

Race PLUS Pocket Book Issues

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How can progressives best respond to Donald Trump's election? The current debate rages between building a coalition of identity groups, key among them racial minorities, or instead unifying around pocket book issues. This is a false choice. For decades politicians beholden to economic elites have stoked status resentments to facilitate their hijacking of government and the economy. No one better epitomizes this swindle than Donald Trump. **Rightwing identity politics generates broad popular support for politicians and policies that transfer our nation's wealth to the new robber barons.** To meaningfully help working people, progressives must simultaneously engage identity plus economic concerns.

Race played a decisive role in the 2016 presidential election

Even progressives frequently use the term "identity politics" to minimize and dismiss the demands of racial minorities, women, the LGBTQ community, labor, and other relatively powerless groups, while presuming that more powerful groups do not organize around identity. But political scientists have long recognized that the central organizing principle in American politics is precisely identity—competing conceptions of who we are, what we deserve, who threatens us, who belongs, and who does not.

In particular, white identity has historically been central to American politics—from efforts limiting citizenship to "white persons" in the 1790s to Andrew Jackson's frontier coalition in the 1820s, from Manifest Destiny and westward expansion in the 1840s to the supposed threats to whites from slavery leading up to the Civil War, from fear of eastern and southern European immigrants in the early 1900s to the furor over civil rights in the 1950s and 60s.

Continuing this pattern, white identity played an overwhelming role in 2016. Roughly 9 out of 10 Trump voters were white.¹ Trump bested Clinton among whites in almost every major demographic cohort: among men, women, and in every age bracket. Only among women with a college degree did Clinton win a majority of the white vote, a bare 51 percent. Trump's debt to white voters was easily predicted from

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the polls, which consistently highlighted the importance of racial resentment to his appeal.² Trump's victory is firmly rooted in white identity politics.

Those skeptical that race played a large role frequently emphasize that some counties carried twice by Obama flipped to Trump. First, this involves a tiny slice of the electorate, likely less than 7 percent of Obama voters.³ Second, Obama ran as a change candidate; in 2016, Trump was the change candidate. Third, sexism played a large role in Trump's win, a dynamic Obama did not face. Finally, the election results more directly reflect not Democrats jumping ship but Democrats staying home, combined with Trump's ability to mobilize new voters.⁴ Focusing on the Obama-Trump voter is less a successful rebuttal than a form of denial.

Likewise, the exit poll cited most often to demonstrate that class rather than race explains Trump's victory actually highlights race's importance. It's true that Trump won among whites without a college degree by a margin of 37 percent (versus a 3 percent margin among white college graduates). But among non-whites with no college degree—a group more economically precarious than their white peers—Clinton won by 56 percent. As John Hudak of the Brookings Institution observes, “The conversation around the ‘economically marginalized’ has focused almost exclusively on white working class voters, and that is a travesty. There are many other Americans who are not traditionally grouped under the heading ‘white working class voters’ who remain economically marginalized—and most of them voted for someone other than Donald Trump.”⁵ Progressives must stop talking about the “white working class” in ways that treat “white” as an empty modifier.

Race's preeminent role was no fluke

Trump made race a cornerstone of his appeal. From his opening invective against Mexicans as rapists to his repeated attacks on Muslims, Trump used narratives of racial peril to motivate his base.

Emphasizing race formed part of a larger campaign rooted in identity politics that also centrally involved gender. On the trail, Trump demeaned women based on looks, promised to restore traditional family values, and excused his bragging about sexual assault as mere locker room talk; meanwhile, crowds at his rallies thrilled to chants of “Trump that Bitch.”

Class identity also constituted an important element of Trump's appeal—not class as wealth, but class as social position. Trump postured as a billionaire common man—a man of great wealth but one despised by the same coastal elites who supposedly look down on average folks. Trump used his mangled grammar

and crude insults to burnish an anti-elitist image as someone ready to stick it to the snobs. Meanwhile, his tirades against “political correctness” combined both status resentments and common man anti-elitism. Many of his fans saw sensitivity to minority concerns as something forced down their throats by condescending cultural elites.

In stressing identity, Trump drew on a “dog whistle” playbook written by the Republican Party more than fifty years ago. This strategy calls for waging a culture war around gender, elitism, and especially race, using coded and not so coded terms to trigger strong resentments.

From Nixon’s Southern Strategy to Reagan’s attacks on welfare queens, then from the elder George Bush’s Willie Horton ad all the way up to slanders against Obama as a Muslim and a food stamp president, the GOP has made racial grievance a core draw. When Trump repeatedly invoked Nixon’s talk of a “silent majority” desperate for “law and order,” he confirmed his deep debt to Republican race baiting.

In a country that is 62 percent white, today’s Republican Party draws roughly 90 percent of its support from white voters and 98 percent of its elected officials are white. This did not happen by accident; it reflects decades of strategy, with Trump a major beneficiary. No Democratic candidate for president has won a majority of the white vote since 1964.⁶

This is NOT a story about bigotry

Many progressives reject claims about the importance of race in 2016 because they cannot believe that most of Trump’s supporters are bigots. As a recent *New York Times* headline put it, “Sorry, Liberals. Bigotry Didn’t Elect Donald Trump.”⁷

In so reasoning, progressives misunderstand the role of race. To say that racial aggrivement fuels American electoral politics is not say that America is country of bigots. Yes, there are some—and Trump along with his chief strategist Steve Bannon makes them feel welcome. But the vast majority of Trump supporters are not motivated by hate.

Racism takes many forms. For most folks, it’s unconscious. As far as most of us are concerned, we oppose racism. But even so, on the level of unexamined assumptions and unconscious thoughts, we all too often accept ugly racial stereotypes about white superiority and non-white inferiority.

GOP strategy has long exploited this tension between supporters who consciously reject racism but simultaneously accept pernicious stereotypes. The main point of dog whistling is to recruit voters who would reject any candidate who openly claimed to represent white interests—but who nevertheless respond to subtle narratives of white racial solidarity. Trump did not say “make America white again,” but his campaign events nevertheless repeatedly conveyed that message.

When progressives understand race solely in terms of bigotry—or shy away from talking about racism because it’s a fraught conversation—they play into conservative hands. GOP strategists certainly understand that racism takes many forms, but it’s in their interest to insist that racism must look like a Klan hood and burning cross. This lets them defend their dog whistling as “not racism” because they manage to use no racial slurs. Progressives must stop repeating this very same argument, must stop denying that racism in electoral politics is a real problem, and must learn to talk about race in a compelling fashion.

Class

Pocket book issues also clearly played a large role in Trump’s victory. He positioned himself as a champion of good-paying blue collar jobs and an opponent of unfair trade deals and globalization. Meanwhile, the Democrats’ own deep ties to Wall Street and their tepid support for labor created space for Trump’s faux economic populism. As a result, Clinton did far worse than Obama among voters making less than \$50,000. While she won this group by a margin of 12 points, that was roughly half of Obama’s 22 percent margin in 2012. Likewise, Clinton won by a margin of 9 percent among union households, but again, this was half of Obama’s 18 point lead in 2012.⁸

Democratic support declined precipitously among the white working class. Even so, this does not suggest that financial distress was the principal factor motivating Trump’s voters. It bears reiterating that though support from low-income families and union households dropped sharply, Clinton nevertheless enjoyed comfortable margins over Trump among both groups.

Careful engagement with Trump’s supporters also undercuts the idea that economic anxiety was the principal motivator. Reporting on a massive Gallup poll released in August, the *Washington Post* found that “those who view Trump favorably have not been disproportionately affected by foreign trade or immigration, compared with people with unfavorable views of the Republican presidential nominee. The results suggest that his supporters, on average, do not have lower incomes than other Americans, nor are they more likely to be unemployed.”⁹ Seemingly confirming these findings, a post-election Pew Research

Center analysis shows that Trump's support came overwhelmingly from middle- rather than low-income counties.¹⁰

Identity as much as financial position seemed to matter to Trump voters. For instance, among white born-again or evangelical Christians, 80 percent voted for Trump compared to 16 percent for Clinton. This result is important not just because of the whopping 64 percent margin, but because of the size of the white evangelical vote. While much has been made about Clinton's overwhelming dominance among non-whites (she won with a 53 point spread), this lead was effectively nullified by Trump's victory among white evangelicals. This group made up 26 percent of all voters, roughly equal to non-whites at 29 percent.

Race, religion, and educational attainment all seem more important in shaping who voted for Trump than financial stress.¹¹ In turn, feelings about race—and also about gender roles—are complexly interwoven with religion and education. Progressives cannot understand, let alone speak effectively to, white voters without addressing identity.

From Financial Stress to Scapegoating

Economics combined with race, rather than either alone, drove Trump's support. The stock story explaining the connection between race and class is that economic stress leads people to look for scapegoats. Feeling financially squeezed, voters look around for someone to blame, and rightwing politicians point to other working people to distract attention from the role of concentrated wealth. Bernie Sanders' campaign showed that many working people will respond when the finger points instead directly at corporations and family dynasties.

But this stock story has a downside: it assumes that economic pain comes first, and so, it implies that finances are more fundamental than scapegoating. This contributes to the sense that progressives should focus primarily, or even exclusively, on pocket book issues.

In fact, however, racial resentment is a powerful political force that preceded—and helped fuel—the rise of a rigged economy. The white working class started fleeing the Democratic Party because of race and other cultural resentments at a time of relative prosperity. In 1964, 3 out of 5 whites voted for a Democratic candidate who promised to expand the New Deal into a War on Poverty. Just eight years later, this Democratic landslide was reversed in an even bigger rout when 2 out of 3 whites threw in with Nixon. This tectonic shift of whites into the Republican Party—which we live with today—came before the oil shocks,

stagflation, and deindustrialization of the 1970s, and indeed would itself propel popular support for regressive economic policies.

We cannot lose sight of the independent power of racial resentment. Many whites respond to culture war appeals even when they are relatively economically secure—though it's also true that today many relatively well-off whites rightly fear a future of declining economic prospects for themselves and their children. Nevertheless, conditioned to fear for their place in a society that is rapidly becoming more racially mixed, or struggling to understand their roles in families moving beyond patriarchy, many whites think of their "interests" in terms of identity, status, and respect, not just nickels and dimes. Talking to these whites about pocket book issues alone will not sway their vote.

Moreover, a class-only strategy risks alienating the Obama coalition—the people of color, women, and Millennials who provide the party's energy as well as its demographic future. It betrays their lived experiences to ask them to ignore the threats of mass deportation, mass incarceration, abortion restrictions, and religious tests, out of some presumably more basic economic interests shared in common with white men.

Identity and the Rigged Economy

Just as we cannot talk about financial issues alone, progressives cannot make headway with many whites solely by stressing the immorality of racial resentment. Most whites—especially but not exclusively Trump supporters—simply don't believe that racism is a big problem socially or that they, individually, are prejudiced.

Instead, the progressive conversation about identity must stress how racial and other group resentments help build support for the rigged economy that hurts everyone. This requires laying bare the rightwing strategy that over the last half century built popular support for shifting trillions of dollars to corporate tycoons.

Through the 1960s, the progressive coalition included working class whites in addition to African Americans, relatively well-off liberals, and other groups. But beginning in that decade, the civil rights movement changed American politics, and created an opening for culture war wedge issues.

Confronting challenges to their racial position—and in the years to follow, their gender roles—many whites were unsure how to react. For their part, politicians had a choice: encourage the shift toward equality, or pander to grassroots fears. Reactionaries chose the second route. One goal was to win votes. The deeper agenda was to convince the white working class to see government as a threat. When the donor class and the politicians who serve them succeeded in making government the enemy, they gained greater leeway to refashion government to serve their own interests.

The conservative playbook was and remains simple: First, confirm that whites (and men) are right to fear and resent minorities. Second, blame government for forcing unwanted integration, for refusing to control non-whites through lax criminal laws and open borders, and for doling out welfare to undeserving minorities. Third, urge voters to punish government, by cutting taxes for the rich, by slashing social spending, and by getting government out of the way of business. Easy as 1-2-3, conservatives sell the white working class and especially men the policy preferences of the corporations and billionaires.

To move forward, connect race and economic inequality

The ultimate goal of progressives should be to make sure that government works for everyone, not just the largest corporations and the wealthiest families. Responsive government is indispensable to economic fairness, racial equity, the environment, criminal justice, immigration reform, a strong labor movement—in short, to every issue progressives care about.

To regain control of government, progressives must directly address the divide-and-conquer politics employed by the right. This doesn't mean blaming white men for being racist or sexist, nor does it mean neglecting economic issues.

To the contrary, it requires that Democrats develop and spread a narrative about how political opportunists have used race, gender, and other identities to divide us, to demonize government in the eyes of many working class whites, and to prevent us from joining together in a broad-based coalition to fight widening inequalities of income, wealth, and political power. Democrats must re-tell the story of the last fifty years, emphasizing how race and other culture-war issues have been used to divide and conquer. This is fundamentally a story of shared interests and a common enemy.

Build a renewed sense of social solidarity

More than a story of interests and blame, Democrats must also offer a positive alternative identity—one capable of supplanting the false allure of racism and sexism to which too many succumb. The right wages politics first and foremost on the basis of identity, recognizing that people's sense of themselves is often more important to them than the thickness of their wallet. Meanwhile, the Democratic Party presents itself as a coalition of minorities, each with discrete identities but united by a few shared interests. This plays into the conservative rhetoric that liberals care more about minorities than they do about the silent majority of whites, and especially, white men. It also leaves existing identities intact and even hardens them, giving whites and particularly white men little room to reimagine themselves outside of relations of superiority and inferiority.

Democrats must respond by invoking not just shared interests but a shared identity. This would be true simply in the face of demographic change. As Robert Putnam cautions, "the central challenge for modern, diversifying societies is to create a new, broader sense of 'we'."¹² But it is all the more important when economic elites foster social division to facilitate their hijacking of society.

The basis for this new identity is right in front of us. Our deepest national ideals insist that everyone is created equal and that out of many, we forge one people. Progressives must seek to fulfill the American Revolution by once again broadening what it means to be American. The future belongs to a coalition, not of minorities, but of Americans committed to the belief that our fates are linked, and that only by seeing ourselves in each other and by rejecting fear and division can we build a political movement to make government work for all of us.

This is not a call to celebrate American identity as a flowery but ultimately empty concept. Instead, the core progressive mission should be to make American identity meaningful for all on the levels of cultural belonging, legal rights, and concrete social position. Civil rights scholar and activist John Powell uses the language of "belonging" to make this point: "the only viable solution to the problem of othering is one involving inclusion and belongingness. The most important good we distribute to each other in society is membership. The right to belong is prior to all other distributive decisions since it is members who make those decisions."¹³

To reclaim government and to create a broadly shared prosperity, progressives must build a renewed sense of solidarity in America—a shared identity as part of a multi-racial social movement coming together to retake the country from the rising plutocrats. A sense of belonging across the lines of race, class, and gender is a necessary precondition for a new politics and a new political coalition.

Endnotes

¹ Election results are drawn from CNN's election exit polls, and are subject to revision as better data emerges. Based on CNN's exit polls, non-Hispanic whites contributed 86 percent of Trump's votes, and Hispanics of all races added a further 6.8 percent. On the 2010 census, more than half of Hispanics identified as white, so most likely at least 3.4 percent of Trump's support came from white Hispanics, raising the white portion of Trump's vote to 89.4 percent. More careful work on Latino voting finds that CNN's numbers overestimate the number of Latinos voting for Trump, which would mean that Trump's debt to non-Hispanic whites is higher than reported. Gabriel Sanchez and Matt A. Barreto, "In record numbers, Latinos voted overwhelmingly against Trump," *Washington Post*, November 11, 2016.

² Philip Klinkner, "The easiest way to guess if someone supports Trump? Ask if Obama is a Muslim," *Vox.com*, June 2, 2016; Michael Tesler, "Views about race mattered more in electing Trump than in electing Obama," *Washington Post*, November 22, 2016. See also Zack Beauchamp, "White riot: How racism and immigration gave us Trump, Brexit, and a whole new kind of politics," *Vox.com*, November 4, 2016.

³ Sean McElwee, "Obama-to-Trump voters are not a myth—but they're also not the real story," *Salon.com*, November 27, 2016.

⁴ David Leonhardt, "The Democrats' Real Turnout Problem," *New York Times*, November 17, 2016.

⁵ John Hudak, "A reality check on 2016's economically marginalized," Brookings Institution, November 16, 2016.

⁶ I detail this history in my book, *Dog Whistle Politics: How Coded Racial Appeals Have Reinvented Racism and Wrecked the Middle Class* (2014).

⁷ David Paul Kuhn, "Sorry, Liberals. Bigotry Didn't Elect Donald Trump," *New York Times*, December 26, 2016.

⁸ The 2012 results are from the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, <http://ropercenter.cornell.edu/polls/us-elections/how-groups-voted/how-groups-voted-2012/>

⁹ Max Ehrenfreund and Jeff Guo, "A massive new study debunks a widespread theory for Donald Trump's success," *Washington Post*, August 12, 2016.

¹⁰ Ruth Igielnik and Rakesh Kochhar, "GOP gained ground in middle-class communities in 2016," Pew Research Center, December 8, 2016.

¹¹ Nate Silver, "Education, Not Income, Predicted Who Would Vote For Trump," *New York Times*, November 22, 2016.

¹² Robert D. Putnam, "E Pluribus Unum: Diversity and Community in the Twenty-first Century," *Scandinavian Political Studies*, Vol. 30, No. 2, 2007.

¹³ John a. powell and Stephen Menendian, "The Problem of Othering: Towards Inclusiveness and Belonging," *Othering & Belonging*, June 29, 2016.

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