

US Presidential Election: Trump Was Elected by the Disinherited White Middle Classes

It Doesn't Mean We Have to Put Up With Their Prejudice

Saturday 12 November 2016, by [ARTHUR Katie](#) (Date first published: 10 November 2016).

We've been told the election of Donald Trump, much like Brexit, revolved around the white, working-class man misguidedly rising up against the injustices of multiculturalism to claim back his birthrights. Only there's a problem with this narrative: it wasn't white working class people who constituted the majority of Trump's vote.

The moderate liberal media would have us believe that Trump and Brexit – like the increasing amount of isolationist policies and alternative right-wing parties across Europe – are the resounding echoes of anti-establishment sentiment among the white working classes who are increasingly hostile to multiculturalism due to a rise in xenophobic political rhetoric. We've seen many narratives explaining how intersections of austerity and globalisation have created a generation of dispossessed and very angry voters who are reclaiming their alienation by voting against the establishment that has displaced them.

In some respects this is true. As Aaron Bastani points out, the lower-income vote swung a significant 16 points toward the Republican candidate, contributing to Hillary Clinton missing out on important margins. But if we look at the exit polls for the election [[1](#)], besides race (and certainly this is primarily an issue of race), income is one of the most distinctive determinants for voter choice, with 52% of those earning less than \$50k a year voting for Clinton and only 41% voting for Trump. In contrast, 49% of those earning over \$50k a year voted for Trump. The intersection between race and class in American society is certainly at play here, but it also highlights that it was feeling of disenfranchisement in the *middle class* that swung the vote – some of the millions of people who only four years before had cast their ballot for Barack Obama.

The 'Red Democrat' [[2](#)] has been seen before in US politics. In the 1980 and 1984 presidential elections, the Republicans swept up Democrat voters across traditionally blue states. Then, like now, the economy had sunk in the years preceding the election. In a study of white voters just north of Detroit in Michigan, the pollster Stan Greenberg found 66% had voted for Ronald Reagan in 1980 compared to 63% for John F. Kennedy in 1960. He concluded that these voters no longer identified with the Democratic party because they felt their economic aspirations were being displaced by policies to promote the very poor, women, and racial minorities. Greenberg's book was aptly called *Middle Class Dreams* [[3](#)].

The historian Nancy Isenberg provides a similar analysis of the Red Democrat today. Isenberg calls Trump supporters 'the disinherited': those who are not at the bottom of society but who predict, fear and resent their descent into it. These voters hate the political establishment and hate elites of all kinds, because these elites not only promote the interests of women, racial minorities and the poor, but they have the nerve to patronise and look down on the 'hard-working taxpayer' in the process.

As such, painting the Trump vote as one dominated by the uneducated white working class is particularly problematic when in fact it is the educated white middle classes leading the fore. We think of the typical Trump supporter as the white, middle-aged truck driver from the midwest, when in reality it's more likely to be a white college graduate.

As Phil McDuff recently pointed out with regard to Brexit, these narratives of the working class are used as political momentum as and when it suits the agenda of politicians. By allowing our politicians and the mainstream press to hinge the argument solely on austerity, welfare, and protecting the fast-eroding national rights of the working classes, we avoid a discussion of the values consolidated by the rise of the petty bourgeoisie in the late 18th century that set the stage for this election result.

Today, the up-ending of the social order caused by the simultaneity of moderate (neo)liberal consensus and growing inequality creates a nostalgia for the land of old, when the USA stood strong on the world stage, led the global pursuit of capitalist innovation, and 'American values' were hard-coded through the nuclear family as the ultimate disciplining technology. It creates nostalgia for myths of stability through homogeneity. It creates social rifts easily exploited by social conservatism and scape-goating. It allows a new kind of establishment figure, the outsider, who divides to conquer at a time when people are feeling most threatened by unity.

Locating these feeling historically, however, does not excuse them. After the vote to leave the EU in Britain, I witnessed such outpourings of anger and frustration on social media that I spoke about the need to empathise and understand with the anger the vote represented. I believed we could build bridges to negate the alienation of these voters, to overcome the neocolonial 'divide and rule' tactics of those in power.

Unfortunately that got old very quickly. It feeds into a narrative that says women, black and brown communities, the working class and marginalised minorities in society must calmly and sensibly listen to the racism, misogyny, homophobia and xenophobia espoused by half of the population without naming it as such or calling it out for risk of offending the speaker. We have been told to be patient and courteous, that if we question the right of these people to mourn the golden years of empire and social hierarchy, we risk polarisation and further punishment.

Why is it on the people who have been marginalised and oppressed for centuries to appease the crumbling of petty bourgeois dreams? To stand in solidarity with the struggle to sacrifice our rights and lives to aid middle-class insecurity?

The polarisation has already happened. It's happened because the powerful made the rules of class a zero-sum game and can't stand it when we try to re-write them. The emotion is already there - it's in the failure of the status quo to see and question the privilege, fear and anger that drives their desire to maintain and reinforce inequality. If you are truly afraid of strong women, of emancipated black and brown communities, of visibly queer folk, then you *should* be made to question why you feel that way, and why you think it is acceptable to feel that way.

Growing inequality, disinheritance and disillusionment don't make these prejudices acceptable. It is time to bypass the scapegoating and put the blame where it really lies: with those in power. There are ways to take down the establishment, protest an unjust social order and fight for a better system that do not involve taking away from those who are most vulnerable and have least.

If you voted for Trump, you should be ashamed of your selfishness. Don't demand minorities stand in to ease your conscience - you knew what you were voting for and who you were throwing under the bus. We're sick of listening to you. We've been fighting this bullshit long before Donald Trump was

born, and we won't stop just because he's been elected president.

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P.S.

* "Trump Was Elected by the Disinherited White Middle Classes, It Doesn't Mean We Have to Put Up With Their Prejudice". Published 10th November 2016:

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Footnotes

[1] <http://edition.cnn.com/election/results/exit-polls>

[2] Red is the Republican colour and blue the Democrat's. ESSF

[3] https://books.google.fr/books?id=0bL60Sv9-O8C&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q&f=false