

Donald Trump, Professional Wrestling, and the Electoral Geography of Vengeance and Redemption

WrestlePosium I 2020

John Heppen, *University of Wisconsin, River Falls,*

David Beard, *University of Minnesota Duluth*

Cartography by Matt Millett University of Wisconsin River Falls

Overview

- We will outline the connection between Trump and Professional Wrestling.
- We will hypothesize that Trump's connection to wrestling culture shapes his political messaging.
 - We will outline three features of "wrestling rhetoric" and we will illustrate aspects of Trump's political messaging that share these features.
- We will hypothesize that regions of the country in which wrestling is popular will be regions of the country in which Trump won the popular vote.
 - We will map attendance at WWE events; regions in which a higher proportion of the population attend wrestling events, we predict, will be regions where a higher proportion of the electorate voted for Trump.



Donald Trump
Wrestlemania
IV

Trump's History with the WWE: Pre-Politics

- Trump as commercial partner:
 - Trump Plaza hosted Wrestlemania IV (1988) & V (89) in Atlantic City.
 - Trump was interviewed during Wrestlemania VII in Los Angeles (1991) and XX New York (2004)
- Trump as character in WWE narratives:
 - Trump was part of the Battle of the Billionaires for Wrestlemania 23 (2007) in Detroit. Proxies for Trump and Vince McMahon wrestled each other.
 - Trump buys *Raw* from owner Vince McMahon in 2009 in order to give fans their moneys' worth. Plot line ended quickly.



Donald Trump
Wrestlemania
23



Donald
Trump
Buying Raw
2009

Trump's History with the WWE: In Politics

- Trump contributed to Linda McMahon's US Senate campaigns.
- McMahons' contributed to Trump and the Republican Party.
- Linda McMahon served in Trump's Cabinet from 2017-2019.
- She left the cabinet to take a position with America First a Pro-Trump Political Action Committee.

Trump's Presidential Campaign

Others have commented on Trump's media savvy.

- In 2015 and 2016 Trump provided Cable television networks and twitter with free content.
- Trump benefitted from an estimated \$5 billion in Free Media Time.

We believe Trump received that media coverage in part because he provided content. He appealed to a segment of the American electorate the way the WWE does.



McMahon
Family and
Donald
Trump

Hypotheses

- We believe that Trump learns to communicate with audiences, in part, in his years affiliated with the WWE. As a presidential candidate, he deploys a “wrestling rhetoric” that makes his candidacy appealing to fans of wrestling.
 - We will define that “wrestling rhetoric.”
- We believe that his history with the WWE and his “wrestling rhetoric” predicts some of his success electorally.
 - We will analyze Trump’s electoral results against the popularity of WWE wrestling events in the Markets (Multi-County MSA) WWE had live events from 2015 to November 2016.

A “Wrestling Rhetoric”

We are not the first scholars or commentators to note that wrestling, as a televised genre, resembles politics and political rhetoric.



A “Wrestling Rhetoric”

Our wrestling rhetoric has three dimensions:

The ways that the wrestler addresses other wrestlers

The ways that the wrestler addresses the interviewer

The ways that the wrestler addresses the audience



The wrestler addresses other wrestlers

Wrestlers use “trash talk,” addressed to their opponent, defined as:

“boastful comments about the self or insulting comments about an opponent that are delivered by a competitor typically before or during a competition.”

(Yip, J. A., Schweitzer, M. E., & Nurmohamed, S., 2018. Trash-talking:

Competitive incivility motivates rivalry, performance, and unethical behavior. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 144, 125–144)

This trash talk serves to assert dominance over the competition. Performing this dominance for the audience builds “heat,” builds interest in the audience. Generates Pops.

Close Reading: Wrestling Trash Talks

Chris Jericho and The Rock, Royal Rumble 2002

Jericho: - "On top of that, everybody's talking about facing you at WrestleMania as if it's some kind of a foregone conclusion that you're gonna beat me this Sunday - as if I'm some kind of a fluke champion, or a transitional champion, but they can all go to hell if they think that! And all of you can go to hell if you think that! But most importantly, Rock, you can go to hell, too. Because there's something a lot more painful than any beating you can get, Rock, and that is the truth - because the truth hurts! The truth hurts, Rock, and the truth is you had the chance to become the Undisputed champ last month at Vengeance, but you failed! You were beaten by me! And you wanna talk about facing the Undertaker or Steve Austin at WrestleMania - you can face anybody you want at WrestleMania, but it won't be for this Championship! Because this championship is not yours, Rock, this championship is mine - it's mine - it's all mine - it's all mine - and the truth is that **Chris Jericho is the most overlooked champion in WWF history!** But you know what else is the truth, Rock? At WrestleMania, I will still be the champion - because this is my championship - this is my championship, dammit, and this is my show, and this is my--"

Trump March 28, 2019, Grand Rapids Michigan

"Little pencil neck Adam Schiff," the president said.

"He has the smallest, thinnest neck I've ever seen," the president added, calling the Democrats "sick people."

Audience later chanted "Lock Them Up"

Close Reading: Wrestling Trash Talks

Chris Jericho and The Rock, Royal Rumble 2002

Rock: - "Whoa-whoa-whoa-whoa-whoa! Let the Rock clarify something to you, Undisputed Champion or not, this is not your show ... this is SmackDown!, this is The Rock's show! And what you're failing to realize is everybody is talking about WrestleMania, facing the Rock, for one reason: because they know, them in the back, they know, the guys in the back, they know, them, the millions ... and **millions of the Rock's fans, they know that the Rock ... is better than you. You see the guys in the back know it, everybody around the world knows it, you know it - and you see, Chris Jericho, the truth, it does hurt - it really, really hurts -** but not as much as the Rock is going to hurt you this Sunday at Royal Rumble. If you smell--"

Jericho: - "No! No, No, No, No, No! This is not a joke! I am not a joke! I am serious! And you will not look past me, you stupid son of a bitch!"

Trump: "Over the last week I have watched Lyin' Ted become more and more unhinged as he is unable to react under the pressure and stress of losing, in all cases by landslides, the last six primary elections – in fact, coming in last place in all but one of them, Today's ridiculous outburst only proves what I have been saying for a long time, that Ted Cruz does not have the temperament to be President of the United States."

The wrestler addresses the interviewer

For decades, professional “interviewers” like Mean Gene Okerlund were the voice of the media for the WWE. Wrestlers were interviewed to build “heat” for future matches.

“A wrestling show is a news program in terms of its documentary style: presented live, like a news broadcast, the wrestling reporters interview wrestlers as though they are politicians arguing with other politicians.” [“Wrestling and Popular Culture,” Dalbir S. Sehmbly, *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 4.1 (2002)]

As with the trash talk, when the wrestler addresses the interviewer, he is performing for the audience. As Spencer Hall notes,

“In an over-the-top medium like professional wrestling with exaggerated highs and abysmal lows, Okerlund served as the level. He kept everything on balance, and gave the exact measure of real gravitas to a moment no matter how absurd that moment might be [...] while never forgetting to mention that the show was at the National Guard Armory in Nashville this coming Saturday” (“‘Mean’ Gene Okerlund took wrestling seriously, so we could too,” SBS Nation, <https://www.sbnation.com/wrestling/2019/1/2/18165293/mean-gene-okerdun-wwe-interviews-took-wrestling-seriously-so-we-could-too>)

Trump’s understanding of the relationship between the media and the star may have been conditioned through his experience in the WWE.



Close Reading: Wrestling Promos

Mean Gene interviews Randy “Macho Man” Savage	Analysis
<p>GENE OKERLUND: In the World Wrestling Federation, here is a man that has not only turned it around 180 degrees...</p> <p>RANDY SAVAGE: 180 Degrees!!!</p> <p>OKERLUND: ...but he's gone another 360...</p> <p>SAVAGE: Another 360!!!</p> <p>OKERLUND: ...and then another 180...</p>	<p>At this point in the promo, I'm not sure Randy Savage is not on some form of medication.</p>
<p>OKERLUND: Macho Man Randy Savage. You have changed over the last couple of months like I cannot believe, sir.</p> <p>SAVAGE: I'm a chameleon. Yeah huh huh.</p> <p>OKERLUND: A chameleon?</p> <p>SAVAGE: Uh huh yeah! I'm talking about the beat goes on, yeah. And the beat goes on, yeah. And the beat goes on! And the videoscope, yeah, I am looking right into you right now. Macho madness, right now. Sugar is sweet and so is honey. Macho madness is on a roll and it can't be stopped, no. Elizabeth understands what I'm talking about, yeah uh huh!</p>	<p>At no point does Okerlund let anything that the Macho Man says, no matter how incomprehensible, become anything to criticize.</p>
<p><i>OKERLUND: Why is it, Macho Man, when I sit and talk to you, stand and talk to you for that matter, that I think of old Sonny and Cher hits? Why is that?</i></p> <p><i>SAVAGE: Unbelievable. Time Distortions. Space is the place, Mean Gene Okerlund. Go down that lonesome highway, yeah! But don't be hypnotized, no. Reincarnation doesn't have to be. You can concentrate and you can, uh, mental telepathy, yeah!</i></p> <p><i>OKERLUND: But the beat goes on?</i></p> <p><i>SAVAGE: But the beat goes on.</i></p>	<p>In fact, by pulling in the Sonny and Cher reference, Mean Gene is making the incomprehensible sensible.</p> <p>The media's role is to make the star make sense, not critique them for not making sense.</p>

Close Reading: Wrestling Promos

Mean Gene interviews Randy “Macho Man” Savage

OKERLUND: That beat in particular has got to include, maybe the Honky Tonk Man, the Intercontinental Champion of the World. I know you're not getting along real well with member of the Bobby Heenan family, Macho Man. Not at all.

SAVAGE: Let me tell you something right now. Talking about the greatest Intercontinental Champion that ever lived, the Honky Tonk Man is out of line, yeah! Cause I am the greatest Intercontinental Heavyweight Champion that ever lived, and I'm the greatest professional wrestler that ever lived. And I'm living now, yeah! Right now, uh huh.

OKERLUND: You know, he makes no bones about making the proclamation that he is, I'm talking about the Honky Tonk Man, the greatest Intercontinental Champion of all time.

SAVAGE: He says I can't sing and I can't dance, but I can make romance, yeah! Right there the fork in the road. I said go right, Elizabeth said go left. I went right and then, and then, I understand what the situation was. I went over that one bridge, yeah. And then, when I crossed that bridge I found out that I was on the right side. And I said Elizabeth follow me, yeah! Because I'm going straight to the top! The stars, yeah the stars. One shining star in the night shining brighter than all the other ones! And I'm talking light years away, yeah.

Analysis

Okerlund generates the opposition, creates the frame which places Savage and “The Honky Tonk Man.”

Frankly, Mene Gene Okerlund carries, structures the promo for Savage, who appears at least media-unsavvy, perhaps incoherent.

A Trump tweeting about “Covfefe” needs an Okerlund in the media.

Close Reading: Wrestling Promos

Mean Gene interviews Randy “Macho Man” Savage	Analysis
<p><i>OKERLUND: You're talking Macho madness.</i></p> <p><i>SAVAGE: Macho madness, yeah. Macho madness rolling, yeah. You thought so, but I know so. And Macho madness is coming straight at you, Honky Tonk Man. And I like it, yeah! Cause I'm on a roll and I ain't stoppin', yeah! Elizabeth go right and I'm going left!</i></p>	<p>Okerlund pulls Savage back on brand message.</p>
<p><i>OKERLUND: Can I ask a question, Macho Man?</i></p> <p><i>SAVAGE: No more questions!</i></p> <p><i>OKERLUND: I'm sorry about that. Macho Man Randy Savage!</i></p>	<p>Despite the fact that Okerlund has provided all of the structure for this promo, Macho Man signals that he's in control at the end.</p>

- Trump's interviews on Fox News with Sean Hannity and others provide him with his own Mean Gene Okerlund.
- Fox News provides Trump with the Structure.
- Recall Fox News coverage of Trump after June Summit with Kim Jung Un.

Trump and Acosta: No Okerlund

Jim Acosta: But let me ask, if I — if I may ask one other question —

Donald Trump: Okay, that's enough.

Jim Acosta: Mr. President, if I may — if I may ask one other question.

Donald Trump: Okay, Peter, go ahead.

Jim Acosta: Are you worried —

Donald Trump: That's enough. That's enough. That's enough.

Jim Acosta: Mr. President, I didn't — well, I was going to ask one other. The other folks that had —

Donald Trump: That's enough. That's enough.

Jim Acosta: Pardon me, ma'am, I'm — Mr. President —

Donald Trump: Excuse me, that's enough.



RAW

The wrestler addresses the audience

Finally, wrestlers address the fans directly, staring into the camera, yelling into the stands:

“[T]he wrestler must look out to the fans and into the camera to fully express his charisma and to declare his threatening persona [...] In wrestling, the performers look and interact [...] with the audience in the arena and at home. Wrestlers salute fans, acknowledge placards, and deliver their messages to the fans and the other wrestlers through direct address.” [“Wrestling and Popular Culture,” Dalbir S. Sehmbly, *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 4.1 (2002)]

We believe that Trump’s interactions with his base is structured in this way.

Close Reading: Addressing the Audience

Chris Jericho on WWE Raw, 1999

August 21, 2015 Trump Rally in Mobile, Alabama

And I am the new Millennium for the World Wrestling Federation! Now for those of you who don't know me, I am Chris Jericho - your - your new hero, your party host and most importantly the most charismatic showman to ever enter your living rooms via a television screen! And for those of you who DO know me, well, all hail the Ayatollah of Rock and Rollah! Now when you think of the new Millennium, you think of an event so gigantic that it changes the course of history. You think of the dawning of a new era. In this case, the dawning of a New Era in the WWF! Thank you - thank you!"

Crowd chanting "Rocky."

"A new era is what this once proud and profitable company sorely needs! What was once a captivating, trendsetting program, has now deteriorated into a cliched - let's be honest - BORING SNOOZEFEST that is in dire need of a knight in shining armour! And that's why I'm here! Chris Jericho has come to SAVE the WWF! Now let's go over the facts. Television ratings - downward spiral. Pay-per-view buyrates - plummeting. Mainstream acceptance - nonexistent. And reactions of the live crowd - complete and utter silence! And I know why you're silent! You're silent because you're embarrassed to be here! And quite honestly, I'm embarrassed for you! And the reason why you're embarrassed is because of the steady stream of uninteresting, untalented, mediocre 'sports entertainers' where you're forced to cheer for and care for - no wonder you're not cheering! You could care less about every single idiot in that dressing room...and especially this idiot in the centre of the ring. You people have been led to believe that mediocrity is excellence. Uh uh...JERICHO IS EXCELLENCE. And now, for the first time in WWF history, you have a man who can entertain you! You have a man who is good enough for you! You have a man who can make you jump up off your chairs, raise your filthy fat little hands in the air and scream 'Go Jericho Go! Go Jericho Go! Go Jericho Go!' Thank you"

"WE HAVE A COUNTRY NOT DOING SO WELL. WE HAVE POLITICIANS... WHO DO NOT HAVE A CLUE. THEY HAVE -- THEY ARE ALL TALK AND NO ACTION. WHAT IS HAPPENING TO THIS COUNTRY IS DISGRACEFUL. "

"THE REASON I HAVE THIS REALLY INCREDIBLE ENTHUSIASM... IS BECAUSE I DO KNOW WHAT I'M DOING, AND I DON'T SAY THAT IN A BRAGGADOCIO WAY. YOU PEOPLE ARE LOOKING FOR SOMEONE WHO KNOWS WHAT HE IS DOING."



What is the “Wrestling Attendance Ratio”

- Taking WWE attendance statistics as tracked by the *Wrestling Observer*, we divide
 - the attendance at a wrestling performance
 - by the population of the Metropolitan Statistical Area of the venue in which the wrestling performance was held.
 - standardized measure based on the attendance at the event in ratio to the population of the metropolitan area (per 1,000)

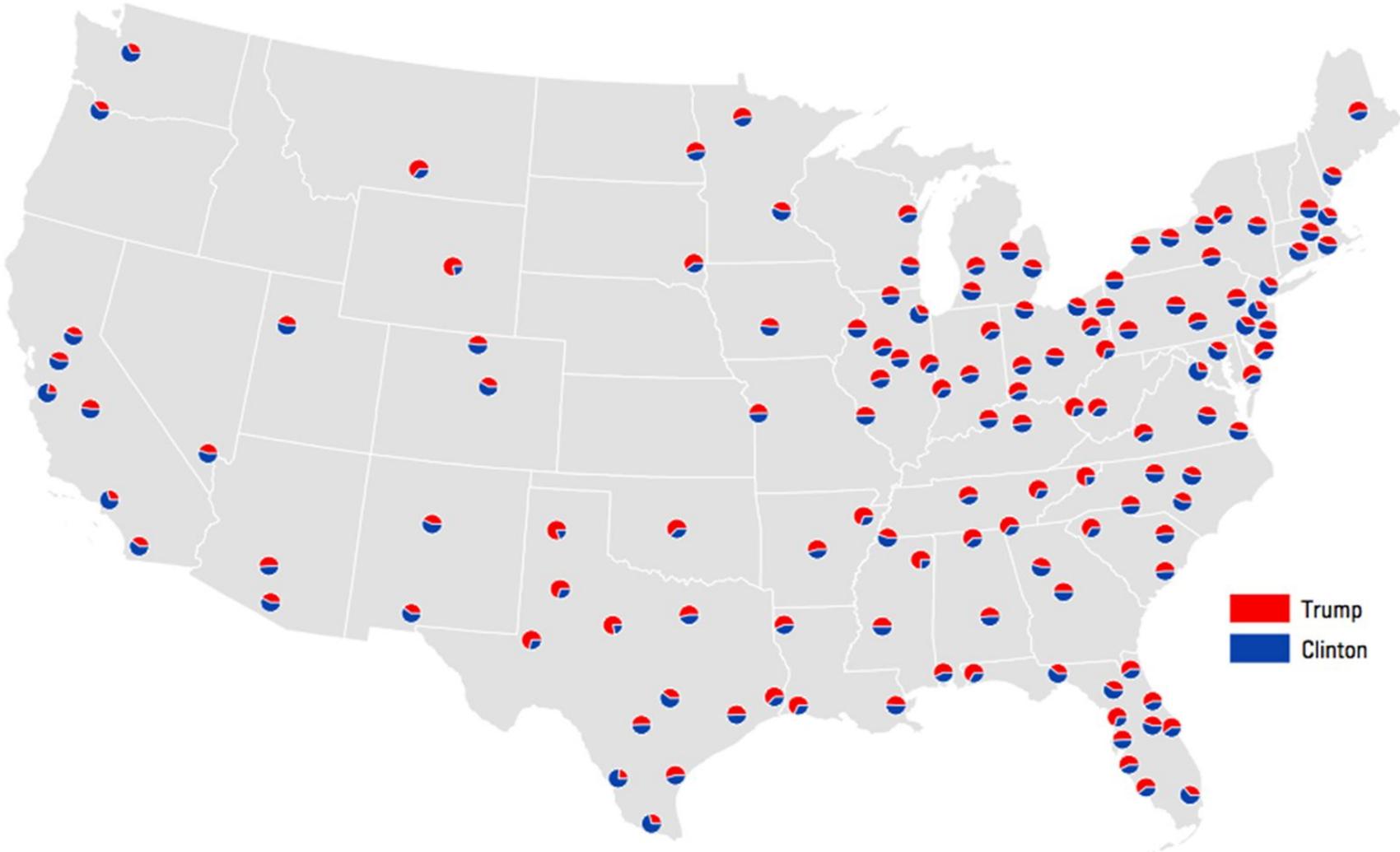
Highest Attendance Ratios 2015

Metropolitan Area	Population 2015	Attendance	Attendance Ratio
Beltrami County, MN	44,442	2,500	56.25309392
San Jose-Sunnyvale-Santa Clara, CA Metro Area	1,968,578	98,576	50.07472399
Danville, IL Metro Area	78,990	3,500	44.30940625
Tupelo, MS Metro Area	82,910	3,500	42.2144494
Corpus Christi, TX Metro Area	4527,35	18,500	40.86275636
Las Cruces, NM Metro Area	213,567	8,000	37.45897072
Ocean City, NJ Metro Area	94,843	3,100	32.6855962
Billings, MT Metro Area	168,164	5,000	29.73287981
Charleston, WV Metro Area	220,375	6,500	29.49517867
Lake Charles, LA Metro Area	205,495	6,000	29.1977907
Johnson City, TN Metro Area	200,607	5,500	27.41679004
Huntington-Ashland, WV-KY-OH Metro Area	361,357	9,200	25.45958706

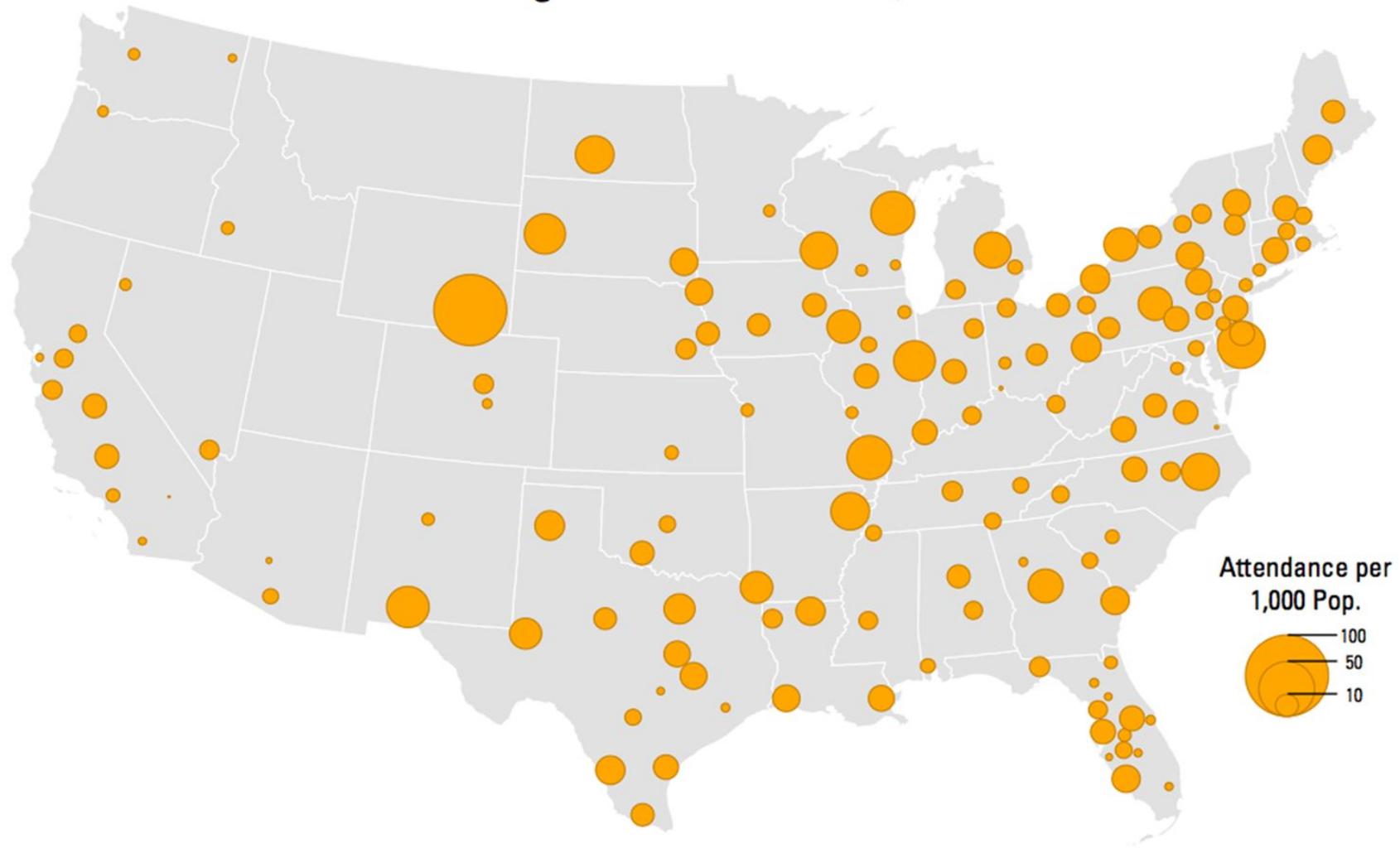
Lowest Attendance Ratios 2015

Table X Lowest Attendance Ratios 2015			
Metropolitan Area	Population 2015	Attendance	Attendance Ratio
North Port-Sarasota-Bradenton, FL Metro Area	768,013	766	0.997378951
Palm Bay-Melbourne-Titusville, FL Metro Area	567,934	750	1.320575982
Portland-Vancouver-Hillsboro, OR-WA Metro Area	2,384,807	3,200	1.341827662
Gainesville, FL Metro Area	276,583	400	1.446220484
Miami-Fort Lauderdale-West Palm Beach, FL Metro Area	6,001,717	9,500	1.582880366
Virginia Beach-Norfolk-Newport News, VA-NC Metro Area	1,723,468	3,000	1.740676357
Grand Rapids-Wyoming, MI Metro Area	1,038,337	2,000	1.926156922
Charlotte-Concord-Gastonia, NC-SC Metro Area	2,424,643	5,200	2.144645624
Washington-Arlington-Alexandria, DC-VA-MD-WV Metro Area	6,078,469	16,400	2.698047814
Houston-The Woodlands-Sugar Land, TX Metro Area	6,647,465	20,969	3.154435563
Phoenix-Mesa-Scottsdale, AZ Metro Area	4,567,857	14,500	3.174355064
Stockton-Lodi, CA Metro Area	72,3496	25,00	3.455444121
Detroit-Warren-Dearborn-Ann Arbor, MI Metro Area	4,227,522	15,000	3.484679500

2016 Presidential Election Results at 2015 WWE Event Sites



Wrestling Attendance Ratio, 2016



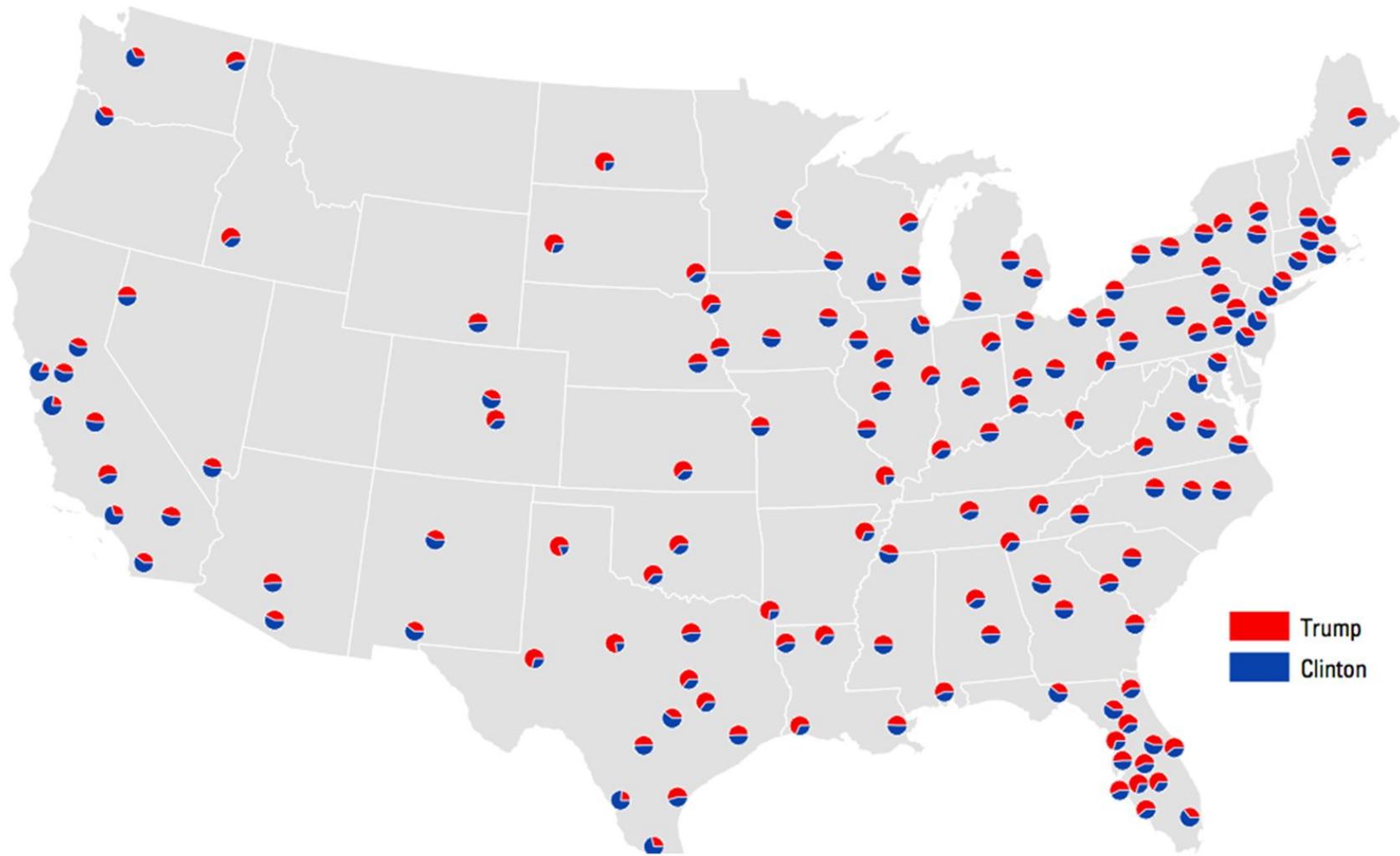
Highest Attendance Ratio 2016

Metropolitan Area	Population 2016	Attendance	Attendance Ratio
Laramie, WY	30,816	2,500	81.13
Pike County, Kentucky, USA	65,024	4,400	67.67
Ocean City, NJ Metro Area	94,430	3,700	39.18
Cape Girardeau, MO-IL Metro Area	97,443	3,500	35.92
Green Bay, WI Metro Area	318,236	11,000	34.57
Las Cruces, NM Metro Area	214,207	6,800	31.74
Rapid City, SD Metro Area	145,661	4,500	30.89
Danville, IL Metro Area	78,111	2,400	30.73
Jonesboro, AR Metro Area	129,858	3,500	26.95
Bismarck, ND Metro Area	131,635	3,500	26.59
Greenville, NC Metro Area	177,220	4,600	25.96
La Crosse-Onalaska, WI-MN Metro Area	136,936	3,500	25.56
Saginaw, MI Metro Area	192,326	4,800	24.96

Lowest Attendance Ratios 2016

Metropolitan Area	Population 2016	Attendance	Attendance Ratio
Riverside-San Bernardino-Ontario, CA Metro Area	4,527,837	1,000	0.22
Virginia Beach-Norfolk-Newport News, VA-NC Metro Area	1,726,907	1,000	0.58
Cincinnati, OH-KY-IN Metro Area	2,165,139	1,500	0.69
Phoenix-Mesa-Scottsdale, AZ Metro Area	4,661,537	6,000	1.29
North Port-Sarasota-Bradenton, FL Metro Area	788,457	1,250	1.59
Miami-Fort Lauderdale-West Palm Beach, FL Metro Area	6,066,387	10,000	1.65
San Francisco-Oakland-Hayward, CA Metro Area	4,679,166	8,000	1.71
Ocala, FL Metro Area	349,020	600	1.72
Spokane-Spokane Valley, WA Metro Area	556,634	1,000	1.80
San Diego-Carlsbad, CA Metro Area	3,317,749	6,000	1.81
Austin-Round Rock, TX Metro Area	2,056,405	4,000	1.95
Sebring, FL Metro Area	100,917	200	1.98
Atlanta-Sandy Springs-Roswell, GA Metro Area	5,789,700	11,580	2.00

2016 Presidential Election Results at 2016 WWE Event Sites



Wrestling Attendance and Trump Vote

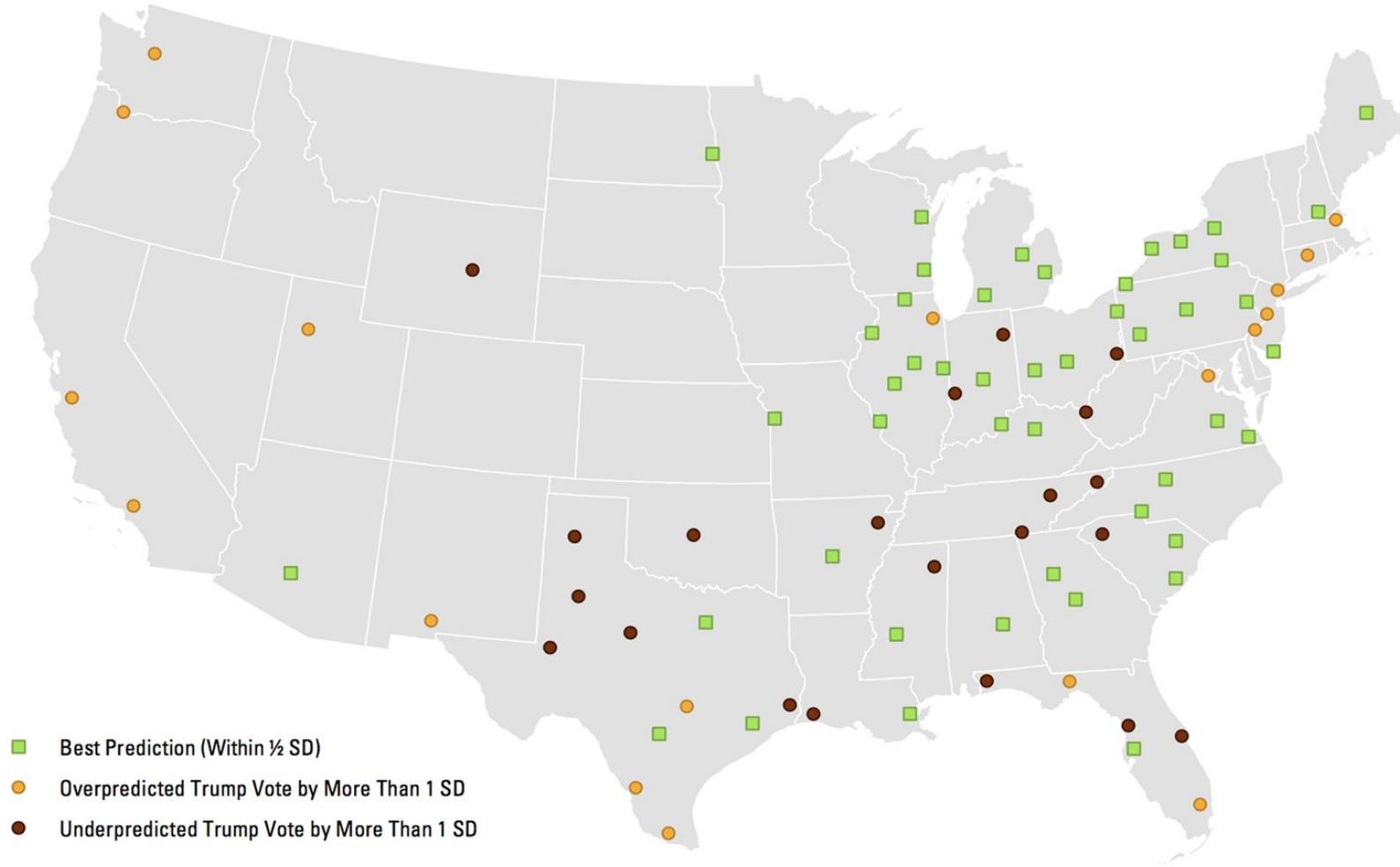
We hypothesized that a high “wrestling ratio,” indicating a high popularity of wrestling in a community, would predict popularity of Trump.

- Trump and Clinton vote consolidated by county into MSA's
- Allow regression analysis with Trump vote as dependent variable and Attendance Ratio as the independent variable
- Map communities where Trump vote is over-, under- or best predicted.

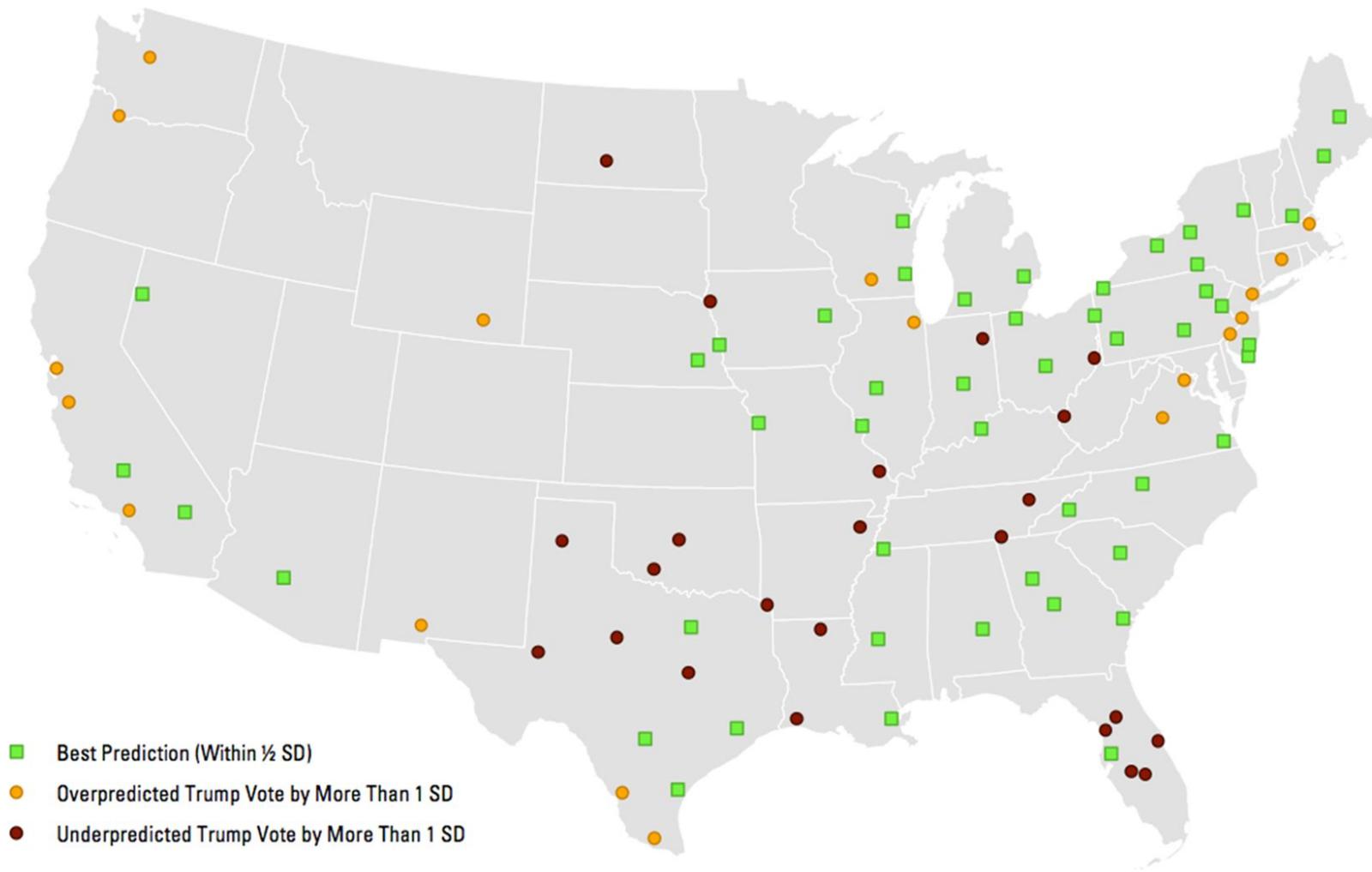
Regression Analysis Results Trump Vote and Attendance Ratio

Independent Variable	R ²	Adjusted R ²	F	Sig.	B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.
Attendance Ratio 2015	0.066	0.067	9.235	0.003	0.289	0.095	0.258	3.039	0.003
Attendance Ratio 2016	0.093	0.087	14.691	0.000	0.329	0.086	0.305	3.833	0.000

Trump Vote Prediction, 2015



Trump Vote Prediction, 2016



Wrestling fans alone did not win Trump the election...

- Regression analysis between attendance ratio and Trump vote in markets there but not that strong.
- Analysis of residuals and best prediction sheds some light
- Model best predicted Trump vote in Midwestern “Rustbelt” MSAs and medium-sized Southern MSAs and where election was closer.
- Over-predicted Trump vote on East and West Coast MSAs and where Hillary won by large margins.
- Under-predicted Trump vote in Mid-Sized Southern MSAs.
- Regional fit of models offers insights on Trump’s appeal

Summary

- We outlined the connection between Trump and Professional Wrestling.
- We will outlined three features of "wrestling rhetoric" and the aspects of Trump's political messaging that share these features.
- We will demonstrated through the "wrestling ratio" that regions of the country in which wrestling is popular tended to be regions of the country in which Trump won the popular vote.