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Publication date

2020

Document Version

Final published version

Published in

Atlantisch Perspektief

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Hull, K. (2020). Lost and Found: Trump, Biden, and White Working-Class Voters. *Atlantisch Perspektief*, 44(5), 11-16. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48600591>

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Lost and Found: Trump, Biden, and White Working-Class Voters

Katy Hull

In the 2016 election, Donald Trump garnered the support of two out of every three white voters without a college education. Making up more than sixty percent of Trump voters in the last election, these working- and lower-middle-class white Americans were instrumental in the Republican's victory. Their votes will likely be just as influential in the upcoming presidential election.¹ This article has three purposes. First, it explains why Donald Trump was so successful with non-college-educated white (NCEW) voters in 2016.² Second, it analyzes the impact of the Trump presidency on these Americans' welfare and political affiliations. Finally, it assesses Joe Biden's capacity to appeal to this group in November's election.

The 2016 election marked the climax of a process that began in the early 1970s, as the Republican Party gained the loyalty of some white working-class voters who had traditionally voted Democratic. Economic and cultural factors accounted for this shift in allegiances. The decline of the manufacturing sector in the 1970s weakened the link between unions, good jobs, and the Democratic Party. Meanwhile, the civil rights and student movements prompted cultural changes that felt alien to some working-class whites. Both Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan capitalized on white Americans' feelings of economic decline and cultural embattlement. Both loosened the historical ties between working- and lower-middle-class whites and the Democratic Party.

Trump built on Nixon and Reagan's approach by appealing to NCEWs' economic concerns and cultural grievances in 2016. On the campaign trail he made frequent pitches to the material interests of this group. Trump pledged to revive American manufacturing by walking back free trade deals, and he promised to protect Americans wages and taxes by blocking illegal immigration. The candidate stated that when he was president he would "fight for every last American job."³

Simultaneously, Trump appealed to the emotions of the white working class. A narrative of fairness resonates strongly with this group. Many working-class whites follow traditions that the political scientist Walter Russell Mead has labeled "Jacksonian"—after the seventh president.⁴ These Americans have a strong work ethic and powerful sense of fairness. The sociologist Arlie Hochschild describes "a story that *feels* as if it were true" to many in this group. According to this story, NCEWs have spent decades laboring. It is as if they have been standing in a long line, patiently waiting. But the line has barely moved forward because successive presidents have allowed non-whites to jump ahead in the queue.

By 2016 the feeling that governing elites had cheated white working Americans out of their just rewards was a powerful undertow in politics. Trump echoed these sentiments to great political effect. China's approach to trade with the United States was "the greatest theft in the history of the world," he said. Vastly overstating the opportunities available to illegal immigrants, Trump ruminated that it was "unfair" that somebody could simply run across the border and become a citizen. It went against the principle of waiting your turn in the line, he said.⁵

Most of Trump's NCEW supporters found the accusation that they were racist deeply offensive. They believed it was a question of fairness, not race. Many of these voters, of course, failed to recognize that, in the past, the odds had been stacked heavily in their favor: the relative decline they experienced was, in reality, an approach toward a level playing field for still disadvantaged groups. One of the strengths of Trump's campaign slogan, "Make American Great Again" (MAGA), was that it did not force disgruntled white voters to reckon with historical reality. Trump's campaign team never specified when—precisely—America had been so great. Instead, MAGA evoked an imaginary past, in which NCEW men had prospered at nobody's expense. It helped Trump's base believe that all they were asking for was a fair deal.

In 2016 Donald Trump encapsulated NCEWs' feelings of marginalization. While armchair psychologists—and some real ones—diagnosed him as a narcissist, his best speeches rang with empathy. At a metals recycling plant in Pennsylvania, the candidate told workers that he understood how they felt betrayed by their elected leaders, as they watched from the "sidelines" while their factories closed. He realized that it was not just about lost salaries. It was about the "heartache" that came from losing the jobs that they loved.⁶

Trump and Mike Pence also responded deftly to Hillary Clinton's comments at a New York fundraiser, when she dismissed half of Trump's base as "racist, sexist, homophobic, xenophobic, Islamophobic" and dumped them into a "basket of deplorables." Using rhetorical strategies that go back to the American Independent Party candidate (and segregationist) George Wallace in the 1960s, Trump and Pence named by occupation the "amazing" people whom Clinton had dismissed: the "cops and soldiers, carpenters and welders," the "farmers, coal miners, teachers, veterans."⁷ By naming them all, Trump and Pence said: *I see you, your work counts, you matter to me.* They made NCEW Americans feel noticed, appreciated, and understood.

In even more personal ways, Trump also appealed to the identities of NCEW voters. As observed by Joan C. Williams, author of *White Working Class: Overcoming Class Cluelessness in America*, there is nothing incongruous about working people identifying with a billionaire businessman. On the whole, NCEW voters do not resent wealth. They resent elitism. Here Trump hit the mark, much as George Wallace had done half a century before. Wallace declared he "put ketchup on everything"; Trump demonstrated his love of Burger King and McDonald's. In the late 1960s, liberal commentators were contemptuous of Wallace's slicked-back hair and shiny suits, much

as pundits today laugh at Trump's bouffant and permaman. This kind of mockery endeared Trump to NCEW voters who knew that metropolitan elites laughed at them, also, for bad hair, bad diets, and "white trash" lifestyles. It felt like sweet justice to watch the rise of a man who was the target of *The Daily Show's* jokes. Who's laughing now? his supporters asked on election night.

TRUMP UNMASKED

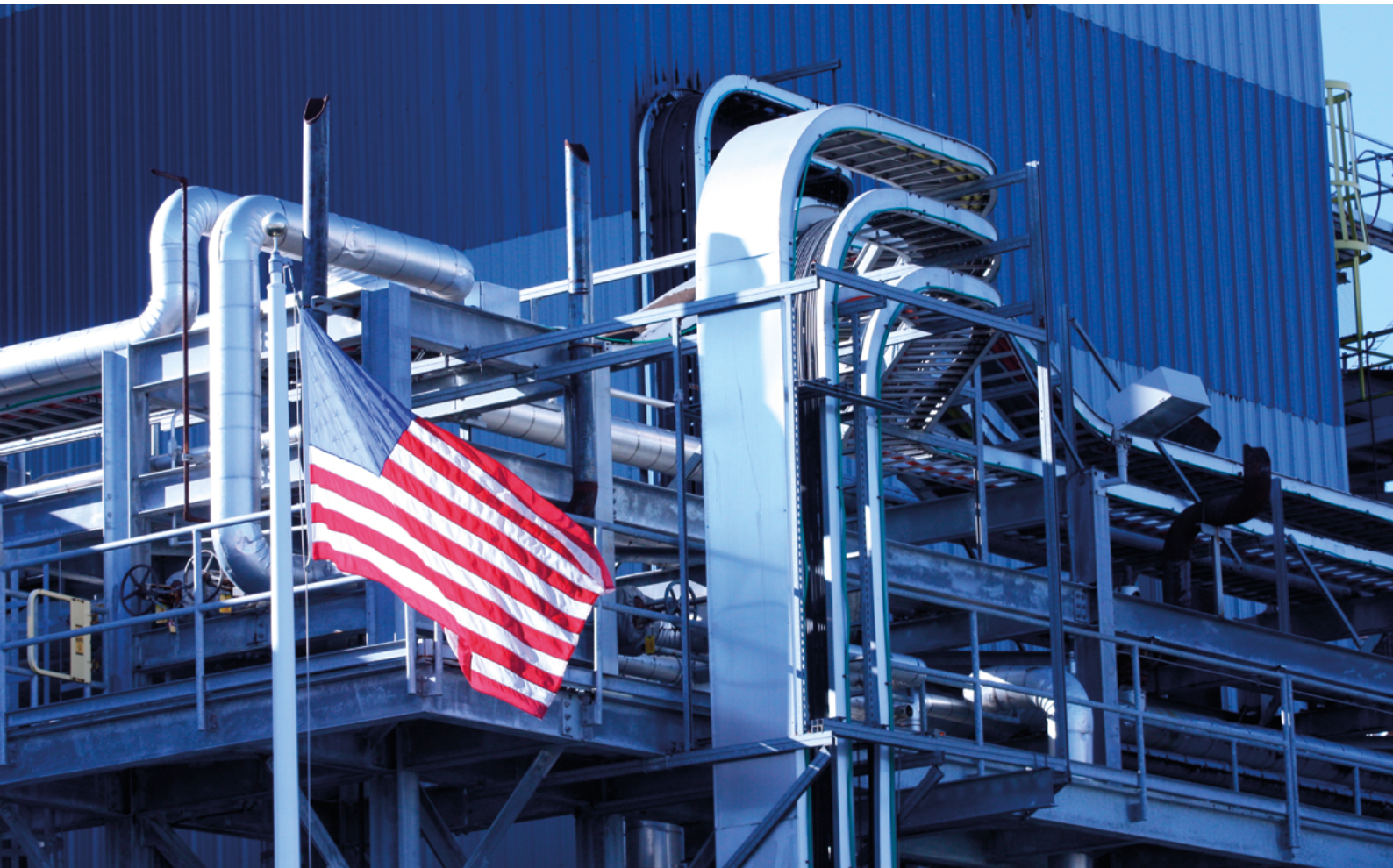
Three questions are particularly relevant as we assess Donald Trump's chances of winning on November 3. First, has the president been the tireless defender of NCEWs' interests, as he promised to be in 2016? Second, has he projected an identity that meets with their approval? And third, has he maintained sufficient loyalty among this group to secure a second term?

During his first term, Trump consistently signaled to NCEW Americans that he had their back. He presented all of his major policies—including tax cuts, border security, and tariffs—as efforts to protect their interests. Trump framed his corporate tax cut as a boon to workers. Companies would transfer their savings into paychecks and retirement accounts, he predicted. Although Trump could not get Mexico to pay for the border wall, he claimed it would "pay for itself" by reducing pressure on the federal dole.⁸ Meanwhile, he argued that his tariff regime protected Americans from unfair competition from China, boosting job creation.

The real impact of these policies on NCEW Americans was much less positive. Contrary to the president's predictions, corporations did not pass their tax savings on to workers; despite rising job numbers, wages only crept up. Tighter controls on migration deprived border towns of the workers and consumers who are essential for local economies to thrive. Meanwhile, the trade war led to decreased Chinese demand and increased input prices, prompting factories in Rust Belt states to hire fewer workers. Trump presented the tariffs as a tax on the rest of world—a punishment for "unfair" trade practices. But it was in fact a tax on American consumers, who paid more for clothes, furniture, and household appliances.

The economic boom, which lasted through the spring of this year, helped to offset working-class Americans' woes. After all, there were new jobs to be had—even if most of them were not permanent positions with decent wages and health insurance. While many of Trump's policies worked against the interests of NCEW Americans in post-industrial states, rural areas, and border towns, the growing economy helped to mask some of this reality.

The coronavirus ripped that mask off. As in the rest of



The decline of the manufacturing sector in the 1970s weakened the link between unions, good jobs, and the Democratic Party. Meanwhile, the civil rights and student movements prompted cultural changes that felt alien to some working-class whites. Depicted is an American manufacturing plant with an American flag (photo: Amanda Wayne/Shutterstock.com)

the world, the virus hit low-income groups hardest. But in the United States the arc of vulnerability is wider than in other advanced economies, due to high medical costs and weak social safety nets. Rather than responding with alacrity, Trump mocked social distancing, spread misinformation, and boasted that his televised briefings were as popular as the season finale of “The Bachelor.”⁹ Urged on by the president, some Republican-run states reopened quickly, putting their residents at even greater risk.

Donald Trump’s reaction to the coronavirus has eroded some NCEW voters’ convictions that he is promoting their best interests. When people get sick and lose family members, when their work dries up and their retirement accounts shrink, they look for leadership. Americans do not blame Trump for the existence of coronavirus, but many of them—including a significant minority of those who voted for him in 2016—do blame him for a failure to respond adequately. More than three-quarters of battleground-state voters who have changed their mind about Trump have indicated that they disapprove of his handling of the coronavirus.¹⁰

If some NCEWs are deserting Trump because he has not protected their interests, others are turning away from him because he does not embody their values. Inspired by Richard Nixon’s reactions to urban unrest, the president has invoked “law and order” as a response to the Black Lives Matter protests. But that strategy is less effective in the age of YouTube than it was in 1968, when many white Americans could turn a blind eye to the underlying causes of African Americans’ fury. Some white Americans today are coming to new realizations about racial injustice. After seeing footage of a Minneapolis police officer suffocating George Floyd, one former Trump supporter reflected that all “the complaints from the black community now become just real complaints.”¹¹ Here, too coronavirus has had an impact. Laid off and furloughed Americans now have the time to watch YouTube videos of police brutality from the discomforts of their homes. Perhaps the pandemic has also made Americans feel rawer and more empathetic to the suffering of others.

While Trump won the election in 2016 by appealing to NCEWs’ interests and identity, his performance as pres-



Trump's campaign team never specified when—precisely—America had been so great. Instead, MAGA evoked an imaginary past, in which NCEW men had prospered at nobody's expense. Pictured are supporters of Donald Trump during a Make America Great Rally on September 17, 2020 in Mosinee, Wisconsin (photo: Aaron of L.A. Photography/Shutterstock.com)

ident has fallen short on both counts. In the face of the president's complacency, the coronavirus has spread rapidly, affecting lives and livelihoods, and exposing an economy that Trump and fellow Republicans have stacked in corporations' favor. Trump has continued to appeal to Americans' sense of grievance, for instance, by blaming China for the health crisis and accusing the "Do Nothing Democrats" of hampering the economic recovery. Assuming the guise of a victim, Trump aims to echo working-class whites' feelings of unfair treatment at the hands of foreign powers and liberal elites. But it seems that growing numbers of NCEW voters have a far more generous conception of fairness than their president. This summer, after the police used tear gas to disperse protestors outside the White House, so that the president could pose before a church with the Bible, one former supporter voiced the feelings of many others: "This is not right, on any level."¹²

NOT SO SLOW JOE: BIDEN'S APPEAL TO NCEW VOTERS

Many Democrats are lukewarm about Joe Biden's third run for the presidency. Bernie Sanders's popularity shows that progressives and young people are not automatically turned off by old white men. But an old white man who is a centrist and a Washington insider does not inspire the party's left flank. And Biden's history of invading women's personal space, combined with his tendency to spew stream-of-consciousness generalizations about African Americans, makes him an anathema to a woke generation. Democratic strategists, however, realize that they could do much worse than the man whom the current president has nicknamed "slow Joe." Biden's identity and politics make him the right candidate to capture the votes of those NCEW voters who are second guessing—or downright regretting—their 2016 vote for Donald Trump.

Biden is acutely aware that the Democratic Party needs

to regain the trust of NCEW voters. In an interview with the *New York Times* editorial board this January, he suggested that the Hillary Clinton's defeat was symptomatic of a deeper problem. Democratic candidates had stopped showing up at the "the Polish American club" and "the Greek American club," he said. In other words, they stopped paying attention to the white working class. Over the course of decades, elitism had "started to seep in" to the party, along with the presumption that "people, if they don't have a good education are *ipso facto* stupid."¹³ Echoing ideas encapsulated by the political analyst Thomas Frank, Biden suggested that the Democratic Party had become a party of snobs, whose discomfort with NCEW voters made them unable—or sometimes even unwilling—to connect with their traditional base.

Biden does not struggle in this regard. His biography has ample overlay with the experience of the white working class. His roots are Irish American. His birthplace Scranton, Pennsylvania is best known as the location of the TV comedy *The Office*—a series that, for all its fictions, conjures up something of the reality of a post-industrial landscape. Biden is able to tout a family history checkered with economic challenges, adaptation, and resilience. And tout it he does. "As they say, in parts of my state, I got brung up on General Motors," he boasted to autoworkers in Michigan this September, before reminiscing that his father had made a living selling American cars.¹⁴

Biden aims to match his cultural credentials with an appeal to the material interests of NCEW voters. Like the Republican candidate for president, the Democratic candidate promises to revive jobs in manufacturing. But, in contrast to Trump's corporate tax break, Biden envisages a tax penalty on companies that engage in offshoring. He plans to encourage domestic manufacturing further with tax credits for companies that create jobs on American soil. The Democrat focuses less on punishing China, and more on incentivizing American firms to create American jobs.

Biden also promises to improve the quality of manufacturing jobs. Under the Biden plan, companies that raise workers' wages will qualify for further tax credits. Biden's commitment to improving the quality of jobs is evidenced too in his pro-union position. Launching his bid for the presidency at a Teamsters' union hall in Pittsburgh, last year, he stated, "I make no apologies. I am a union man."¹⁵ The stance adds weight to his promise that he will generate more of the kind of stable, well-paid jobs that were a given for NCEW men in previous generations.

As suggested by one union chief, Biden evokes memo-



Donald Trump and Mike Pence responded deftly to Hillary Clinton's comments at a New York fundraiser in 2016, when she dismissed half of Trump's base as "racist, sexist, homophobic, xenophobic, Islamophobic" and dumped them into a "basket of deplorables." Depicted is Hillary Clinton at a campaign rally in New Hampshire in 2016 (photo: Andrew Cline/Shutterstock.com)

ries of a time when politicians didn't treat "union" like a "dirty word."¹⁶ In less tangible ways, the Democratic candidate also strikes chords with those Americans who yearn for something they have lost. He harks back to the glory years of manufacturing every time he mentions his beloved 1967 Corvette—a gift from his father. His rhetorical style—anecdotal and more than a little repetitive—feels old-fashioned too, like the reminiscences of a grandfather or uncle.

Nods to nostalgia aside, Biden's vision is resolutely forward-looking. The candidate invariably uses the topic of manufacturing jobs to lay out plans for transition to a sustainable future. He envisages tax credits also for companies that reduce their carbon footprints, and he plans to upgrade the government's fleet of cars to American-made electric vehicles. This kind of investment project is grounded in historical experience, since major infrastructure innovations—from railways and space exploration to the internet—have benefited from state support as they edged toward commercial viability. In contrast to Trump's protectionism, which shores up sectors of the economy in which the United States' has lost its competitive edge, Biden's goal is to harness research



Biden's identity and politics make him the right candidate to capture the votes of those NCEW voters who are second guessing—or downright regretting—their 2016 vote for Donald Trump. Depicted is Joe Biden meeting an American worker on the campaign trail (photo: KelseyJ/Shutterstock.com)

and development—sectors in which the United States remains a global leader—to industry. The Democratic candidate underscores his plan with a good dose of symbolism. “They tell me, and I am looking forward to buying one, that they’re making an electric Corvette that can go 200 miles an hour,” he says in one campaign video, from the seat of his beautiful old car.¹⁷

NCEW VOTERS ON NOVEMBER 3

Polls suggest that the majority of NCEW Americans who voted for Trump in 2016 are set to vote for him again in 2020. Some will do so enthusiastically, certain that Trumponomics produced three years of growth and job creation, and confident that the president will continue to put their idea of America first. Others will do so with trepidation, uneasy with the bully who lives in the White House, yet hopeful that Donald Trump, the businessman, will bring about an economic recovery in the real world.

But, if the realities of the first three years of President Trump were enough to make a minority of his erstwhile supporters pause for thought, 2020 has prompted many changes of heart. For these voters, the president's arrogance, ignorance, and callousness may have felt unpleasant, but beside the point, when the economy was booming. Manifested in his response to current health crisis, the president's character is now of consequence for these voters.

Joe Biden is well-placed to garner the support of those

NCEWs who are regretting their 2016 vote for Donald Trump. He comfortably embodies the identity of white working- and lower-middle-class Americans. His concern for their welfare runs through his platform, which is aimed at producing stable, decent, and sustainable jobs. The Democratic candidate conveys his respect for the intelligence of working Americans by presenting them with policies that are sophisticated, economically rational, and grounded in historical experience. More than most other politicians, he does a good job of noticing them, talking to them, and appearing to care.

Katy Hull is a lecturer in American Studies at the University of Amsterdam. Her book, *The Machine Has a Soul: American Sympathy with Italian Fascism* will be published in January 2021 by Princeton University Press.

Would you like to react?

Mail the editor: redactie@atlcom.nl.

1. Thanks to Mark J. Biros for his comments and suggestions. The books referenced in this article are: Arlie Russell Hochschild, *Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right* (New York: New Press, 2016); Joan C. Williams, *White Working Class: Overcoming Class Cluelessness in America* (Boston: Harvard Business Review Press, 2017); and Thomas Frank, *Listen Liberal: Or What Ever Happened to the Party of the People* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2016).
2. Education is a viable—if imperfect—proxy for class in the United States, with the absence of a college degree signaling working and lower-middle class and a college degree signaling upper-middle class and elite.
3. Donald Trump, speech in New York, September 15, 2016.
4. Walter Russell Mead, “The Jacksonian Tradition and American Foreign Policy,” *National Interest*, Winter 1999/2000.
5. Donald Trump speech in Fort Wayne, May 1, 2016; debating Hillary Clinton, October 19, 2016; speech in Phoenix, August 31, 2016.
6. Donald Trump, speech in Monessen, June 28, 2016.
7. Donald Trump, speech in Des Moines, September 13, 2016; Mike Pence, speech in Washington, DC, September 10, 2016.
8. Donald Trump, twitter post, March 13, 2018, 4:24 PM.
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