

NEW JERSEY DATA

# These 4 towns did something this election they haven't done for nearly 40 years

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By **Carla Astudillo**, [castudillo@njadvancemedia.com](mailto:castudillo@njadvancemedia.com),

For 36 years, they were loyal to the Republican Party, always falling in line to back its candidates for governor no matter the odds. They went for Tom Kean, Jim Courter, Christie Todd Whitman, Bret Schundler, Doug Forrester and Chris Christie.

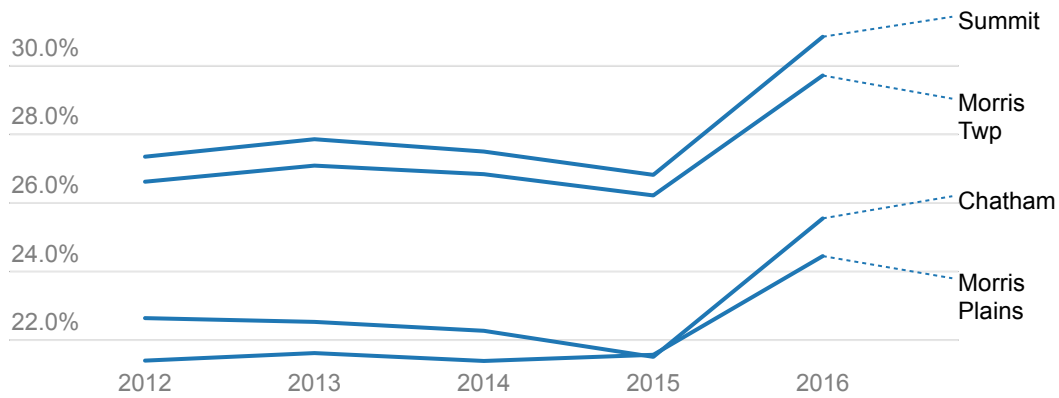
Then, in 2017, something seismic happened. For the first time since at least 1981, they turned blue.

An NJ Advance Media analysis of election data from the Rutgers NJ Databook and the state Division of Elections found four towns -- Summit, Chatham Borough, Morris Plains and Morris Township -- that bucked their GOP roots and opted for Democrat Phil Murphy.

Except for in Morris Plains, the race against Republican Kim Guadagno wasn't even all that close. Murphy won by 13 points in Summit, seven points in Morris Township and six points in Chatham Borough, according to unofficial tallies. He won by 0.8 points in Morris Plains.

There were signs a year ago that these four towns might be changing their allegiances. The number of voters registered as Democrats spiked across the board, and all four of them voted for Hillary Clinton instead of Donald Trump, who went on to win the election.

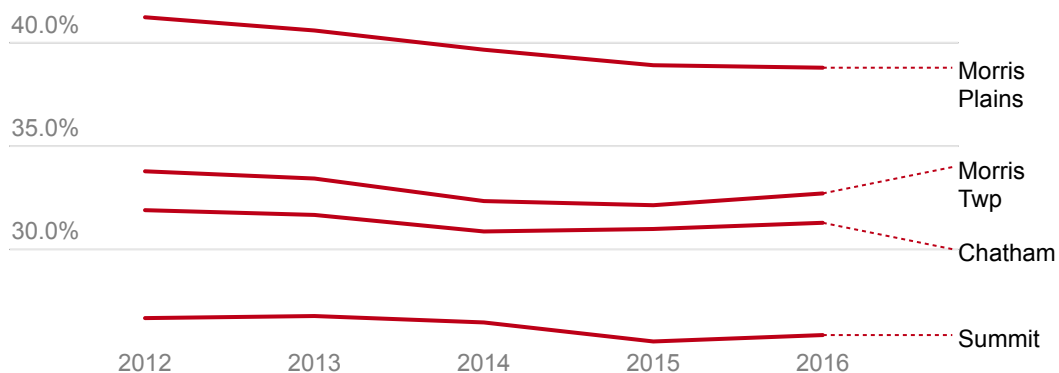
## Registered Democrats



Source: Rutgers NJ Data Book • Created with Datawrapper

By comparison, the percentage of registered Republicans changed up or down only slightly.

## Registered Republicans



Source: Rutgers NJ Data Book • Created with Datawrapper

In addition, while Morris Plains and Chatham Borough voted for Mitt Romney and John McCain in their respective elections, Summit voted for Barack Obama twice, and Morris Township voted for Obama once, in 2008.

So what explains the political change of heart?

Census data shows that while all four towns have grown slightly in the last ten years, they remain extremely wealthy, white-majority communities.

Matthew Hale, a political science professor at Seton Hall University, said Republican voters in the four towns are more moderate - conservative on fiscal issues, but more liberal on social issues. That made them ripe for flipping with the advent of President Trump's GOP firebrand.

"I would suspect that many of them feel like the Republican Party has abandoned them," Hale said. "That it's now the party of the far right and Donald Trump."

While canvassing this year, Saily Avelenda and John Hartinger, both members of NJ 11th for Change, could sense voters did not feel like their values were represented in government.

The grassroots activist group started about 11 months ago, with the hope of making local races with long-term incumbents in the 11th congressional district more competitive. Morris Plains, Chatham Borough and Morris Township are part of that district, while Summit belongs to the 7th.

"Some of the older, moderate Republican residents, they see what's going on, and then they say, 'That's not what I meant what I say moderate!' " Avelenda said.

However, it's unlikely these towns can be permanently counted in the Democratic column.

Ben Dworkin, director of the Rebovich Institute for New Jersey Politics at Rider University, attributes it as part of a "double whammy" that benefitted Democrats this election.

First was the "Trump Effect," which mobilized voters to turn against the Republican party. Second, Christie, the incumbent Republican governor, is extremely unpopular with voters.

"Chris Christie wasn't on the ballot, but he might as well have been," Dworkin said.

That made it a tall task for Christie's lieutenant governor, Kim Guadagno, to recast herself as a new, refreshed brand of Republicanism in the state, said Carl Golden, analyst with the William J. Hughes Center for Public Policy at Stockton University.

In order to win these voters back, Golden said, the GOP has to pay more attention to the local issues that affect these towns.

"It does tell you something that these towns were pretty Republican for a long, long time," Golden said. "It would suggest that voters were once pleased with their government. It's not something that [Republicans] can take for granted."

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