



**'Blue Wall Politics':
Inside the Key Heartland Battlegrounds
Deciding the US Election**

The Heartlands Transformation Network gathers on-the-ground journalists to discuss the importance and implications of Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin in the 2024 U.S. Presidential Election.

By Meriem Hamioui

The U.S. presidential contest between the Harris-Walz and Trump-Vance tickets is high stakes for the entire world. Given the political quirks of the U.S. Electoral College voting system, only seven of America's 50 states are considered up for grabs. And within those seven, the three industrial heartland states of Wisconsin, Michigan, and Pennsylvania are pivotal. Former President Donald Trump won these three once-reliable Democratic "Blue Wall" states in 2016 by a collective total of 80,000 votes, enabling his unlikely and transatlantic alliance upending ascent to the White House. In 2020, President Joe Biden narrowly won them back and evicted Trump from 1600 Pennsylvania Ave.

What is going to happen in 2024?

That was the question posed and discussed at the recent transatlantic virtual discussion with key Blue Wall State-based political analysts hosted by the [Jefferson Educational Society](#), the Erie, Pennsylvania-based think tank, as part of the [Heartlands Transformation Network](#).

The event on Thursday, Oct. 10, brought together over 40 members of the transatlantic network in real time with many more streaming the video on-demand to hear from:

Chuck Quirnbach, government, politics, and business correspondent for WUWM, Milwaukee's NPR station.

Zoe Clark and Rick Pluta, co-hosts of "It's Just Politics," Michigan Public Radio Network.

Jeff Bloodworth, professor at Gannon University and contributor to various publications, including on Erie News Now and The Liberal Patriot.

The discussion was moderated by Juliane Schäuble, U.S. correspondent for Der Tagesspiegel.

You can review the whole discussion via this [video link](#); but with the election just days away and observers around the world waiting anxiously to see what will happen, below are some of the highlights as well as some of the surprising insights.

Key Takeaways from the Discussion

Demographic shifts: White non-college voters, especially women, are a crucial demographic in these states. Vice President Kamala Harris, the Democratic nominee, is performing well with this group, particularly on the abortion issue, which could be a significant factor in the election outcome.

Abortion rights: The Dobbs decision reversing the Roe v. Wade Supreme Court decision allowing abortion rights nationally has made reproductive freedom a top issue in these states. In Michigan, a 2022 ballot question on reproductive rights passed with 57% support, contributing to Democratic victories. Wisconsin and Pennsylvania have also seen abortion rights become a central campaign topic.

Urban-rural divide: All three states exhibit a stark urban-rural political split. Cities like Detroit, Milwaukee, and Madison tend to be Democratic strongholds, while rural areas lean Republican. Candidates are focusing on high-turnout areas and college towns to maximize their support.

Voter turnout strategies: Both parties are emphasizing early voting and absentee balloting. Democrats are focusing on organizing get-out-the-vote efforts, particularly in urban areas and among college students. Republicans are working to persuade voters in traditionally Democratic areas, including targeting Black voters in Detroit.

Third-party candidates: The potential impact of third-party candidates like Robert F. Kennedy Jr., who dropped from the race but remains on some ballots, and Green Party nominee Jill Stein is being closely watched, as they could act as spoilers or influence major party platforms.

Union influence: Labor unions continue playing a significant role in these states' politics. Democratic vice-presidential nominee Tim Walz of Minnesota, a union member himself, is seen as potentially influential in appealing to this demographic.

Campaign strategies: Harris and Walz are focusing on population-rich areas and college towns, while Trump is leveraging his appeal through podcasts and rallies. The Democratic campaign is described as more organized, while the Trump campaign faces some internal challenges.

Polling and predictions: Experts caution against over-relying on polls, noting their inaccuracies in previous elections. The race is expected to be very close, with organization and early voting potentially being decisive factors.

Working-class voters: There's an acknowledgment that Democrats have struggled to connect with working-class voters in recent decades, which Trump capitalized on in 2016. The party is working to address this issue in the current campaign.

The overall sentiment is that the race in these Blue Wall states remain extremely tight and could go either way. The outcome will likely depend on voter turnout, the effectiveness of campaign

organizations, and how well each ticket addresses key issues like abortion rights and economic concerns. The discussions emphasize the continued importance of these states in determining the national election result.

Following are some notes and quotes from the group of on-the-ground journalists that aren't popping up as part of the relentless national and international reporting:

Kamala Harris' Appeal to White Non-College Women

Jeff Bloodworth: "Harris is doing exceptionally well with white non-college women. So, you know, suburban women, college educated, you know, sure that you know, abortion rights kind of moving that demographic. But I think the sneaky one is white non-college women in the abortion issue, driving them to Harris, whereas in the last two elections, Trump had demographic, and so we think about like losing by less right with rule voters, for example, that is a Trump demographic that what I've seen is that Kamala Harris is doing much better with and that's very key in these three states, because that's a significant part of the electorate, and that's about abortion."

It Will Be All About Turnout

Zoe Clark: "It is important to understand that in 2016, it wasn't so much that Trump 'won' Michigan, it is that Hilary Clinton lost it.... Democrats, and in particular, African Americans did not turn out for Hilary, as they had four years prior for Barack Obama. Democratic groups did turn out in 2020..... So, it is all about whether young people, African Americans, women will turn out in numbers. That is why Gov. Gretchen Whitmer is going to MSU sorority houses, to get out that demographic."

Democrats are Organized- Trump Campaign is Not

Jeff Bloodworth: "On the ground in northwestern Pennsylvania, the Democratic Party is very organized and going door-to-door..... The Trump campaign is freaked out as they outsourced their field operation..... Paid canvassers knocking on doors, paid by how many doors they knock, is not as effective as the volunteers that Democrats have, actually talking to voters..... In 2016, Hilary Clinton was absent. In 2020, there was a pandemic. This is the first time Donald Trump has run against a real Democratic campaign."

Undecided Voters Not Truly Undecided

Zoe Clark: "What we know is that these folks also are what we call low-propensity voters, and that's actually who we were talking earlier about, sort of who Donald Trump is going after when you talk about base and try to go back into your party and get your enthusiastic base out, what they're looking at is voters don't tend to turn out right because Donald Trump sort of level of it's not over 50% in Michigan. He's never won 50% in Michigan, and so he's trying to get folks who don't normally turn out ladies, undecideds, but I'm not so much sure they're undecided. It's more

about whether they're undecided, if they're going to vote or not, not undecided between Harris versus Trump.”

Impact of Third-Party Candidates

Zoe Clark: “We are in a party system. We are a fundamental two-party system. And so, what you sort of see is these playing spoilers. First, we were talking about sort of uncommitted in February. In the presidential campaign, you have these sort of anti-Trump or anti-Harris votes rather than a vote necessarily for Stein or Kennedy Jr.”

Union Influence and Tim Walz's Appeal

Zoe Clark: “I will say I'm actually surprised that in Michigan we are not seeing more visits. I think we probably will as election day gets closer, but to union voters, more visits to labor voters by a Tim Walz right? Tim Walz is the only candidate who actually is part of a union, and the only candidate, I should say, among the presidential candidates or VP, like he should be out talking the talk the way Joe Biden was in 2020, and I think possibly see Bill Clinton be a surrogate soon here in Michigan and doing the same. But that is a voting block that when we're talking about sort of losing less is absolutely important in Michigan.”

The Role of Third Parties in Coalition Building During Primaries:

Rick Pluta: “Third parties largely act as spoilers, or they can drive the two big political parties to try and adopt a platform issue that they're pushing, but sort of the parliamentary function, the coalition building that comes with it tends to happen in primary elections as the parties try to attract those people who are either less likely to vote or more passionate about a particular issue. That's where the coalition building party function often comes in, it is in the primary election, rather than in the general election.”

The Middle East: A Challenge for Democrats:

Chuck Quirnbach: “There's a sizable pro-Palestinian group here that in the primary, got nearly 50,000 votes as protest votes against Joe Biden, or issue of Israel arms and lack of a cease-fire. So that's been part of the effort of Democrats is to win back some of those folks who voted or the uninstructed movement here. They're having some success with a group or two that has endorsed Harris, that stayed out of Biden's camp earlier, but the Democrats need to round up, collect those folks and get them into the polls to vote for Harris; and it's not quite clear yet if they're going to do so.”

What to Watch For

Jeff Bloodworth: “Pennsylvania likely will be undecided for a while (because of the manner in which mail-in and absentee votes are counted, which is later than 43 other states)... Watch the early returns from North Carolina. Western North Carolina, the Democrats are very organized. If the

state is not called early for Trump, it bodes well for the Democrats. If North Carolina is called early for Trump, then it likely will come down to Pennsylvania, and we all may be in for a long week before we know the results.”

About the Transforming Industrial Heartlands Initiative

The [Heartlands Transformation Network](#) is a transatlantic collaborative partnership dedicated toward closing geographic economic divides and reconnecting residents of rural and former industrial heartland communities to economic opportunity. The initiative works to return community pride and optimism about the future, and diminish the appeal of polarizing, resentment-driven, isolationist and ethnonationalist political movements that threaten our democracies.

The initiative, its learning exchanges, convenings, events, study tours, presentations, publications, and other learning products, are conducted with partners including the Eisenhower Institute at Gettysburg College, the Brookings Institution; the Georgetown University BMW Center for German and European Studies; the Jefferson Educational Society; the Ruhrkonferenz of North-Rhine Westphalia; Policy Manchester at the University of Manchester, U.K.; the University Allianz Ruhr; the German Consulate General in Chicago; the University of Michigan; the European Commission Directorate of Regional and Urban Policy; and the Committee of the Regions of the European Union, among others.

About the Authors

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