REPORT *Published October 15, 2017*

Arizona District Visit



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Intro: Hot, Hot, or...Not



Here's a measure of how interesting we find Arizona's second congressional district: we visited there in the middle of summer. Now, this is a district that runs from Tucson (90 miles south of Phoenix) to the Mexican border. You've got to really *want* to be in southern Arizona at that time of year. As we entered Tucson's City Hall one day in late July, a guard measured the temperature of the sidewalk concrete: it was 160 degrees.

Tucson's economy, while not quite that hot, is at least warming up. After a laggard recovery from the Great Recession, Tucson had the third fastest job creation in the country in 2016, and 2017 is expected to be even better.

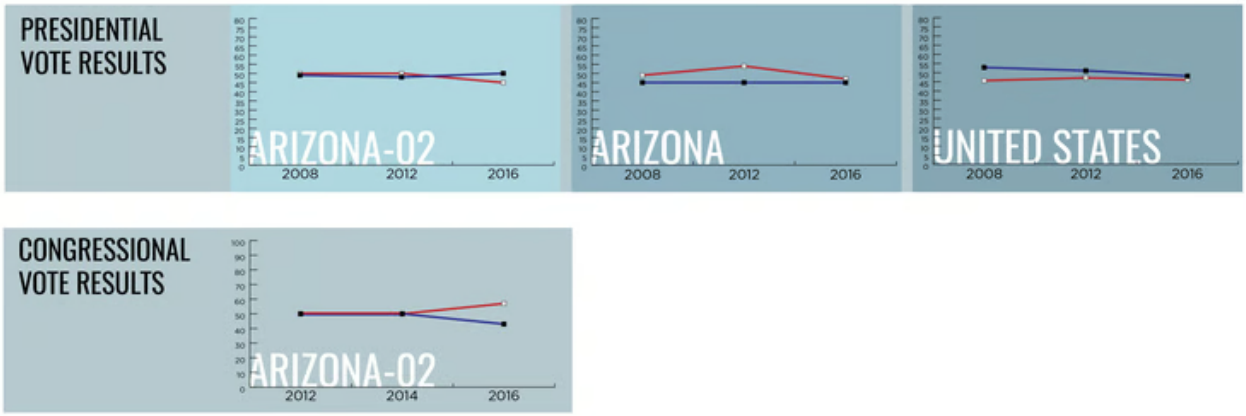
The district's more rural areas also are bringing some heat, from the mining-turned-tourist border town of Bisbee to the Army/retirement community of Sierra Vista. Both are thriving, and their economic indicators largely are pointing up.

But there is plenty of angst as well in AZ-2. Primary education is massively underfunded. The state government is unresponsive. There is too little economic diversity. Not enough University of Arizona graduates stick around. And, most urgently, far too many in the large Mexican-American community, which constitutes 35% of Tucson, are seriously struggling.

The Basics

Arizona's second district sits in the southeastern corner of the state, bordering Mexico to the south and New Mexico to the east. It contains a large chunk of Tucson and all of Cochise County. There is a lot of beautiful and wide-open desert between Tucson and the border.

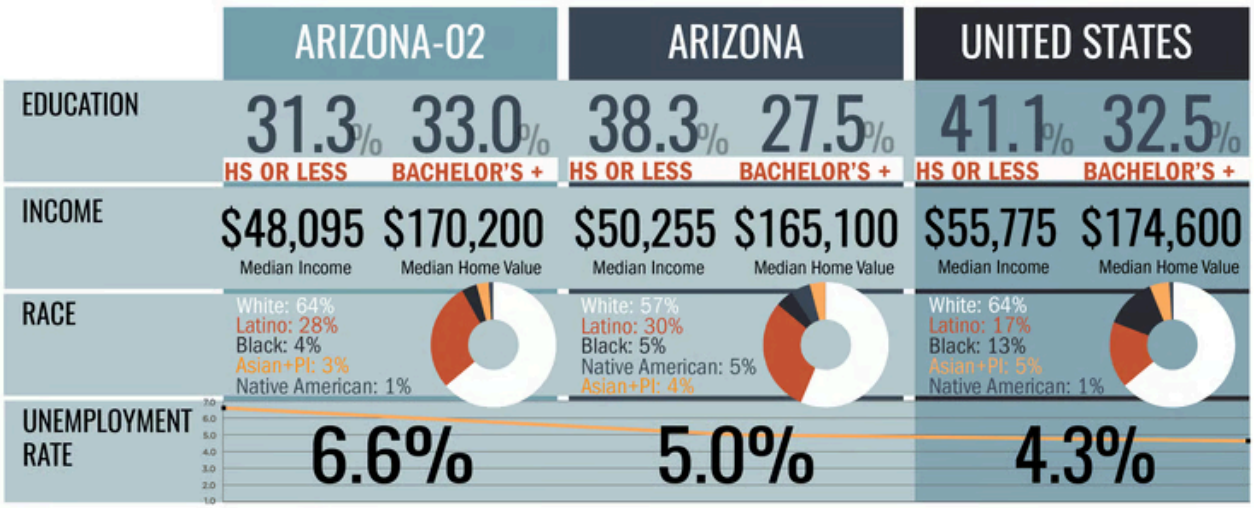
This is the district that former Rep. Gabrielle Giffords (D) held when she was shot at a public event at a Tucson supermarket in 2011. Her former staffer, Ron Barber (D), held the seat for two terms, but he lost in 2014 to Republican Martha McSally.



Hillary Clinton carried the district by five-points, a seven-point swing to the left from 2012, when Romney won there. Yet McSally was able to win by 14-points,

outperforming Trump by almost 20. Clinton's win here is credited to a surge in Latino voter turn-out, which obviously didn't help some of the Democrats down-ballot.

Frequently described to us as a "blue island in a sea of red," Tucson offers Democrats a refuge in a heavily Republican state. That said, one Tucson teacher said, "Every two years, my wife and I consider leaving because of how conservative Arizona has become."



Moreover, Tucson is sharply divided between the affluent north side of town, with upscale professionals and wealthy snowbird retirees, and the poorer, largely Latino neighborhoods to the south. The neighboring Cochise County is much more rural and much redder.

We took two trips to AZ-2, visiting Tucson, Sierra Vista, and Bisbee. Here's some of what we heard:

"Feds, Eds, and Meds"

Tucson and Sierra Vista, the largest town in Cochise County, are one hour and many worlds apart. One is a university city that is hip (or getting there), young(ish), and sprawling. The other is a small, neat community of military families and retirees.

But both places have a clear understanding that the health of their economy and the government—the military and its contractors, state and local higher education—are inextricably linked. Others broadened the lens a bit to include health care, summing up life in AZ-2 this way: “Unless you’re feds, eds, or meds, there’s nothing.”

Tucson: “We could’ve been Austin, but we screwed it up”

Tucson is a city of contradictions. Some of the (white) locals pride themselves on the “seamless” relations between the white and Latino communities, but many Latinos don’t see it that way, and they live in segregated sections of the city. Tucson is at once affluent, with rich retirees and an expanding economic base, and crumbling, with potholed streets and vacant storefronts. It’s got a vibrant set of businesses, fueled by major private sector investments, but most of those depend on government contracts.

Moreover, economic improvements feel elusive to many of the people we spoke to. “We are on the upswing, but it still seems very, very tentative,” one Tucson young professional told us.

I think I am okay, but I am not sure everyone is doing okay.

His company hasn’t hired a new person in six years, in part, he said, because there just aren’t people to hire.

On the other hand, one student told us they felt limited by the jobs available. “It’s hard to get a job outside health care, Raytheon, or the military,” she said.

Several, particularly younger, city residents said the gentrifying downtown core is getting better rapidly. “There was no night life at all six years ago—that’s changed.” But several compared the city unfavorably to Austin, another small city with a big state school that has hit the big time in ways that Tucson hasn’t.



“Something about this town means people getting stuck”

So, despite the changes, many educated young people are fleeing Tucson.

A local business leader noted:

> **The U of A graduation ceremony should just be held at the airport. Because everybody’s leaving.**

He told us of the area’s extraordinary attrition—only 6 out of 50 grads stay. “The city is thriving, but it’s losing population. It has had the biggest percent of out-migration in the country.” One young professional who recently moved back to the area after being away for 15 years said that not one of his high school friends still lived there.

On the other side of town, in the Latino neighborhoods, a lot of people feel stuck. Many are in dead-end jobs with few real prospects. Young people spoke of the duel pressure of

Latino parents expecting that their kids would "get them out of poverty," combined with a brutal, low-wage job market for those without the right level of education.

And education is a serious problem in AZ-2—the state ranks 49th in that regard, and almost every community leader mentioned that statistic. Governor Doug Ducey (R) and his allies in the legislature have drained money from the public education system, igniting widespread ire in the area. Several people noted ruefully that the word "Phoenix" is spelled with four letters in Tucson.

This starving of the education system has real consequences. For example, we met with a group of teachers at a successful magnet school. The faculty seemed fantastic, but the physical plant did...not. We gathered in the crumbling, dank basement that they borrow from another high school. The place could have used an upgrade—in roughly 1975.

There's also real fear related to higher education. One Tucson mom said that "many kids see higher education as leading to deep debt. Their anxiety level about getting decent jobs is huge." A younger woman in the group confirmed that it *is* terrifying—her parents didn't have experience with college, and she didn't know how to figure it out on her own.

Cochise County: "Everyone here has some connection to the military"

An hour's drive south sits Sierra Vista and the Army's Fort Huachuca, the hub of the Cochise County economy. It's beautiful and pristine, cooler (on a thermometer, anyway) than Tucson, with dry, high desert air.

But to the students at the local community college, it's stifling. In Cochise County, a group of students told us they have two choices if they don't go to college: service sector jobs or enlistment. "Our parents say if you want to make something of yourself, go into the military. They didn't save for college," a Cochise College student said. Every head nodded as she spoke.

Students we met also complained of being bored senseless. Sierra Vista caters to retirees —not the most exciting environment for teenagers. "This place blows if you're not a snowbird," a student griped. "There's a lack of stimulus; the only thing to do is drugs and have sex."



“I wave ‘Hi’ to Mexico on my way in each day”

There’s already a border wall in AZ-2. The rusted corrugated metal structure is not that big, it’s not at all beautiful, and Mexico didn’t pay for it.

As one woman noted, you can wave to Mexico from the second district—it is on the actual front line of the immigration debate. But we were surprised to find that the issue almost never came up on its own in our conversations. When we asked about immigration, we got a lot of shrugs; it is just not regarded as a big deal. We heard none of the apprehension or anxiety about immigrants taking jobs and resources or changing the culture that we heard in some other visits.

“Those of us on the border do not worry at all,” one Bisbee resident said. Indeed, the people we spoke to said their communities (in Cochise County and Tucson) feel connected to immigrants and visitors from Mexico, as they are vital to the economy.

A group of business owners all agreed that people from other places, including Phoenix, do not understand immigration. They were highly critical of a new state law that penalizes employers for hiring undocumented workers, saying it has driven out a lot of commerce.

But it's not just about the economics—it's also about the people. A priest noted that he's never heard anything derogatory said about immigrants since he moved to the area nearly two years ago. "It's amazing how passionate and angry people in rural Indiana get about the Arizona border, but not Arizonans," he told us.

"I consider the (Trump) wall proposal to be an unspeakable horror," another man told us. "Xenophobia is horrible—that's East Coast mentality." "Some of the people who are the most American, aren't American. They represent our values," a Tucson businessman said.

While the native-born population seems unconcerned about immigration issues, those living on the legal margins are anything but. We had a remarkable, heartbreaking dinner with a group of young people, each of whom was undocumented and part of the DACA program. They described their lives as "survival mode every day." One summed up their situation starkly: "We are too Latino to be American, and we're too American to go back to Mexico."

To a person, they were brilliant and unbelievably hardworking—most were holding down multiple jobs (one had *five*) while attending school *and* doing extensive community advocacy and organizing. They apparently do not sleep.

Our dinner companions told us that they are terrified and furious about what's going on in Washington. When we met, a few months before President Trump announced the end of the DACA program, they were concerned about themselves, but they were even more worried about their parents and siblings who did not have DACA protection. One said:



> **We are the 'good immigrants,' we cannot forget about everyone else.**

Indeed, we were surprised to hear that even these people who had, at that time at least, achieved some measure of legal status under DACA, the program was viewed with skepticism. All agreed that DACA "did more harm than good." "It was just a crumb, and it moved people out of community organizing. It made us all too comfortable."

"Fracturing of a shared reality"

Politics are not on everyone's lips in AZ-2. Trump's name came up on its own only once during our visits. But it's on their minds, and many bemoaned the general chaos in Washington. A Cochise County faith leader told us:

> **Despair is not too strong a word. There is hopelessness.**

Trump is also a major source of tension. One man who noted that he used to be Republican said: "Now I'm a flaming independent; I'm fed up." Another chimed in: "People here really hate the political leadership of this country."

And it's not all about Trump. "There's a strong 'us vs. them' culture between Tucson and the capital [Phoenix]," a (Republican) business leader said. "The legislature sticks its finger in the eye of Tucson on everything."

One focal point of their anxiety is the deterioration of civic dialogue. Many people told how they can't talk politics anymore because it's become too heated. "Politics is not a 'nice' thing to talk about," man told us. "You'd don't feel good about it afterwards."

A Tucson Republican, who had moved there from Ann Arbor, MI, said that while people in his liberal former town had disagreed with him, they were able to talk about it. The polarization he's seeing now is much worse: "There's shouting and people calling each other bigots."

One person blamed this on "a fracturing of shared reality." Another said that we've "abandoned the sense of community."

Conclusion

When we asked one community organizer – herself a Dreamer – about her local hero, she pointed to "people like my mom [a house cleaner], who "do the work no one else wants to." Those parents "made it possible for us to get ahead. We are standing on their shoulders."

There is an intensity to the pride in AZ-2—pride in familia and culture, the beauty of the landscape, the burgeoning economy, the relative lack of racial strife.

But, like many other precincts of America, there is tension just beneath the surface. Will economic growth continue, and will it leave too many behind? Will the education

system be able to cope with the cuts? Will the water last? Will the military and its contractors stay?

One leader summed it up this way: “The best cure for poverty is jobs. But we can’t be sure there will be enough good ones to go around.”



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