

United States: Millions of ordinary Americans support Donald Trump. Here's why

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When he isn't spewing insults, the Republican frontrunner is hammering home a powerful message about free trade and its victims.

Let us now address the greatest American mystery at the moment: what motivates the supporters of Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump?

I call it a "mystery" because the working-class white people who make up the bulk of Trump's fan base show up in amazing numbers for the candidate, filling stadiums and airport hangars, but their views, by and large, do not appear in our prestige newspapers. On their opinion pages, these publications take care to represent demographic categories of nearly every kind, but "blue-collar" is one they persistently overlook. The views of working-class people are so foreign to that universe that when *New York Times* columnist Nick Kristof wanted to "engage" a Trump supporter last week, he made one up, along with this imaginary person's responses to his questions.

When members of the professional class wish to understand the working-class Other, they traditionally consult experts on the subject. And when these authorities are asked to explain the Trump movement, they always seem to zero in on one main accusation: bigotry. Only racism, they tell us, is capable of powering a movement like Trump's, which is blowing through the inherited structure of the Republican party like a tornado through a cluster of McMansions.

Trump himself provides rather excellent evidence for this finding. The man is an insult clown who has systematically gone down the list of American ethnic groups and offended them each in turn. He wants to deport millions upon millions of undocumented immigrants. He wants to bar Muslims from visiting the United States. He admires various foreign strongmen and dictators, and has even retweeted a quote from Mussolini. This gold-plated buffoon has in turn drawn the enthusiastic endorsement of leading racists from across the spectrum of intolerance, a gorgeous mosaic of haters, each of them quivering excitedly at the prospect of getting a real, honest-to-god bigot in the White House.

All this stuff is so insane, so wildly outrageous, that the commentariat has deemed it to be the entirety of the Trump campaign. Trump appears to be a racist, so racism must be what motivates his armies of followers. And so, on Saturday, *New York Times* columnist Timothy Egan blamed none other than "the people" for Trump's racism: "Donald Trump's supporters know exactly what he stands for: hatred of immigrants, racial superiority, a sneering disregard of the basic civility that binds a society."

Stories marveling at the stupidity of Trump voters are published nearly every day. Articles that accuse Trump's followers of being bigots have appeared by the hundreds, if not the thousands. Conservatives have written them; liberals have written them; impartial professionals have written them. The headline of a recent *Huffington Post* column announced, bluntly, that "Trump Won Super

Tuesday Because America is Racist.” A *New York Times* reporter proved that Trump’s followers were bigots by coordinating a map of Trump support with a map of racist Google searches. Everyone knows it: Trump’s followers’ passions are nothing more than the ignorant blurtings of the white American id, driven to madness by the presence of a black man in the White House. The Trump movement is a one-note phenomenon, a vast surge of race-hate. Its partisans are not only incomprehensible, they are not really worth comprehending.

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Or so we’re told. Last week, I decided to watch several hours of Trump speeches for myself. I saw the man ramble and boast and threaten and even seem to gloat when protesters were ejected from the arenas in which he spoke. I was disgusted by these things, as I have been disgusted by Trump for 20 years. But I also noticed something surprising. In each of the speeches I watched, Trump spent a good part of his time talking about an entirely legitimate issue, one that could even be called leftwing.

Yes, Donald Trump talked about trade. In fact, to judge by how much time he spent talking about it, trade may be his single biggest concern – not white supremacy. Not even his plan to build a wall along the Mexican border, the issue that first won him political fame. He did it again during the debate on 3 March: asked about his political excommunication by Mitt Romney, he chose to pivot and talk about ... trade.

It seems to obsess him: the destructive free-trade deals our leaders have made, the many companies that have moved their production facilities to other lands, the phone calls he will make to those companies’ CEOs in order to threaten them with steep tariffs unless they move back to the US.

Trump embellished this vision with another favorite leftwing idea: under his leadership, the government would “start competitive bidding in the drug industry”. (“We don’t competitively bid!” he marveled – another true fact, a legendary boondoggle brought to you by the George W Bush administration.) Trump extended the critique to the military-industrial complex, describing how the government is forced to buy lousy but expensive airplanes thanks to the power of industry lobbyists.

Thus did he hint at his curious selling proposition: because he is personally so wealthy, a fact about which he loves to boast, Trump himself is unaffected by business lobbyists and donations. And because he is free from the corrupting power of modern campaign finance, famous deal-maker Trump can make deals on our behalf that are “good” instead of “bad”. The chance that he will actually do so, of course, is small. He appears to be a hypocrite on this issue as well as so many other things. But at least Trump is saying this stuff.

All this surprised me because, for all the articles about Trump I had read in recent months, I didn’t recall trade coming up very often. Trump is supposed to be on a one-note crusade for whiteness. Could it be that all this trade stuff is a key to understanding the Trump phenomenon?

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Trade is an issue that polarizes Americans by socio-economic status. To the professional class, which encompasses the vast majority of our media figures, economists, Washington officials and Democratic powerbrokers, what they call “free trade” is something so obviously good and noble it doesn’t require explanation or inquiry or even thought. Republican and Democratic leaders alike agree on this, and no amount of facts can move them from their Econ 101 dream.

To the remaining 80 or 90% of America, trade means something very different. There’s a video going around on the internet these days that shows a room full of workers at a Carrier air conditioning

plant in Indiana being told by an officer of the company that the factory is being moved to Monterrey, Mexico, and that they're all going to lose their jobs.

As I watched it, I thought of all the arguments over trade that we've had in this country since the early 1990s, all the sweet words from our economists about the scientifically proven benevolence of free trade, all the ways in which our newspapers mock people who say that treaties like the North American Free Trade Agreement allow companies to move jobs to Mexico.

Well, here is a video of a company moving its jobs to Mexico, courtesy of Nafta. This is what it looks like. The Carrier executive talks in that familiar and highly professional HR language about the need to "stay competitive" and "the extremely price-sensitive marketplace". A worker shouts "Fuck you!" at the executive. The executive asks people to please be quiet so he can "share" his "information". His information about all of them losing their jobs.

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Now, I have no special reason to doubt the suspicion that Donald Trump is a racist. Either he is one, or (as the comedian John Oliver puts it) he is pretending to be one, which amounts to the same thing.

But there is another way to interpret the Trump phenomenon. A map of his support may coordinate with racist Google searches, but it coordinates even better with deindustrialization and despair, with the zones of economic misery that 30 years of Washington's free-market consensus have brought the rest of America.

It is worth noting that Trump is making a point of assailing that Indiana air conditioning company from the video in his speeches. What this suggests is that he's telling a tale as much about economic outrage as it is tale of racism on the march. Many of Trump's followers are bigots, no doubt, but many more are probably excited by the prospect of a president who seems to mean it when he denounces our trade agreements and promises to bring the hammer down on the CEO that fired you and wrecked your town, unlike Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton.

Here is the most salient supporting fact: when people talk to white, working-class Trump supporters, instead of simply imagining what they might say, they find that what most concerns these people is the economy and their place in it. I am referring to a study just published by Working America, a political-action auxiliary of the AFL-CIO, which interviewed some 1,600 white working-class voters in the suburbs of Cleveland and Pittsburgh in December and January.

Support for Donald Trump, the group found, ran strong among these people, even among self-identified Democrats, but not because they are all pining for a racist in the White House. Their favorite aspect of Trump was his "attitude", the blunt and forthright way he talks. As far as issues are concerned, "immigration" placed third among the matters such voters care about, far behind their number one concern: "good jobs / the economy".

"People are much more frightened than they are bigoted," is how the findings were described to me by Karen Nussbaum, the executive director of Working America. The survey "confirmed what we heard all the time: people are fed up, people are hurting, they are very distressed about the fact that their kids don't have a future" and that "there still hasn't been a recovery from the recession, that every family still suffers from it in one way or another."

Tom Lewandowski, the president of the Northeast Indiana Central Labor Council in Fort Wayne, puts it even more bluntly when I asked him about working-class Trump fans. "These people aren't racist, not any more than anybody else is," he says of Trump supporters he knows. "When Trump talks about trade, we think about the Clinton administration, first with Nafta and then with

[Permanent Normal Trade Relations] China, and here in Northeast Indiana, we hemorrhaged jobs.”

“They look at that, and here’s Trump talking about trade, in a ham-handed way, but at least he’s representing emotionally. We’ve had all the political establishment standing behind every trade deal, and we endorsed some of these people, and then we’ve had to fight them to get them to represent us.”

Now, let us stop and smell the perversity. Left parties the world over were founded to advance the fortunes of working people. But our left party in America – one of our two monopoly parties – chose long ago to turn its back on these people’s concerns, making itself instead into the tribune of the enlightened professional class, a “creative class” that makes innovative things like derivative securities and smartphone apps. The working people that the party used to care about, Democrats figured, had nowhere else to go, in the famous Clinton-era expression. The party just didn’t need to listen to them any longer.

What Lewandowski and Nussbaum are saying, then, should be obvious to anyone who’s dipped a toe outside the prosperous enclaves on the two coasts. Ill-considered trade deals and generous bank bailouts and guaranteed profits for insurance companies but no recovery for average people, ever – these policies have taken their toll. As Trump says, “we have rebuilt China and yet our country is falling apart. Our infrastructure is falling apart ... Our airports are, like, Third World.”

Trump’s words articulate the populist backlash against liberalism that has been building slowly for decades and may very well occupy the White House itself, whereupon the entire world will be required to take seriously its demented ideas.

Yet still we cannot bring ourselves to look the thing in the eyes. We cannot admit that we liberals bear some of the blame for its emergence, for the frustration of the working-class millions, for their blighted cities and their downward spiraling lives. So much easier to scold them for their twisted racist souls, to close our eyes to the obvious reality of which Trumpism is just a crude and ugly expression: that neoliberalism has well and truly failed.

Thomas Frank

P.S.

* The Guardian. Tuesday 8 March 2016 04.12 GMT:

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/mar/07/donald-trump-why-americans-support>

* Thomas Frank is the author of *Listen, Liberal or Whatever Happened to the Party of the People*, published 15 March by Metropolitan Books

This article was amended on 9 March 2016 to reflect the fact that Nafta stands for the North American Free Trade Agreement. An earlier version of this article referred to it as North Atlantic Free Trade Agreement.