

The myth of the reactionary white working class

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In the days following the victory of Donald Trump in the presidential election, the Democratic Party and media have attributed the results to the ignorance, backwardness and inherent racism and sexism of the “white working class.”

“Why Trump Won: Working Class Whites,” read the headline of a Wednesday article in the *New York Times*. Columnist Charles Blow wrote in Thursday’s *Times* op-ed page: “I can only assume that President Donald Trump will be a bigot. It is absolutely possible that America didn’t elect him in spite of that, but because of it.”

The so-called “left” press has advanced the same racialist narrative: The *Nation*’s Monica Potts noted with hateful sarcasm, “This election season has seen no shortage of tender, worried portraits of the white working class and its economic grievances...”

Potts explains Trump’s victory in terms of identity, race, and gender. The working class in rural communities “make[s] more money than their poor neighbors,” she writes. “They think they work hard, and they think other people—their neighbors, immigrants, the African Americans in ‘inner cities’—do not... While they could be doing better and surely struggle, it is their cultural identity that is important in this election... This wasn’t about anguish. It was about identity.”

This identity-based presentation of Tuesday’s election is a false narrative exploded by the most basic analysis of the data from the election.

The most significant statistic from 2016’s election is the massive drop in support for both the Democratic and Republican candidates. While uncounted votes from California may slightly alter these figures, Hillary Clinton received about ten million fewer votes than Barack Obama did eight years ago. Trump, who lost the

popular vote while winning the electoral vote, received the least votes of any candidate from either party since 2000. These figures are even more striking because of a drastic increase in the population of eligible voters: 18 million since 2008.

Far larger in number than the vote for either candidate are the 99 million eligible voters who abstained from the 2016 election or voted for a third party. This is a measure of social discontent and not of apathy. In other words, while Clinton and Trump received the vote of 26.6 and 25.9 percent of eligible voters, 43.2 percent chose neither.

Among those who did vote, Trump received the votes of just over 27 million white men, about equal to the 27.2 million white men who voted for Republican Mitt Romney in 2012. As for women, 35.5 million voted for Clinton in 2016, a significant drop from the 37.6 million who voted for Obama in 2012. Remarkably, just 30 percent of women eligible to vote cast ballots for Clinton in 2016, compared to 47 percent who did not vote.

Clinton also suffered significant losses among African-American, Latino and young voters. In 2012, Barack Obama won 16.9 million African-American votes, over 3 million more than Clinton’s 13.7 million. Just over 9 million Latinos voted for both Obama and Clinton, despite a significant increase in the Latino voting population over the past four years. Among people aged 18-29, Clinton’s 13.6 million votes is roughly 8 percent less than Obama’s 14.8 million figure from 2012, despite a similar growth in this age demographic.

As a percentage of votes cast, all racial groups swung toward the Republican candidate in 2016 compared to 2012. However, white voters showed the *lowest* swing to the Republicans (1 percentage point), compared with

African-Americans (7 percentage points), Latinos (8 percentage points), and Asian-Americans (11 percentage points).

These shifts, which occurred within the broader framework of abstention, were driven largely by economic issues. Fifty-two percent of voters said that the economy was the most important issue in the election, far above the second most important issue at 18 percent. Racial and gender issues did not register, while sixty-eight percent of voters said their financial situation was the same or worse than it was four years ago. Thirty-nine percent said they were looking for a candidate who “can bring change,” and of these, 83 percent voted for Trump. This equals roughly 40 million votes, or two thirds of Trump’s total.

Another indication that Trump was seen as the “change” candidate against the status quo is the fact that, of the 18 percent of voters who said they disliked both candidates, Trump won 49 percent to Clinton’s 29 percent. Fourteen percent said neither had the right temperament to be president, with Trump defeating Clinton 71 percent to 17 percent in this group. Remarkably, 57 percent of voters said they would be concerned or scared by a Trump presidency, but Trump still won 14 percent of these voters. These figures indicate the depth of the hatred that exists for the political establishment.

The elections saw a massive shift in party support among the poorest and wealthiest voters. The share of votes for the Republicans amongst the most impoverished section of workers, those with family incomes under \$30,000, increased by 10 percentage points from 2012. In several key Midwestern states, the swing of the poorest voters toward Trump was even larger: Wisconsin (17-point swing), Iowa (20 points), Indiana (19 points) and Pennsylvania (18 points).

The swing to Republicans among the \$30,000 to \$50,000 family income range was 6 percentage points. Those with incomes between \$50,000 and \$100,000 swung away from the Republicans compared to 2012 by 2 points.

The affluent and rich voted for Clinton by a much broader margin than they had voted for the Democratic candidate in 2012. Among those with incomes between \$100,000 and \$200,000, Clinton benefited from a 9-point Democratic swing. Voters with family incomes above \$250,000 swung toward Clinton by 11

percentage points. The number of Democratic voters amongst the wealthiest voting block increased from 2.16 million in 2012 to 3.46 million in 2016—a jump of 60 percent.

Clinton was unable to make up for the vote decline among women (2.1 million), African Americans (3.2 million), and youth (1.2 million), who came overwhelmingly from the poor and working class, with the increase among the rich (1.3 million).

Clinton’s electoral defeat is bound up with the nature of the Democratic Party, an alliance of Wall Street and the military-intelligence apparatus with privileged sections of the upper-middle class based on the politics of race, gender and sexual orientation. Over the course of the last forty years, the Democratic Party has abandoned all pretenses of social reform, a process escalated under Obama. Working with the Republican Party and the trade unions, it is responsible for enacting social policies that have impoverished vast sections of the working class, regardless of race or gender.

The present political juncture presents real dangers for the American and international working class. The Trump administration will be the most reactionary in American history. At the same time, the election of Donald Trump heralds a period of renewed, explosive social convulsions.

The Socialist Equality Party stands for the unity of the working class. The task of socialists is to prepare the working class for the coming upheavals by relentlessly opposing attempts to divide it based on race, nationality or gender. Those who agree with this perspective should join the Socialist Equality Party today.



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