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## FLYOVER COUNTRY BLUES

*Trump's Democrats*, by Stephanie Muravchik and Jon A. Shields.  
Brookings Institution Press, 224 pages, \$27.99

STEPHANIE MURAVCHIK AND JON Shields, by their own admission, were “aghast” at the election of President Donald Trump. So, like good political scientists, they set out to understand the causes of the catastrophe: they interviewed residents of three out of 206 “pivot” counties that voted twice for Barack Obama and then for Trump. The result is *Trump's Democrats*.

One of the three counties in question had fairly predictable reasons for voting Trump: the traditionally Democratic Ottumwa in Wapello County, one of Iowa's 31 pivot counties, is the site of a now-closed John Deere factory. Another, Elliott County in the hills of eastern Kentucky, was more unusual: unlike dozens of Appalachian counties, Elliott did not abandon its ancestral Democratic allegiance in 2008 or 2012. (Obama carried eight and two Kentucky counties respectively in those years, not two and one as the authors say.) For their third choice, Muravchik and Shields cheated just a little: the Providence suburb of Johnston is actually just *outside* Kent, the one pivot county in Rhode Island.

Thankfully, *Trump's Democrats* does not contain the identically structured interviews and dubious quantitative analysis which are fashionable in social science. Instead, Muravchik and Shields seem simply to have driven into each locale and schmoozed with dozens of people. Their conclusions, though often reasonable, are not always charitable. Trump Democrats, in their view, cherish an honor culture the president embodies: never admit you're wrong, fight anyone who challenges you, and defy political correctness. The husband and wife authors assure readers that as academics (Muravchik at California State University, San Bernardino; Shields at Claremont McKenna College), they don't endorse this honor culture: “political correctness, after all, functions as the cutting edge of a bourgeoisie culture that prizes civility and gentleness in manners.” But politically correct elites are known for “cancelling” dissidents by driving them from their jobs or forcing them to apologize for wrongthink. That's hardly “civil” or “gentle.” In fact, as the authors' own accounts make clear, you get more respectful discourse in these three Obama/Trump communities than you do on just about any “cutting-edge” university or college campus.

MURAVCHIK AND SHIELDS BEGAN each visit by interviewing local county officials. These small-town politicos are well-informed and well-regarded: Jerry Parker, a Wapello County supervisor, is still knowledgeable about his county though he hasn't wielded political power for some time. Judge David Blair is revered and well-connected in Elliott County, despite a scandal involving the misappropriation of county-owned gravel. And Johnston Mayor Joe Polisena comes across as firmly in power and attentive to his community. In the authors' view, voters in these counties believed Trump would care for them as Parker, Blair, and Polisena have. Trump offered a “paternalistic social contract” (including no reductions in entitlements) in return for “loyalty and respect.”

That is fair, if condescending. What's unfair is the leap the authors make from observing that these three communities “have a high degree of racial and ethnic homogeneity” to concluding that “Trump promised to protect and provide for *his* people, a category bounded by race.” Trump is notoriously a product of multiethnic and multiracial New York. When he speaks of caring for Americans first, he takes some pains to indicate he means *all* Americans. It's also worth noting that a fair number of the 206 pivot counties have significant percentages of black or Hispanic voters. Ottumwa's population is 15% Hispanic, Johnston's 9%. Besides which, though our ruling classes are keen to lump us into groups by skin color, there has always been a huge degree of cultural diversity among white Americans. Muravchik and Shields do note that their three counties alone have residents of English, German, Irish, Scottish, and Italian descent. Yet the authors still consider their subjects provincial: Trump Democrats, in their telling, have “a moral map...composed of ever-expanding circles of intimacy and community, bounded by culture, ethnic and municipal borders.” As a result they “regard their obligations to newcomers...as relatively weak.” But anyone who travels through pivot counties will be struck by an abundance of proudly displayed American flags. This in itself is evidence of allegiance to a larger national community—one known for being culturally and ethnically diverse. That allegiance seems weaker, and unburned American flags much

scarcer, in the university and college towns whose values the authors find more congenial.

WITH ITS CONVERSATIONAL, FREE-flowing interviews, *Trump's Democrats* aspires to be a worthy successor to the illuminating work of political scientists like Sam Lubell. But it's also the next in a long line of tomes by liberal Democrats urging their fissionary party to hold its various constituency groups together. As I argued in my 2019 book, *How America's Political Parties Change (And How They Don't)*, the Republican Party is built around a core of demographically “typical” Americans who are never a majority. The Democrats, meanwhile, are a coalition of “atypical” demographic groups who together can be a majority. Since the urban riots and violent leftist agitation of the late 1960s, the Democratic Party has been losing support among blue-collar whites. In the pivot counties, Muravchik and Shields are documenting the latest iteration of what should be a familiar problem for Democrats by now.

The authors' solutions are also familiar, and unwelcome to most Democratic primary voters: the party must show more respect for people like the Trump Democrats. It must become less of a pantsuit, more of a baseball cap, party. But, ensconced in academe and familiar with current primaries as they are, Muravchik and Shields know that advice is likely to be met with distaste. “Many will be alienated from the honor culture, casual nepotism, and racial insensitivity that endure in many white working-class communities.” In the 1990s, a Democratic Party suffused with such snobbery but led by a moderate Southerner aware of that liability and shrewd enough to overcome it, managed to win the presidency. Since then, the party has won popular vote pluralities in four of five elections, mostly by ballooning its majorities in coastal California and the far Northeast, but at the cost of losing votes in the Ottumwas, Johnstons, and Elliott Counties of America that it needed to win majorities of the Electoral College. Not necessarily a good tradeoff.

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