

United States: Who Put Trump in the White House? - Class data and Democrats' politics as usual

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THE MEDIA STORY in the days following the 2016 election was that a huge defection of angry, white, blue-collar workers in the Rust Belt from their traditional Democratic voting patterns put Donald J. Trump in the White House in a grand slap at the nation's "liberal" elite. But is that the real story?

While he didn't actually win the popular vote, Trump did carry the majority (58%) of white voters. Furthermore, he won the key "battleground" states in the Rust Belt that are the basis of the media story, which raises serious questions. Who were these white voters? Was this the major shift that sent Trump to victory?

Exit polls taken during the primaries, when the Trump revolt began, showed that the whole election process was skewed toward the better-off sections of U.S. society, and that Trump did better among them than Clinton. Looking at those voters in the general election from the 26% of U.S. households earning more than \$100,000, who are unlikely to be working class these days, we see that Clinton got 34% of her vote, and Trump a slightly larger 35% of his, from these well-to-do voters. [1]

In other words, upper-income groups were overrepresented in the voting electorate as a whole, and both candidates drew a disproportionate part of their vote from the well-to-do, with Trump a bit more reliant on high-income voters. This in itself doesn't rule out a working-class shift to Trump, but the media's version of this is based on a problematic definition.

Among other problems, a large majority of those without a college degree don't vote at all. Furthermore, people who don't vote are generally to the left of those who do on economic issues and the role of government. Of the 135.5 million white Americans without degrees, about a fifth voted for Trump — a minority that doesn't represent this degreeless demographic very well.

Another problem is that there are only about 18.5 million white, blue-collar production workers — the prototype of the defecting white industrial worker. [2] If we double this to account for adult spouses to make it just under 40 million, and assume that none of them have degrees, it still only accounts for a little more than a third of those white adults lacking the allegedly class-defining degree.

Of course, there are another 14 million or so white service workers who are working class, but even if we include them and their spouses we still account for only about half of the huge 70% of white

adults in the United States who lack a college degree.

There are also millions of Americans who don't have a college degree, who are not working class, and who are actually more likely to vote than the "left behind" industrial workers. There are some 17 million small business owners without that degree. As a 2016 survey by the National Small Business Association tells us, 86% of small business owners are white, they are twice as likely to be Republicans as Democrats, almost two-thirds consider themselves conservative (78% on economic issues), and 92% say they regularly vote in national elections.

They drew an average salary of \$112,000 in 2016 compared to \$48,320 for the average annual wage. [3] Add in the spouses, and this classically petty bourgeois group alone could more than account for all the 29 million of those lacking a college degree who voted for Trump. [4]

There are also 1.8 million managers, 8.8 million supervisors, and 1.6 million cops whose jobs don't require a college degree. To this we could add insurance and real estate brokers and agents, and so on. [5] Some may have a degree, but it is clear that there are tens of millions of non-working class people in the United States who lack such a degree, and who are more likely to be traditional and frequent Republican voters than a majority of white, blue-collar workers.

The relatively high-income levels of much of Trump's vote point toward a majority petty bourgeois and middle-class base for Trump, something *The Economist* concluded in its earlier survey of Trump primary voters when they wrote, "but the idea that it is the mostly poor, less-educated voters who are drawn to Mr. Trump is a bit of a myth." [6] The first point, then, is that Trump's victory was disproportionately a middle-class, upper-income phenomenon.

Trump's Union Vote

To test the extent to which white, blue collar or related workers handed Trump victory, we will look at the swings in union household voting in national elections. This is far from perfect, of course, since only a minority of workers belong to unions these days, about half are public employees, and non-white workers make up a quarter of the total.

Nevertheless, we can safely assume that any swings toward the Republicans came mostly from white union members and their families. It is important to bear in mind as well that the union household vote has declined as a percentage of the total vote in presidential elections from about 26-27% in 1980 to 18% in 2016 so that the impact of the union household vote has diminished though not disappeared. [7]

Union Household Vote in Presidential Elections, 1976-2016

Year	Democrat	Republican
2016	51%	43%*
2012	58%	40%
2008	59%	39%
2004	59%	40%
2000	59%	37%
1996	60%	30%
1992	55%	24%

Year	Democrat	Republican
1988	57%	43%
1980	48%	45%
1976	62%	38%

*Additionally, in 2016, 6% other/no answer; in 2000, 1% Buchanan, 3% Nader; in 1996, 9% Perot; in 1992, 21% Perot; in 1980, 7% Anderson

Source: Roper Center, “How Groups Voted”, 1976-2012, [8]; CNN politics, election2016, “Exit Polls, National President”, [9].

Two things are clear from the table. First, an average of about 40% of union members and their families have been voting Republican in presidential elections for a long time, with the Democrats winning a little under 60% of the union household vote for the last four decades. Only in 1948 and 1964 did over 80% of union household members vote for the Democratic candidate, Harry Truman and Lyndon B. Johnson respectively. [10]

Nevertheless, in 2016 a relatively small number shifted to Trump from 40% for the Republican in 2012 to 43% in 2016. This three percentage points represents a shift of just under 800,000 union household voters across the entire country.

Even more interesting is that the Democratic vote fell by seven points from 2012 to 2016 as union household members defected to a third party, refused to answer the question when surveyed, or didn't vote and weren't surveyed. While the unspecified “no answer” group of those surveyed lends some credibility to the theory of the “silent Trump voter,” this drop nonetheless points to the fact that the Democrats have lost votes since 2012.

Putting this in historical context, Trump's shift of union household voters is actually less dramatic than the swing from 1976 to 1980 for Reagan, and even less so than the 14-point desertion of union household voters from Carter in 1980, half of which went to independent John Anderson rather than Reagan, in an election when union householders composed 26% of all voters. [11]

In other words, Trump attracted both a smaller proportion and number of these voters than Reagan or Anderson. These same voters have swung for some time between Democrats, Republicans, and high-profile third-party candidates such as Anderson, Ross Perot who got 21% of union household voters in 1992, and Ralph Nader, who got three percent in 2000. [12] The meaning of the 2016 shift was more sinister to be sure, but it was also long in the making as the Democrats moved to the right.

This is not to say that the swing of union household or white working-class voters away from the Democrats doesn't reflect the conservative social views, racism, and in the 2016 election, sexism of many white working- and middle-class people as well as their anger at their deteriorating situation.

Clearly Trump won almost 10 million union household votes, compared to almost 12 million for Clinton. These numbers are significant, but we know that many are not as new to voting Republican as is often thought. This, of course, is not something to take comfort in, but it is an indication of the results of the Democratic Party's choice to emphasize higher-income people that began under Bill Clinton and the Democratic Leadership Council. [13]

It seems clear that a significant number of white working-class people voted for Trump who had voted for Obama in 2008 or 2012 — even if more just didn't vote.

The Democrats' Self-Made Debacle

While there was a swing among white, blue-collar and union household voters to Trump, it was significantly smaller than the overall drop in Democratic voters.

While recent voter suppression laws demanding state-issued photo IDs in some 17 states along with the racial cleansing of voter rolls in many states have undoubtedly limited voting for Blacks, Latinos and low-income whites, most non-voters don't vote because they don't see anything compelling to vote for.

At the same time, working-class voter participation has remained low in part because the political parties have reduced the direct door-to-door human contact with lower-income voters in favor of purchased forms of campaigning, from TV ads to the new digitalized methods of targeting likely voters. [14]

Vast amounts of personal data are accumulated by firms specializing in this, turned into voter-targeting algorithms, and sold. According to John Aristotle Phillips, the CEO of Aristotle, they can provide customers with "up to 500 different data points on each individual." [15] The parties or campaigns that purchase this service, in turn, use it to spread targeted messages to specific groups or even individual voters mostly via the internet through various platforms, including Facebook which apparently made a bundle off the 2016 election.

Spending on digital political ads rose from \$22 million in 2008 to \$158 million in 2012, and is expected to hit \$1 billion for the 2016 election and over \$3 billion by the 2020 elections. No doubt they will continue to soar as they are increasingly available for elections way down the ballot to the local level according to the Democratic digital outfit DSPolitical. [16]

Aside from the soaring costs this invasive digital targeting adds to U.S. elections and the further erosion of our privacy, it further removes political campaigning from any direct human contact. As reporters for *The Guardian* put it, "campaigns of the future will depend as much on being able to track people across screens and apps as knocking on doors or sending out flyers." [17]

It's not that no doors are knocked on or phone calls made, but the algorithm that decides the limited number of actual voters to be visited or called to turn out the vote in practice has meant identifying the better-off part of the population. The Get-Out-The-Vote campaign has become the Get-Out-The-Well-To-Do-Votes canvass. More importantly, the shaping of the political process, already an auction, is being even further outsourced to the profit-making "expert" firms that provide this service.

In short, despite all the vast amounts of money raised and deployed, all the digital and "expert" sophistication available to this "party of the people" and Clinton's allegedly massive "ground game" force in the "battleground" states, the Democratic Party as a whole no longer can or tries to mobilize enough of those among its traditional core constituencies — Blacks and Latinos, as well as white workers and union members — to win national and even state offices in these key states.

To be sure, Clinton won the popular vote nationally, perhaps as John Nichols gloated in *The Nation* by an "unprecedented" margin that might run as high as two million or more. The problem is that 1.5 million of that can be accounted for from Clinton's margin over Trump in New York City alone. [18] The majorities in the coastal states of California and New York by themselves accounts for more than her net majority; the rest of the country continues to see its Democratic vote stagnate or decline.

The Democrats are and have been for decades the party of the (neoliberal) status quo when millions

of all races have seen their living standards shrink and future prospects disappear and, as a result, have come to despise the status quo. And as the many millionaire Democrats in Congress (average wealth of a Democratic Representative is \$5.7 million) and their business buddies demonstrate for all to see, they are part of the nation's elite.

The decline in manufacturing jobs, the shrinking of union representation, the creation of more and more lousy jobs, the withdrawal of aid to the cities, etc. have created not just "angry white men" who voted for Trump, but angry white, Black, Latino and Asian men and women who, for good and sound reasons, no longer see the Democrats as their defenders.

Many in this legion have voted with their feet, and it wasn't to the polls. In 2014, the last off-year Congressional election, non-voters numbered almost 128 million adult citizens — a majority of eligible voters [19] — the vast majority of these were middle-to-lower income working-class people.

Strong evidence that the Democrats can no longer motivate or mobilize the majority in much of the country is the fact that the millions of non-voters are on average and in their majority politically to the left of those who do vote on key economic issues.

As one study put it, "Nonvoters tend to support increasing government services and spending, guaranteeing jobs, and reducing inequality" more than voters, by about 17 percentage points. This includes whites as well as Black and Latino non-voters. [20]

The Democrats cannot mobilize the forces needed to defeat the right, in part because they cannot implement any policies capable of addressing the plight of the majority that might attract these left-leaning non-voters.

Nationally the Democrats have been losing elections at just about every level since 2009. In that year, during the 111th Congress the Democrats had 257 members in the House of Representatives. By 2015, in the 114th Congress that was down to 188 Democrats, the lowest number since the 80th Congress in 1947-49, over which time voter participation rates fell from 48% to 42% in off-year Congressional elections.

In 2016 the Democrats won back just six seats in the House. [21] Between 2009 and 2015 the Democrats lost 203 seats in State Senates and 716 in State Houses or Assemblies. An indication of what was to come in Ohio and Pennsylvania in 2016 could be seen in the loss of 21 Democratic seats in the state legislatures of each of these states between 2009 and 2015. [22]

Consequences of Failure

This time, however, the falling Democratic vote meant the victory not of a run-of-the-mill conservative or even a Tea Bagger, but of a racist demagogue bent on doing serious damage. And he will.

There will be resistance. Rather, there will be increased resistance. And this will offer new possibilities for organizing, even in a more hostile atmosphere. At the same time many, including not a few on the socialist left, will run for cover in the Democratic Party's "Big Tent," arguing that now is not the time to take on the Democrats, that the great task is to elect a Democratic Congress, any Democratic Congress, in 2018 to rein in Trump just as the Republicans blocked Obama after 2010, and so on.

But such a political direction will only reinforce the Democrats' neoliberalism, digital-dependency,

and failed strategies. We had better bear in mind what this approach has not done for the past four decades and will not do in the coming years.

It will not significantly or permanently increase voter turnout for working-class people, especially African-American and Latino voters. The rate of voter turnout has fallen for the past few decades and particularly for off-year Congressional elections.

Both Black and Latino rates of voter participation in off-year elections, long below average, have nose-dived since 2010 and did not recover in 2016 despite the threat of a Trump victory. [23]

Nor will the centrist liberalism, much less neoliberalism, of Democratic incumbents and most likely candidates win back those white working-class people or those in union households who have been voting Republican for decades, much less the recent angry Trump converts.

Politics as usual have failed! Who put Trump in the White House? The Democrats.

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P.S.

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Footnotes

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