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50 Takes on Trump – Rhode Island

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To understand Rhode Island's take on Donald Trump, it is important to first understand the political peculiarities of the nation's smallest state. When it comes to presidential elections, Rhode Island leans strongly Democratic. The last time its four electoral votes appeared in the Republican column was 1984. In 2016, Hillary Clinton beat Trump by over 15 percentage points, maintaining Rhode Island's reputation as a Democratic stronghold. However, as any observer of Rhode Island politics will tell you, all is not as it appears on the surface in the Ocean State.

With two Democratic U.S. Senators, two Democratic U.S. House Members, a Democratic Governor, 64 out of 75 seats in the State House, and 32 out of 38 seats in the State Senate, Rhode Island appears to be one of the bluest states in the nations. And yet, the shades of blue here differ substantially from those just across the border in Massachusetts. Many elected Democrats in this heavily-Catholic state are conservative. According to an analysis by political scientists Boris Shor and Nolan McCarty discussed in the *New York Times*: "The median Democrat in Rhode Island was more conservative than in all but 13 state legislatures, scoring directly between Georgia and Indiana and far to the right of those in Connecticut or Massachusetts." Therefore, while Rhode Island is a one-party state, there are deep ideological divisions within that party. With these divisions come opportunities for political wild cards, such as Providence's former felonious mayor, Buddy Cianci, and Trump.

Despite the party's electoral dominance, Rhode Islanders have little love for the Democratic Party itself. An incredible 47.3 percent of voters are not affiliated with either party, well outpacing the 40.6 percent registered as Democrats and 11.8 percent registered as Republicans. As a result, Rhode Island is the most "elastic" state in the nation. Nate Silver explains an elastic state as one in which voters are "relatively sensitive or responsive to changes in political conditions, such as a change in the national economic mood." This creates the possibility that, in unique circumstances, a significant number of independent voters could swing their vote from the Democratic status quo to a Republican candidate. And what did the presidential campaign of Donald Trump represent, if not a unique circumstance?

A significant shift toward Trump did occur in many Rhode Island towns. As a result, Clinton's totals statewide fell well short of those achieved by Obama in 2008 (-8.7%) and 2012 (-8.3%), as well as John Kerry in 2004 (-5%) and Al Gore in 2000 (-6.6%). This shift was not enough to win a plurality of votes in the state, as it was most pronounced in rural towns that simply did not have the population to counter-balance the massive, 70 percentage point victory for Clinton in Providence, within which live one-fifth of the state's residents.

In the liberal bubble of Providence, there is little recognition of Trump's support in other parts of the state. Immediately following the election and the inauguration, small protests were held at the

State Capitol and students walked out at Brown University. However, there are still no shortage of Trump lawn signs outside of Providence, in more rural, less demographically-diverse towns, such as West Greenwich and Coventry, in which Trump won by 24 and almost 13 percentage points, respectively.

These two towns are in Kent County, which was one of 206 "pivot counties" across the nation that voted for Trump after supporting Obama in both 2008 and 2012. The party registration in Kent demonstrates its role as an elastic county in an elastic state, with 28 percent of those in a recent survey identifying as Democrats, 22 percent as Republicans, and 49 percent as "something else." These "something else" voters shifted their party support and, as a result, Kent County saw drastically different results in 2016. Trump won the county by less than a single percentage point, but this represented a full 20 percentage point swing from the 2012 results and a 17 percent swing from 2008.

Therefore, Kent Country provides an excellent opportunity to focus in on a population that was clearly moved by Trump's candidacy and explore how the support of these Rhode Island Trump voters has changed since the election. The Taubman Center at Brown University conducted a poll of Kent County voters during the first week of April 2017, then repeated the survey during the second week of June 2017. The first iteration found that Trump had a 56 percent approval rate—with 30 percent indicating that he was doing an "excellent job"—even as national polls such as Gallup measured 40 percent approval during the same time period. This poll also found a relatively solid backing for heavily-publicized Trump initiatives, such as his proposed "travel ban" (50% support vs. 36% oppose). Less than three months into his presidency, support for Trump in Kent County appeared relatively firm.

However, only two months later, the second survey indicated declines in support for both the president and his policy initiatives. In Kent County, approval of the president fell to 49 percent— with only 23 percent responding that he was doing an "excellent job." This drop generally mirrors Gallup's national poll taken the same week, which put Trump's approval rating at 37 percent. Support in Kent County for the "travel ban" also dropped a few percentage points from April to June (47% support vs. 37% oppose).

Of course, two data points do not make a trend, nor can they give us anything more than a limited snapshot of political opinions in a small county in a small state. But they do reveal numbers that are historically low for a new president just six months out from his inauguration. They are a warning sign of trouble to come in this state. For without elastic counties like Kent in his corner, Trump will find few friends in Rhode Island.