breaking for Trump by a 57 to 36 percent margin over Democratic nominee Hillary Clinton.

There are similar stories to be found in Ohio and Pennsylvania, where 47 percent and 53 percent of voters respectively feel that trade hinders workers. Again, those voters showed up in a big way for Trump in both states.

For all of his spectacle, Trump was essentially **proposing the sorts of aggressively protectionist policies that have gotten Rust Belt Democrats elected for decades**. But Frost suggested that by upending conventional Republican wisdom on trade, Trump opened the door to a whole new cache of voters.

“Organized labor had thought that the Democrats had had their backs for the last 25 years, but they look around and see where they are, and they wonder why they had placed their faith there,” Frost said. “Donald Trump went against what had been Republican orthodoxy on trade. Part of how we got there is that Hillary Clinton ... began taking an internationalist position of trade for trade’s sake, as opposed to representing an American position on trade.”

Trump appealed to the emotions of workers who felt wronged by a steady pattern of trade liberalization that is, in their minds, about to get much worse if the U.S. Congress is able to ratify the Trans-Pacific Partnership accord, which now seems dead in the water with a Trump victory.

But all throughout the election cycle, a flurry of economists and trade wonks attempted to set the record straight on trade, noting that U.S. job losses were driven largely by automation and other improvements in worker efficiency, not foreign competition.

Chief among the voices pushing back against Trump was Cato Institute adjunct scholar and White & Case LLP trade attorney Scott Lincicome, who was skeptical about trade serving as the silver bullet for Trump’s Rust Belt barnstorming but acknowledged it certainly played a role in his ascent.

“What Trump did very well in retrospect was express an affection of the **white working class, and trade** was certainly one of his outlets for that,” Lincicome told Law360. “And for a lot of these folks who feel down on their luck, that resonates with them.”

Liberalized trade does not affect every citizen equally.

There is considerable economic research to suggest that trade deals, like the North American Free Trade Agreement and the TPP, have and would lead to job loss in certain pockets of the nation, and once you acknowledge that those pockets can coalesce around a single anti-trade message, Trump's appeal is easier to grasp.

“He understood how powerful that message was in that region ... you have to give him credit even if you're not supportive of his policies on trade, for understanding how much people have been hurt by those free trade agreements,” Republican pollster Glen Bolger of Public Opinion Strategies told Law360.

But the more pressing issue for free trade advocates is how Tuesday's events may impact what lies ahead. Trump claimed victory, but both Clinton and her top primary opponent, Sen. Bernie Sanders, I-Vt., have also opposed the TPP and distanced themselves from the past two decades of trade policy.

Candidates on both sides of the aisle have played **that game before**, Lincicome observed, but only in 2016 did the mainstream anti-trade rallying cry rise from a murmur to a shout.

“The clear problem for free traders and the clearest result on trade for this election is that **running as a staunch protectionist is not political suicide**,” Lincicome said. “You can go out there and basically say you want giant trade wars that are going to collapse the global economy and you are not going to lose because of it, and that is stunning to me.”