

## **Disenfranchisement and Disengagement: The Story of Voters in Youngstown**

### **The Intersection of Economics and Politics**

Nestled in the northeast part of Ohio is a county called Mahoning County. Mahoning County is home to the City of Youngstown and numerous other municipalities. When thinking of Mahoning County, picture a place filled with numerous nationalities, religiosity, and a pride for hometowns found in few other places around the country. Mahoning County's wealth and reputation was built on producing coal and steel. Numerous steel mills once dotted the Mahoning River. These mills provided financial stability to those who worked in them, and upward mobility for young people looking to make a life in Mahoning County. This was all true until Monday, September 19, 1977—otherwise known as “Black Monday.” Black Monday was the day that Campbell Steel Works, a local steel producing company, announced that it would be closing immediately—putting 5,000 employees out of work. Campbell Steel Works was the first of many mills to shutter in Mahoning County. Ultimately, the closure of Mahoning County's mills would put 50,000 people out of work, and thus the “rust belt” was born.

Loss of industry has gone on to define, not just daily life in Mahoning County, but our politics as well. Once a Democratic stronghold, 46 years removed from Black Monday, something has changed in Mahoning County politics. A once reliably blue county, has started to lean Republican. Voters here are tired of feeling the economic squeeze, and turning away from “establishment” politicians and government officials. This paper will explore the story of a people abused by industry and government alike, and how those abuses have fostered an environment in which voters no longer see the value of participating in the political process. Disenfranchisement and Disengagement: The Story of Voters in Youngstown.

### **Youngstown's Political History**

Youngstown voters backed Democrats for decades because of strong union ties and church membership. For much of Mahoning County's history, Republicans were viewed as anti-worker, which left them without any appeal to Youngstown voters. They wanted to cut entitlements, break-up unions, and pass more trade agreements that would send American jobs overseas. This created a dichotomy where Democrats were the party of blue-collar workers and Republicans were the party of elites.

In the 15 Presidential elections that took place between 1960 and 2016, the Democratic candidate won Mahoning County 13 out of 15 times. This success also trickled down to other races, as Youngstown was represented in Congress by a Democrat for 38 straight years starting in 1985. First, with Congressman Jim Traficant who served 18 years, and then Congressman Tim Ryan who served 20 years. Furthermore, the last 7 Mayors of the City of Youngstown have been Democrats when elected with the exception of Jay Williams. Williams won his first election as

an Independent, and then proceeded to win his reelection as a Democrat before taking a job with the Obama administration.

Democrats winning in Youngstown seemed guaranteed. It was as if the Youngstown political environment was immune to outside forces. The national environment, candidate quality, nor fundraising numbers mattered. If your name had a Democratic signifier next to it on the ballot, you won.

However, woven through the decades of Democratic success in Youngstown is another story. It's a story of government distrust and a complicated electorate. Voters in Youngstown feel like the government has failed them. For 46 years, they have seen banks receive bailouts, CEO pay increase, and companies move jobs overseas. In their minds, the federal government has hung them out to dry. Because if federal officials really cared about the people of Youngstown, they would have done something to revive Youngstown by now. On the local level, Youngstown has been mired in mediocrity. Due to the lack of opportunity and overall low quality of life, young talent often leaves the area in search of a more "livable" community with upward mobility. As only 14.1% of Youngstown residents have a bachelor's degree, 35.3% live in poverty, and the per capita income is \$18,820. Youngstown has failed to reinvent itself, and has not created a more dense, walkable city like other revived midwest cities have. Our assessment of the quality of life in Youngstown is harsh, but the data backs it up. In 1970, when Youngstown's mills were still running, the city's population was 139,788. Today's population is less than half that number. As of the 2020 Census, Youngstown's population was 59,620—a 58.4% decline in population since 1970.

After 46 years of population loss, stagnant economic growth, unfulfilled promises, and botched government projects, voters in Youngstown no longer see the value of engaging in the political process. Why be involved if no one is going to change anything? The failure to turn around Youngstown's economy and livability problem is not the only factor in low voter turnout—Ohio is a horribly gerrymandered state and Ohioans have constantly had their right to vote attacked. However, some of that blame falls to the Mahoning County Democratic Party as well.

### **Jubilee and Agony**

For much of its history, the Mahoning County Democratic Party (MCDP) was made up of a diverse coalition of community stakeholders—labor unions, suburbanites, and African-American voters. Combined together, these coalition pieces formed an unstoppable force in Mahoning County politics. It was the perfect blend of progressive and moderate, religious and secular, union and non-union. MCDP epitomized the idea of a "big-tent" party at the local level. As a result, MCDP had vast resources and controlled nearly every elected seat in Mahoning County.

However, MCDP has always been a complicated organization. Across those decades of dominance, the party battled with corruption and found themselves intertwined with criminal activity. From the 1970s to the 1990s the MCDP Chairman was Don “Bull Moose” Hanni. Hanni was the attorney for the local mob and often found himself protecting the interests of his clients through his position with MCDP—backing mob-friendly candidates over those looking to fight corruption. More recently, Lisa Antonini, former Mahoning County Treasurer and MCDP Chair from 2002 to 2009, was found guilty of honest services mail fraud for failing to disclose a \$3,000 cash gift. Forcing Antonini to resign her position as treasurer and chair.

The corruption went deeper than the party chairperson however. Former Congressman Jim Traficant was expelled from Congress and went to prison for his part in a bribery scheme. James Philomena, former Mahoning County Prosecutor, was convicted on charges that he fixed cases during his time as prosecutor. Ron Gerberry went from being an esteemed community member to an ashamed elected official, as he was caught improperly handling campaign contributions.

This dicey history was covered up by the endless number of victories MCDP achieved, but MCDP now finds themselves with less support and losing more races. So much so that Mahoning County can now be considered a “Lean R” county. Strikingly different from the political trends in other counties within which there is a large urban and suburban voting base.

In Mahoning County, there is little long-term evidence that the “suburban mom” vote exists for Democrats. So many of the suburban residents in states like Pennsylvania, Georgia, and Arizona who have voted for Democrats the last 3 election cycles are college educated, upper middle class voters. That is not what our electorate looks like in Mahoning County. The voters who live in our suburbs are working class folks without a college education—only 25% of individuals who reside in Mahoning County have completed a bachelor's degree.

Mahoning County's suburban voters make their political decisions based on their checkbooks. They only care about jobs, lowering costs, and retiring with dignity. Voters in other counties, with higher incomes and more upward mobility, are free to care about a wider range of issues because their basic needs are met. For more context, let's take a look at the Ohio Gubernatorial race results from 2018 and 2022 to further explain the struggles of the Democratic Party in Mahoning County.

In 2018, the Democrat running for Governor, Richard Cordray, won Mahoning County with 54.83% of the vote. Mike DeWine, the Republican, won only 42.65% of the vote. Cordray won Mahoning County thanks to strong support from voters in Youngstown, and winning many suburbs (Struthers, Campbell, Austintown, Boardman) by 5%-10%. Fast forward to 2022, after Mahoning County voted for Trump in 2020, Mike DeWine won Mahoning County with 65.20% of the vote (a 22.55% increase in support from 2018). In 2022, the suburbs that went for Cordray

swung for DeWine by a large margin. The only place in Mahoning County that stayed a Democratic stronghold was the City of Youngstown.

From this data, you should conclude the need for a strong focus on boosting voter turnout in the City of Youngstown—specifically among African-American voters for they are the base of the party. Youngstown-proper is the only place in Mahoning County with a strong base of Democratic voters. It is the only place where there is room to grow in terms of getting more Democrats out to vote. Voters in Mahoning County’s suburbs are turning away from Democrats. For a multitude of reasons from racism to sexism to economic hardship, they no longer see us as sharing their values.

Now, admittedly boosting turnout in the City of Youngstown is easier said than done. There is a long history between MCDP and African-American voters in the city, and the relationship between the two has not always been good.

### **“The Great Schism”**

For a while now, MCDP and the African-American voters in Youngstown have been at odds over which candidates to support. In 2017 Youngstown’s own version of “The Great Schism” happened. The City of Youngstown had two incredibly important races on the ballot in 2017—a race for Mayor and a race for Municipal Court Judge. The Democratic primary for Mayor was a face-off between then incumbent John McNally and Jamael “Tito” Brown. Youngstown had seen some economic development progress under McNally’s watch, but like many Mahoning County politicians before him, McNally found himself in legal trouble over an alleged bribery scheme. Before his tenure as Mayor, McNally served as a Mahoning County Commissioner and Law Director for the City of Youngstown. Brown was a community organizer for the local university (Youngstown State), social worker, Mahoning County Chief Deputy Treasurer, and former President of City Council. It was a battle of two men with enormous amounts of political capital and experience.

The Democratic Primary race for Municipal Court Judge was between Carla Baldwin and Anthony Sertick. Sertick was the long-time magistrate for the Youngstown Municipal Court. He had the backing of party insiders and was a well known figure in local government thanks to his time in the Youngstown Law Department and Mahoning County Jobs and Family Services. Baldwin was considered the outsider in this race. She was a young African-American woman looking to make a difference in her community. Baldwin built a reputation while working in the Mahoning County Prosecutor’s Office and serving on many community boards. In that race, Baldwin built a grassroots movement and was a true community activist.

MCDP, led at the time by Atty. David Betras, found themselves in a difficult situation. Do they stick with the party insiders and endorse an all-white ticket? Or do they embrace change and

throw their support behind Brown or Baldwin? Much to the dismay of local African-American leaders and voters, MCDP chose to stick with the party insiders and endorse an all-white ticket. These endorsements fundamentally changed the dynamics of MCDP’s relationship with Youngstown’s African-American community. Whatever trust remained between African-American voters and MCDP was gone. To the African-American voters in Youngstown, these endorsements signaled that the party did not speak for them. The party was out of touch and out of line with the base of the party.

The primary races came down to Youngstown’s 4th, 5th, and 7th wards vs the 1st, 2nd, 3rd, and 6th wards. In order for McNally and Sertick to win, they needed to increase turnout among their base in the 4th, 5th, and 7th wards—these wards make up the West side of town, and have more white voters than the other wards. Many of Youngstown’s Italian and Irish Catholics reside in these wards. In order for Brown and Baldwin to win, they needed to increase turnout in Youngstown’s 1st, 2nd, 3rd, and 6th wards. These wards are home to most of the city’s African-American population and baptist churches. In politics, math is math. Whoever won the turnout battle was going to win the election.

When election day finally arrived in early May, Brown and Baldwin emerged victorious. They had done it. They beat the party insiders and all the doubters who said that they would never win. Baldwin became the first African-American female elected Judge anywhere in Mahoning County. It was a triumphant moment for a community that was told their political preferences did not matter. But then again, isn’t that the story of America? People of all creeds rising up to demand political justice in the name of creating “a more perfect union.” The final results for each race are displayed on the tables below.

<b>Mayoral Race</b>	<b>Votes Received</b>	<b>Total Ballots Cast</b>
Brown	4,385 (52.84%)	8,298
McNally	3,913 (47.16%)	

<b>Municipal Judge Race</b>	<b>Votes Received</b>	<b>Total Ballots Cast</b>
Baldwin	4,830 (58.62%)	8,240
Sertick	3,410 (41.38%)	

Our team, including long-time Mahoning County political consultant Kristen Olmi, have theorized that Baldwin’s trouncing of Sertick carried the other African-American candidates on

the ballot that year. Baldwin ran a flawless grassroots campaign that got more infrequent voters out to vote.

Also on Youngstown voter’s ballots that year was a race for President of Council. It was a 4-way race that was ultimately won by DeMaine Kitchen—a prominent member of the African-American community. Kitchen defeated Mike Ray, long time 4th Ward Councilman.

President of Council Race	Votes Received	Total Ballots Cast
Kitchen	3,600 (44.19%)	8,147
Ray	2,608 (32.01%)	
Swierz	1,562 (19.17%)	
Tensley	377 (4.63%)	

**Apathy**

The 2017 Democratic Primary in the City of Youngstown seemed to be the start of a new era in city government. For the first time in a long time, people had hope. After all, downtown was revitalizing, crime was coming down, and voters had just elected change-making candidates who promised to build on the progress that had been made. Many thought Youngstown was finally going to get its break, and move past “Black Monday.” What Youngstown voters got instead, was a mixed bag.

Six years on, Youngstown finds itself in the midst of stagnation with the hope of revitalization dwindling. Bungled project after bungled project has made residents wary of all local elected officials and has forced voter apathy to an all-time high. Downtown businesses are struggling due to mismanaged construction projects that are making it hard for customers to get to downtown businesses. Plus, Youngstown’s neighborhoods and thoroughfares continue to deteriorate thanks to a lack of economic development and strategic planning. As a result, post-2017, the voter turnout in the City of Youngstown has been horrible in both odd and even year elections. Because, after all, why would you come out to vote if, after 40 years of different elected officials, your sidewalk is still uneven, there are still potholes in the road, and you're still living in poverty?

This all culminated in a voter turnout of 9.76% in Mahoning County for the 2023 May Primary. Turnout was even worse in the City of Youngstown, as only 1,361 voters came out to vote in the entire city. This is particularly striking when you consider that the 2nd, 5th, and 6th wards in Youngstown had competitive races for City Council on the ballot. Voter turnout being this poor indicates that voters in Youngstown have lost faith in the electoral process. It builds on the point why turnout when nobody makes positive change in your life?

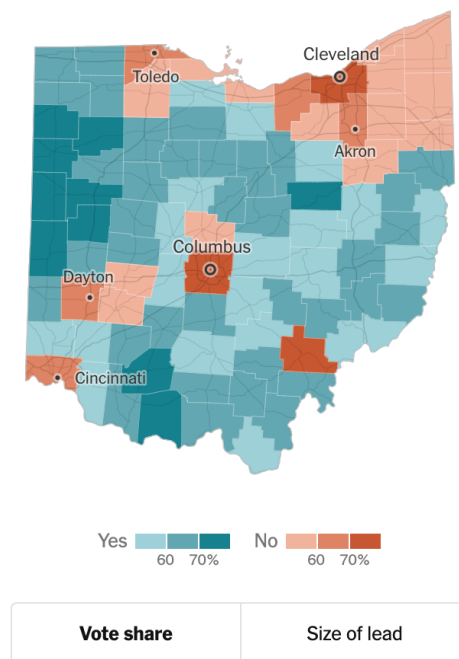
Furthermore, voters were extremely confused in the 2023 primary. There were a number of wards, townships, villages, and cities across Mahoning County in which none of the elections were contested. Under Ohio Revised Code, local Boards of Elections can choose not to run elections in those races because of their uncontested nature. The Mahoning County Board of Elections took advantage of this rule and did not run elections in Youngstown's 1st, 3rd, 4th, and 7th wards. This led to confusion amongst Youngstown voters, as even individuals who vote in every election were unaware that there would not be an election in their ward. Add it all together, and you get one of the least conducive environments for political involvement in the entire United States.

### **Hope Floats**

Just when it seemed that all hope was lost, Ohio Republicans (specifically Frank LaRose) made a mistake and tried to pull a fast one on Ohio voters. At the last minute, after outlawing August Special Elections just months earlier, Republicans decided to conduct an August Special Election for Issue 1—a proposed amendment to the Ohio Constitution that attempted to make changing the Ohio Constitution via the ballot initiative process much more difficult. Issue 1 sought to “increase the voter approval threshold for new constitutional amendments to 60%; require citizen-initiated constitutional amendment campaigns to collect signatures from each of the state's 88 counties, an increase from half (44) of the counties. eliminate the cure period of 10 days for campaigns to gather additional signatures for citizen-initiated constitutional amendments when the original submission did not have enough valid signatures.” This proposed amendment was nothing more than an attempt to reduce the power of Ohio voters. It was a disgusting display of voter disenfranchisement. Republicans also sought to pass this measure because, in November 2023, Ohio voters will vote on a proposal to codify abortion into the Ohio Constitution.

As Ohio neared Election Day, the outcome of the Issue 1 proposition was anything but certain. Every person you talked to gave you a different prediction, and the polling conducted regarding Issue 1 was inconsistent. Some polls had Issue 1 passing or failing by a large margin. It was anyone's guess what the final vote count would look like come election day.

On August 8th, we got our answer. Ohioans resoundingly voted No on Issue 1 and chose to retain their power to change the Ohio Constitution. Issue 1 failed by a 14% spread (57% to 43%). The No vote dominated in Ohio's cities—Cleveland, Akron, Columbus, and Cincinnati. In the rural parts of Ohio the No vote did better than Democrats normally do, cutting down the margins in places like Tuscarawas and Ross County. However, the biggest surprise of the night came out of the Northeast portion of the state.



As evidenced by the map above, Issue 1 failed by large margins in northeast Ohio. For the first time in a long time, a liberal cause did well in northeast Ohio. The No vote carried in Mahoning County by a 58% to 42% margin and the City of Youngstown’s voter turnout was 25% percent. It was a good night in Mahoning County for Democrats and liberals. And although 25% voter turnout is not ideal, that number is much higher than the 8% - 13% turnout Youngstown has been experiencing of late. Perhaps, as said by the folks over at Crooked Media, “Ohio voters like liberal issues, just not Democrats.”

The grassroots activism of the Mahoning County Democratic Party, Steel Valley Reproductive Organization, League of Women Voters, and many other organizations made these results possible. For the first time in 10 years, Mahoning County had a robust canvassing and phone banking program that reached a large portion of the electorate. These results provided hope to all those who support liberal laws and common sense government in Ohio.

### **Marching On**

While the results of Issue 1 should make us hopeful, we must also recognize that this singular victory does not guarantee us that the change we seek is to come. We must remain vigilant in the fight for Ohio. In Youngstown, we must continue to rebuild the relationship between the party and the African-American community. If Democrats want to return to their winning ways, they must engage in efforts that will boost Youngstown turnout—canvassing, phone banking, etc. Issue 1 was defeated because we embraced grassroots efforts and had consistent messaging. Even in



today's digital age, campaigns do not have more effective tools than canvassing and phone banking. Furthermore, we must reconnect people to politics. In order to carry out an effective grassroots campaign, you need volunteers. Many individuals have withdrawn from politics because they no longer feel connected to government. We have to do a better job explaining to people that politics and government affects every aspect of our lives. Do you have clean water to brush your teeth? Thank government regulations. Does your pet have safe food to eat? Thank government regulations. Do you like your break at work? Thank government regulations. If we can get folks to understand how government and politics directly impacts their lives, they will be more inclined to get involved in the political process.

Ohio is not like states or cities with high levels of density and diversity. We cannot win elections via social media. Democrats and liberal causes must win via grassroots efforts and boosting voter turnout. That is the only mechanism we have to elect Democrats and pass liberal causes in Mahoning County and Ohio.

In a few days, Ohio voters will decide if they want to codify reproductive rights into the Ohio constitution. Let us hope that Ohio's grassroots organizing infrastructure delivers another big victory for a liberal cause. If the reproductive rights amendment passes, it could signal a seismic shift in Ohio politics. It is time to once-again channel the spirit of the grassroots organizers who came before us and work to engage more citizens in the process. "The arch of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice." We just need more individuals to do the bending.

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