

TRUCK STOP POLITICS

UNDERSTANDING THE EMERGING FORCE OF WORKING CLASS AMERICA

TOM MULLIKIN

AN EXCERPT FROM PART 4: ENGAGE THE VOTER – DRIVE THE AGENDA

We developed a tool to help quantify the importance and potential impact of working class voters on any election. We focused on manufacturing workers, because of their pivotal place in recent employment and economic trends and their status as a discreet group.

The heart of our quantitative approach is a Domestic Manufacturing Quotient (DMQ), which is the ratio of the number of expected voters in an electoral region that have a direct stake in a manufacturing job relative to the number of votes by which the last election was decided.

If a Congressional or legislative district includes a critical mass of voters who consist of manufacturing employees and their families, one can expect that working class issues in general, and certain manufacturing issues in particular, can play a significant factor in the district's vote.

North Carolina's 11th Congressional District serves as a good example. In 2002 (I'm referring to the last midterm election because there tends to be significantly higher turnout in Presidential election years, so one must make sure not to compare apples and oranges), Representative Charles Taylor won by a total of 25,671 votes – a thirteen percent margin of victory (56% to 43%). For a candidate looking to secure electoral victory over Taylor, it would not be necessary to change the minds of all 25,671 voters. If

just over half that total – 12,836 voters – decide to cast a different vote, Representative Taylor’s opponent would have been elected.

In the 2005 American Community Survey, the U.S. Census Bureau estimated that 39,877 people were employed in manufacturing in the 11th District. If we assume that every manufacturing job supports 1.7 voters (employees and spouse or voting-age dependent), then we can calculate that North Carolina’s 11th District has 67,790 eligible voters who directly depend on the future of manufacturing in their district.

It is noteworthy that in this district, the census indicates that 15,416 workers have lost their jobs in manufacturing since the 2000 census. Using the same 1.7 multiplier, this adds another 26,207 voters who have reason to focus on the candidates’ positions on manufacturing issues. However, for the purposes of this example, let’s conservatively focus on those voters with a current and direct stake in manufacturing.

The 11th District had a voter registration rate in 2006 of approximately 97 percent. Therefore, we can assume that 65,757 registered voters will be directly affected by the manufacturing economy and have a direct stake in its health.

Using this figure in the Domestic Manufacturing Quotient formula, we get the following result:

$$\text{Manufacturing Voters} / \Delta \text{ of last election} = \text{DMQ}$$
$$65,757 / 25,671 = 2.56 = \text{DMQ}$$

In other words, these “manufacturing voters” account for twice the difference between the incumbent and his opponent in the 2002 election, and more than four times the number of votes needed to change the outcome of that election.

The influence of manufacturing issues in elections can be broadened by taking into account manufacturing’s strong multiplier effects throughout an area’s economy. One rule of thumb holds that for each manufacturing job in a region, four additional jobs are created and supported.ⁱ

Based on this we can calculate what is termed a Broader Manufacturing Quotient (BMQ). This brings into the equation voters whose economic livelihoods and well-being are linked through direct spending of the high manufacturing wages with local retail merchants, the increased taxes off of the high manufacturing payrolls to pay for government employees such as teachers, and through supplies and raw materials purchased through local vendors and suppliers.

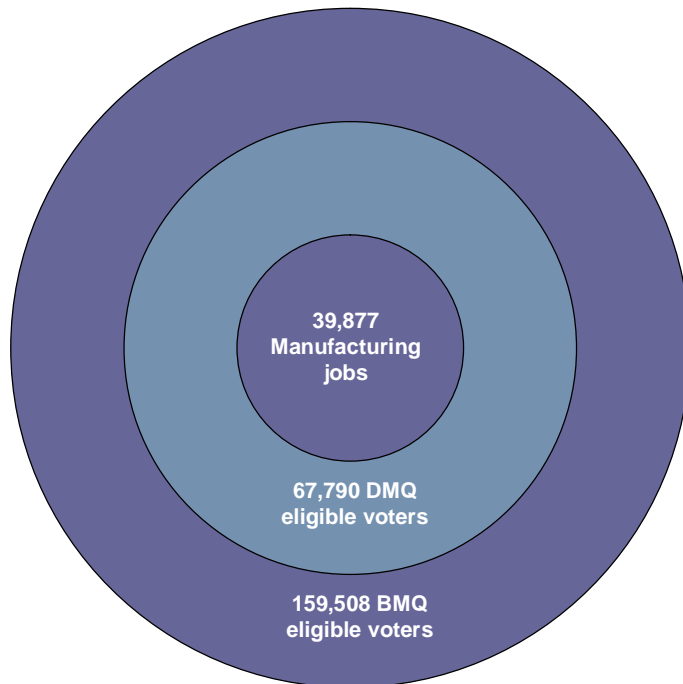
All of these merchants, suppliers, vendors and public sector employees are also voters who can be made aware of how their economic well-being is linked to that of local

manufacturing. So the BMQ enables us to broaden the political scope and while focusing the message on a much more diverse electorate than just factory workers – even while showing the broader community’s stake in the continued strength of the local manufacturing base.

Returning to our example of the North Carolina 11th Congressional District, this widens the political playing field to encompass approximately 159,508 eligible voters, or 151,532 registered voters who make up the broader manufacturing voters.

$$\text{Broader Manufacturing Voters} / \Delta \text{ of last election} = \text{BMQ}$$
$$151,532 / 28,521 = 5.31 = \text{BMQ}$$

In other words, these manufacturing voters account for five times the difference between the incumbent and his opponent in the 2004 election, and more than ten times the number of votes needed to change the outcome of that election. Given that only 290,897 people voted in the 2004 election, the broader manufacturing voters have the potential to account for more than 50% of the vote in the district.



2002: Rep. Taylor won by 25,671 votes

Moore&VanAllen

Fig. 4-2 Votes Tied to Manufacturing in NC-11

As I mentioned in Part 3, the Democratic candidate in the 2006 election, Heath Shuler, hammered Representative Taylor for his failure to vote against CAFTA, and spoke repeatedly about protecting the jobs of manufacturing workers in Western North Carolina. Shuler captured 54 percent of the vote, to Taylor's 46 percent, defeating the incumbent by just over 17,000 votes. In fact, Shuler was only one of two Democratic candidates for Congress in 10 southern states that was able to defeat a Republican incumbent.ⁱⁱ

If we look back to the previous midterm election in 2002, Taylor had won that race by 25,671 votes. From the perspective of the D.C. pundits, who assume that all the variables have remained the same, one might begin looking for where these votes went. Yet something else happened in 2006. Voter turnout increased almost 15 percent from 2002 to 2006 – some 28,500 votes; more than enough to shift the balance of this election. Something overcame all those excuses that voters typically have and made this election a “chore” they believed was worth performing.

The point I'm trying to make is this: in a district like North Carolina's 11th district, an informed and activated manufacturing electorate has the potential to deliver more than 65,000 votes to one candidate or the other, easily making the difference in this race.

And it's clear that the electorate in this district was informed and activated. Shortly before the 2006 midterm elections, we conducted a poll of 400 registered voters in North Carolina's 11th Congressional District. 40 percent of the respondents identified themselves as Republican, with Democrats and Independents accounting for 28 and 27 percent, respectively. Over 50 percent of respondents' house-hold income was no more than \$49,000 – note that the national median household income was \$46,326. Nine percent of these voters were unemployed. Full-time jobs were held by 49 percent, and 8 percent had part-time jobs.ⁱⁱⁱ 25 percent of them had experienced some sort of job loss in their family since 2000, and in half of those cases, the layoff had had caused serious or very serious economic harm to their families. Almost 60 percent of these individuals believed that American workers, in general, were in a weaker job and financial situation than in 2002 – only 14 percent believed the situation had improved! With the experience and perspective of these voters in mind, what follows is what they told us about the issues that matter to them.

An amazing 80 percent of voters indicated they were aware that U.S. manufacturing had lost over 3 million jobs over the past several years. 87 percent stated that the loss of these jobs and failure to enforce trade agreements were important to them. When asked if Congress should place a renewed emphasis on the concerns of working Americans, 92

percent said “Yes.” And yet less than 20 percent of those same voters believed that Congress would take any such action. That is a sad indictment of our elected officials in Washington, D.C. These voters are just waiting for a candidate – and a Congress – that will prove them wrong.

When we asked these North Carolina voters to what extent a number of issues were important or very important to determining their vote, they responded:

- Medicare / Social Security – 88%
- Loss of Manufacturing Jobs – 86%
- Price of Gasoline – 82%
- Relocation of Jobs to Other Countries – 77%
- Personal or Family Financial Situation – 73%
- Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA) – 53%

Clearly, the voters were aware of and concerned about issues that affected their wallets and pocketbooks – their ability to provide for their families.

And so how did this awareness and concern manifest itself? Aside from the direct effect on the ballots, a fourth of voters indicated they had participated in some sort of grassroots political activity leading up to the 2006 elections. Executives and managers from local manufacturers mailed letters to the candidates urging action on issues that affect their ability to keep jobs in the state. Local officials in Polk, Yancey, Graham, Clay, and Cherokee counties memorialized their strong concern and support for manufacturing in their counties, cities, and towns, by urging their delegations to the state legislature and Congress to take a stand for trade policies that promote fair trade and competition. Although we don’t have specific exit polls for the district, voters across the nation placed the economy among the top three causes of concern and reasons for voting among voters; 39 percent of voters said the economy was an extremely important factor in their vote. Iraq did not make the top three.

Now obviously, political strategists and candidates have been looking at districts such as North Carolina’s 11th and Georgia’s 12th Congressional Districts as political battle-grounds, but I contend that they have underestimated the effectiveness of mobilizing the working class voters and failed to grasp the perspective these voters have of the political landscape. Along with the specific quantitative measures I outlined above, broader employment trends, income trends, factory closings, political volatility, demo-graphic profiles and many other factors can be woven together to portray districts that may be primed for a political temblor.

ⁱ Press Release, U.S. Senator Lindsey Graham, Senators Graham and Clinton Launch Manufacturing Caucus (June 14, 2005).

ⁱⁱ Tim Whitmire, *1 House Victory Offers Strategy for Dems*, ASSOCIATED PRESS (Nov. 11, 2006). The article does not specify who the other victorious Democrat was, but would be either Ron Klein in Florida's 22nd District, or John Yarmuth in Kentucky's 3rd District.

ⁱⁱⁱ The remainder identified themselves as retired.