

# WebMemo



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## Getting Better, Not Bitter, in Pennsylvania

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The recent firestorm over Senator Barack Obama's comments about Pennsylvania's "bitter" voters has focused on charges of condescension and on the perceived denigration of gun ownership and religion. The Senator's attitudes and tone are certainly fair game in an election year, but the more interesting issue is his facts: Are Pennsylvanians in fact "bitter?" Are there communities that have stagnated for "25 years?" Are there no jobs? Is there no hope?

The Census Bureau's Quarterly Workforce Indicators (QWI) tell a different story.<sup>1</sup> The QWI are a dataset that allows government officials, researchers, and anyone interested in facts—for example, journalists or campaign staffs—to look at jobs and income data on a county-by-county basis.

How are Pennsylvanians doing? The picture is surprisingly good. Total employment rose from 5,486,213 in 2005 to 5,566,049 in 2006, the latest year for which full data are available. Average monthly earnings rose too, from \$3,359 in 2005 to \$3,509 in 2006. Growth in jobs and incomes was widespread across the state. Forty of Pennsylvania's 67 counties showed gains in both categories, and 21 of the others showed gains in incomes but not in the number of jobs.

Over a longer period, the data are even more compelling and more positive. The QWI don't cover Senator Obama's 25-year time span, but they do cover a full decade.

- Total employment in Pennsylvania rose 7 percent from 1997 to 2006.

- Average monthly earnings rose over 31 percent, from \$2,672 to \$3,509.
- At the beginning of the decade, the Pennsylvania unemployment rate was 4.7 percent; it dropped to 4.4 percent by the end of 2006.<sup>2</sup>
- Only 11 counties showed a decrease in jobs; and the hardest-hit, Northumberland County, lost only 2,186 jobs, almost exactly mirroring a drop in population in the county between the 1990 and 2000 censuses.<sup>3</sup>
- No county in Pennsylvania suffered a loss in average salary between 1997 and 2006.

The picture painted by the data is far less bleak than the candidates would have us believe. Indeed, the data show widespread, steady progress and rising standards of living. You would never know that from the debate. Perhaps it's not the picture that a candidate focused on "change" needs to show.

Individual voters don't need a picture to know how they are doing. The vast majority are living the good life. They know they have more and better cars and bigger TVs than their parents. They have cell phones and computers, better health care, and access to high-quality fresh food year-round.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:  
[www.heritage.org/Research/Economy/wm1895.cfm](http://www.heritage.org/Research/Economy/wm1895.cfm)

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They have better jobs too. Not many parents aspire for their children to hold the same factory jobs that lifted them up the economic ladder after World War II. Have we forgotten that life in mill towns was often “singin’ the blues”? Perhaps the candidates are too young to remember that one of the most popular songs of the ’50s was a lament: “You load 16 tons, and what do ya’ get, another day older and deeper in debt.”

We’ve come a long way, and the middle class in Pennsylvania knows it. Middle-class parents want their kids to go to college and work in an office or a profession. This is the American dream and the American middle-class experience of the past 50 years. Though politicians and the media would like to tell us otherwise, life in the middle class has never been better.

Of course, it’s not enough for Americans to know how well they are doing individually. It’s important

that they know how well their neighbors are doing too. Americans are a generous, caring people who want everyone to share in society’s bounty. A falsely negative picture may lead them to opt for change when the best thing for themselves and their neighbors alike is to stay on course.

This is the challenge of this election year. Economic growth rates are not as rosy as they have been, and the negative headlines are coming fast and furious. Candidates, in this year or any other, will say almost anything to get elected. Thoughtful voters will listen, but they will also look carefully at their own situations and those of their friends. Are voters in Pennsylvania bitter? I doubt it. Their votes will tell us one way or the other.

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1. Quarterly Workforce Indicators for Pennsylvania are available at <http://lehd.did.census.gov/led/datatools/qwiapp.html>.
2. U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, “State at a Glance” data, at [http://data.bls.gov/PDQ/servlet/SurveyOutputServlet?series\\_id=LASST4200003&data\\_tool=%22EaG%22](http://data.bls.gov/PDQ/servlet/SurveyOutputServlet?series_id=LASST4200003&data_tool=%22EaG%22). The Pennsylvania unemployment rate fluctuated significantly during the decade, peaking at 5.8 percent in 2003. The latest data available (February 2008) showed the rate at 4.9 percent.
3. U.S. Census Bureau data. The population in Northumberland County declined from 96,771 as measured in the 1990 Census to 94,556 in the 2000 Census. According to the Census Bureau, the decline in population has continued, with the county population at 91,003 in 2007. See U.S. Census Bureau Web site, at <http://tinyurl.com/45y4hy>.