Voices Of Voters: Rural Ohioans Consider Their Presidential Options

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Sixty-two percent of rural Americans voted for Donald Trump for president four years ago, according to exit polls conducted by The New York Times. Ohio’s farmland was Trumpland in 2016, and Trump is depending on a repeat of that, since no Republican has lost Ohio and still won the White House. But Democratic nominee Joe Biden is hoping to make some inroads or at least chip away at Trump’s dominance in rural Ohio.

Trump’s eight point victory in Ohio came from winning 80 counties, including Clinton County, where Roger Winemiller and his cousin have a 3400 acre grain farm like 74% of voters in Clinton County. Winemiller picked Trump in 2016, though he admits he wasn’t a fan but liked his business background.

“I have gained a whole lot of respect and I’m very happy with all the things that he stands for and that he’s done for this country,” Winemiller said.

Roger’s story is well known here. He lost a daughter and son to opioid overdoses in 2016. His surviving son is in recovery, and Roger spends time speaking to and working with those struggling with addiction. But he’s also been driving his Trump-decked truck in parades on the roads and freeways near his home.

Jeff Magyar runs a 3,000 acre farm in Ashtabula County with his daughter growing soybeans, corn, cows and hogs. He said Trump’s late 2016 visit to his county, which Trump then won by nearly 19 points, meant something to people about their concerns and values had been ignored.

“For the last 10, 15 years, we felt our voices weren’t being heard. You know, the president has never been in this county. 95% of the farmers I talked to feel that he has our back and hears our voice,” Magyar said.

Across the state, Chris Gibbs farms 560 acres, growing corn, soybeans and alfalfa. Gibbs didn’t just vote for Trump in 2016. He was the Shelby County Republican Party chair.

But in 2018, when Trump imposed tariffs on steel and aluminum for most countries and launched a trade war with China, that was it for Gibbs.

“That hurt my bottom line. And right off the bat in the soybean complex alone, we lost 20% of our value because we lost the China trade. So I ended up off of the Trump train at that point,” Gibbs said.

But Magyar said Trump is fighting a battle that should have been settled years ago. And Winemiller agreed, saying it’s about shared sacrifice.

“It’s not all about us. It’s about the country. So this time it happens to us that we have to take it on the chin. But I would much rather do that and have someone that will stand up to China than I would to have a president that is weak and came to China and just listen to constantly take advantage of us like they had the decades,” Winemiller said.
Tariffs are a reason Charlie Beck opposes Trump, though he didn’t vote for him in 2016 either. Beck grows corn and soybeans with his father, uncle and some cousins on 1100 acres outside of defiance and a county Trump won by nearly 35 points.

“If he gets re-elected, there’s nothing to say that he’s not going to come back on with a stronger and try to strengthen arm with the terrorists more than what he has in the past. And tariffs are so frustrating because China isn’t paying the tariffs, we’re paying the tariffs. But that’s not what he said. He said, China is going to pay the tariffs. And that’s what a lot of people believe,” Beck said.

Beck said he’s also concerned about climate change and coronavirus.

The pandemic is a big issue in rural Ohio as people worry about the future of health insurance and the economy.

Kristi Luschek is thinking about both those things as a registered nurse and health insurance company case manager. Her husband runs a trucking company and they’re part-time farmers in Highland County, where 76% of voters picked Trump in 2016.

Luschek said the insults and attacks on women Trump is accused of are outweighed by her support for his policies and optimism for his reelection.

“You know, we all have a past. I don’t care. I don’t care what he did. All I know is that he has been a great president and I’m voting for him. And I’m hoping and praying that he gets in for another four years and our economy will definitely be on the rise,” Luschek said.

The rural support for Trump is strong. But there are Biden voters there, such as Chris Gibbs. He officially left the Republican Party last year, but has not left politics. He briefly considered an independent run against right-wing Republican Congressman Jim Jordan this year. And a few months ago, he helped launch Operation Grant, the Ohio offshoot of the high-profile and big-money-raising Lincoln Project, a national effort to convince fellow frustrated Republicans to vote for Democrat Joe Biden.

“I’m a black sheep in the agriculture community, and that’s fine. I find as a black sheep, my pastures are a whole lot less crowded that way,” Gibbs said.

Trump’s rural backers also talk up their support for him on social issues such as abortion. And many also say they don’t trust Biden on the economy, which they fear will veer toward socialism, or on racial issues. In many rural counties in Ohio, more than 90% of the population is white.

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