



Reagan Redux? Trump Eyes Blue-Collar Strategy to Grab Southern Democrat Voters

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To hear Donald Trump tell it, blue-collar workers here are suffering as much as ever, their livelihoods endangered by the familiar combination of foreign competition and U.S. companies eager to hold down labor costs.

It's Trump's mantra. He repeats it again and again at campaign stops like the one he made here last week. A leading contender for the Republican presidential nomination, Trump has made the health of the U.S. manufacturing a cornerstone of his insurgent campaign.

In doing so, Trump is targeting a big pool of potential voters among disaffected blue-collar workers, even if it means alienating the business community and conservative free-market advocates and brings accusations of demagoguery.

He vows to slap penalties on goods produced by U.S. companies outside the country, make it harder for China and others to export their goods, and tear up trade deals that he says hurt the U.S. industry. "I wonder how many Chevrolets are in the middle of Tokyo?" he told the Anderson crowd to applause. "I would say none."

And at the economy-themed Republican debate held Wednesday in Boulder, Colorado., Trump pledged to "bring jobs back" from China and Mexico.

There are signs that Trump's strategy is working.

Polls show that the bulk of Trump's support comes from men who lack a college degree and make less than \$40,000 a year, the kind of workers who once formed the backbone of the U.S. manufacturing economy. They have helped propel Trump to the top of popularity rankings in South Carolina, a key early primary state, where he is outpacing rival Ben Carson.

"Some of the Republicans get so tied up with free trade," said Lee Cole, a Republican attorney from nearby Williamston who attended Trump's event. "Over the past 20 years, we've lost all of our manufacturing jobs," Cole said of his hometown. "Anything that talks about getting some of that back I think really resonates well here."

Government data shows that less than 30 percent of Americans have four-year college degrees and more than half of U.S. workers make less than \$30,000 a year, so at stake is a vast pool of potential voters.

"He's tapped into an uneasiness, and he's done it cleverly," said Chip Felkel, a Republican strategist in Greenville, South Carolina, who is not aligned with Trump. "He's played it to the hilt."

TRUMP DEMOCRATS?

At the Anderson event, Trump talked up his blue-collar support, comparing himself to Franklin Roosevelt. His campaign brings up another name: Ronald Reagan.

Ed McMullen, Trump's campaign strategist in South Carolina, says the billionaire contender has his sights on "Reagan Democrats" - working-class voters who tend to support moderates. Those moderate voters famously switched sides and helped Republican Reagan win the 1980 election and the Trump campaign believes it could happen again in 2016 if he makes it to the general election.

According to a Pew Research Center survey taken late last month, Trump's supporters tend to attend church less frequently than the entire Republican electorate and more often identify themselves as "moderate" or "liberal."

Critics say that Trump is proffering an outdated, simplistic, and overly pessimistic view of the U.S. economy, one that fails to grasp the multi-national complexity of global manufacturing.

Nowhere is that more apparent than in South Carolina where 700 international firms employ 115,900 people, according to State Department of Commerce data. That makes for the highest percentage of private-industry workforce employed by foreign-owned firms.

Just up the road from Trump's stop in Anderson sits a 5-million square foot German-owned BMW plant that employs 8,000. Nearby is a Michelin facility, one of nine in the state owned by the French company. And Swedish automaker Volvo earlier this year announced plans to build a plant near Charleston, that could end up employing 4,000 workers.

"All of these companies are part of the modern global supply chain," says Scott Lincicome, a trade policy expert with the conservative Cato Institute, calling Trump's ideas "completely unmoored from reality."

"It's ironic he would go to the one's country's burgeoning manufacturing hubs to bemoan the state of manufacturing."

Femi Fadeyi, an engineer for German-owned SEW Eurodrive, an industrial equipment firm that has a facility in nearby Lyman, said he moved from Colorado during the height of the recession because of the economic opportunity.

An independent, Fadeyi said Trump made him follow the Republican race, but he remained skeptical.

"I don't understand how Trump plans to actually execute many of these goals - some of which are conflicting," Fadeyi told Reuters.

Still, even as the state's workforce returned to pre-recession levels already in June 2013, sooner than most of the country, it has only recovered 40 percent of manufacturing jobs lost in the downturn, according to Manufacturers' News, Inc., a publisher and compiler of industrial directories and databases. The textile sector has been particularly hit hard, with abandoned mills dotting the landscape around Anderson and Greenville, allowing Trump's message to resonate with many.

Trump is hoping to develop an early momentum in early primaries held February in Iowa and South Carolina and build on that in March in Alabama, Arkansas, Kansas, and Tennessee, all states with sizeable manufacturing sectors accounting for more than 10 of the economy.

"People see all that, see those investments, but there is something going on where they don't personally feel a benefit from it," Felkel said. "Sometimes, it's easier to vote against something than for something."