

Jeffrey M. Stonecash\*

# The Puzzle of Class in Presidential Voting

DOI 10.1515/for-2017-0003

**Abstract:** The conventional wisdom is that class divisions once prevailed but in recent decades have gradually declined. Indeed, many now suggest that the working class has been voting Republican since the 1980s. The historical evidence on voting in presidential elections does not indicate that there was a decline since the 1950s. If anything, the well-off and more educated have moved somewhat more Democratic, lessening class divisions. There has, however, been a change since the 2008 election, with the working class – whether only whites or all – moving away from the Democrats. This may not mean a decline of the working class voting their interests. It may be that the economic recovery of recent years has done little to help the working class and they have taken a gamble that a businessman will help their job prospects more.

## Introduction

Does class matter in American politics? If it does, does it matter in the way we generally assume? Does the working class vote Democratic and provide an electoral base so party candidates can make issues of opportunity and fairness in receiving the benefits of capitalism central to political campaigns and debates? Or is the working class now voting Republican? In 2016 it appears Donald Trump won the presidency by attracting the White working class, especially in key states. Does this election confirm the conclusion that we are experiencing a class “inversion” in politics?

Despite the seeming simplicity of these questions, assessing what has been happening is not simple. There are disagreements about how to assess the issue. How do we define class? Do we examine just Whites or all respondents? Further complicating matters, perhaps our expectations about how class plays out are in need of reassessment. We may also need to incorporate economic trends and the impact of competing narratives of change being presented by activists, elites and politicians.

To address these questions this paper first examines the historical record of class voting in presidential elections as background for assessing 2016 results. Much of the commentary begins with references to how contemporary patterns

---

\*Corresponding author: Jeffrey M. Stonecash, Maxwell Professor Emeritus, Syracuse University, Department of Political Science, e-mail: jstoneca@maxwell.syr.edu

differ from the past. Are those summaries accurate? With that background the focus can shift to 2016. What occurred in 2016 and what framework do we use to think about class voting patterns in this election?

## The Historical Record: Have Class Divisions Declined?

The primary approach to assessing the role of class in American politics has been to rely on survey data. Anyone following these studies might be very hesitant to offer a clear answer to the question whether class divisions have declined. Class political divisions were once seen as very relevant.<sup>1</sup> Then they apparently began to decline.<sup>2</sup> Several explanations have been offered for the decline. Perhaps the general rise in affluence was making economic issues less significant.<sup>3</sup> This provides an opportunity for cultural issues to be of greater importance.<sup>4</sup> The working class is often seen as more conservative and political elites have stressed an array of issues – abortion, gay rights, lifestyle, race, authoritarianism, and policing – to pull the working class away from the Democratic Party.<sup>5</sup> By some accounts class political loyalties have been reversed. In recent years it has become common to read such statements as that made by Ron Brownstein in 2012:

If Obama survives, it will likely be the White upper middle-class that saves him. And if Romney wins, he will likely need to thank voters from the White working class, many of them of modest means. This counterintuitive dynamic is the result of one of the most powerful trends to reshape American politics over the past half-century: a “class inversion” that has scrambled each party’s core coalition of support.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup> James L. Sundquist, *Dynamics of the Party System: Alignment and Realignment of Political Parties in the United States*, Revised ed. (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 1983).

<sup>2</sup> Robert R. Alford, *Party and Society: The Anglo – American Democracies* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1963); and, Everett Carl Ladd and Charles Hadley, *Transformations of the American Party System*, 2nd ed. (New York: W.W. Norton, 1978).

<sup>3</sup> Ronald Inglehart, *Culture Shift in Advanced Industrial Society* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990).

<sup>4</sup> James Hunter, *Culture Wars: The Struggle To Define America* (New York: Basic Books, 1992); and Mark D. Brewer and Jeffrey M. Stonecash, *Split: Class and Cultural Divisions in American Politics*, (Washington, DC: CQ Press, 2006).

<sup>5</sup> Thomas Byrne Edsall and Mary D. Edsall, *Chain Reaction: The Impact of Race, Rights, and Taxes on American Politics* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1991); and, Thomas Frank, *What’s the Matter with Kansas? How Conservatives Won the Heart of America* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2004).

<sup>6</sup> Ronald Brownstein, “The class inversion: how American politics turned upside down,” *Quartz*, 08 Oct 2012. <https://qz.com/13018/the-class-inversion-how-american-politics-turned-upside-down/>.

In 2016 the voting inclinations of the White working class became a central focus as polls found they were voting Republican.<sup>7</sup> As one commentator noted, “Class is back. Arguably, for the first time since the New Deal, class is the dominant political issue. Virtually every candidate has tried appealing to class concerns, particularly those in the stressed middle- and lower-income groups. Class has risen to prominence as the prospects for middle- and working-class Americans have declined.”<sup>8</sup> There were multiple explanations offered as to why this was occurring. Was this behavior driven by economic frustration,<sup>9</sup> racial resentment,<sup>10</sup> authoritarianism,<sup>11</sup> or class resentment of how liberal commentators characterized the working class?<sup>12</sup> Regardless, it was often argued that we have experienced a lengthy transition from a politics of the lower class voting Democratic to a reversal of prior patterns. By some reports Republicans represent the working class and Democrats the well-educated.

Is this historical evolution accurate? If yes, what does it tell us about the relevance of economic issues in political debates? Are they now overshadowed by other issues? If not, and class does matter, how does it matter? To answer these questions we need to pursue several matters. First we need to review just what class means. How has and should it be defined and measured? If we can settle that we then can track what divisions have prevailed over time. If those divisions do not exist politicians cannot be sure if there is a base for appeals based on economic differences. Using historical data we can assess whether class divisions

---

**7** Ron Brownstein, “The Class Inversion of American Politics Accelerates: Donald Trump’s Republicans are becoming the Party of Blue-Collar White Voters, as College-Educated White Voters Slip Away,” *The Atlantic*, 26 Jul. 2016. <http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2016/07/college-educated-white-voters-may-decide/492995/>.

**8** Kotkin Joel, “We Now Join the U.S. Class War Already in Progress,” *The Daily Beast*, 15 Feb. 2016. <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2016/02/15/we-now-join-the-us-class-war-already-in-progress.html>.

**9** By Binyamin Appelbaum, Patricia Cohen and Jack Healy, “A Rebounding Economy Remains Fragile for Many,” *New York Times*, 14 Sep. 2016. [https://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/15/business/economy/census-poverty-income-donald-trump.html?emc=edit\\_th\\_20160915&nl=todaysheadlines&nid=3647501](https://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/15/business/economy/census-poverty-income-donald-trump.html?emc=edit_th_20160915&nl=todaysheadlines&nid=3647501).

**10** Max Ehrenfreund and Scott Clement, “Economic and Racial Anxiety: Two Separate Forces Driving Support for Donald Trump,” *Washington Post*, 22 Mar. 2016. [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2016/03/22/economic-anxiety-and-racial-anxiety-two-separate-forces-driving-support-for-donald-trump/?utm\\_term=.3f0bc9a37711](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2016/03/22/economic-anxiety-and-racial-anxiety-two-separate-forces-driving-support-for-donald-trump/?utm_term=.3f0bc9a37711).

**11** Philip Klinkner, “The Easiest Way to Guess if Someone Supports Trump? Ask if Obama is a Muslim.” *Vox*, 2 Jun. 2016. <http://www.vox.com/2016/6/2/11833548/donald-trump-support-race-religion-economy>.

**12** Victor Davis Hanson, “The Privileged vs. the White Working Class,” *National Review*, 10 Nov. 2015. <http://www.nationalreview.com/article/426810/privileged-vs-white-working-class-victor-davis-hanson>.

have diminished or even inverted. Finally, we need to understand what happened in 2016. Class was a perpetual topic, but it is not clear just how it played a role.

## Defining Class

Class is used in very different ways. To some it involves prestige or status. Traditionally it involved the relationship to the means of production. Factory workers are working class because they do not control the means of production. Some follow that logic and construct elaborate occupation classifications to define class. Others define it by the attributes that reflect likely economic position, such as education, income, or socio-economic status, which combines education, income, and occupation. Each approach has its merits.<sup>13</sup> The concern here is to utilize an indicator that has validity and can be used to track class voting over time. Self-defined status may be appealing but in a society where many may not wish to identify as working class, the responses may reflect aspirations more than reality. Socio-economic status and occupation are also appealing, but classifying occupations over time as to class becomes very problematic in an economy that is continually changing. Added to these issues is that of whether to focus just on Whites.

The two most common indicators for political analysts are education and income. They are simple and can be obtained via surveys. Each has appeal and each has limitations. Education clearly translates into job opportunities, income and status. Income reflects economic position and the resources and opportunities for families. The difficulty in choosing an indicator involves the issue of whether class is an absolute or relative situation. If education is used and over time we move from a society in which few people go to college to one in which many attend and graduate, does this suggest class is of less relevance? This issue of shifting composition is particularly relevant if only Whites are examined. The decline over time of Whites with a high school degree or less is significant. Whites with a high school degree or less were 78.5 percent of all voters in 1952. They declined to 55.9 percent in 1972, 35.4 percent in 1992, and 12.8 in 2016. If the concern is an analysis of class divisions, it is questionable to use only 12.8 percent of the voting population. We might use a more expansive education grouping of Whites to cope with change. If we use Whites without a college degree, the declines are from 87.9 percent of all voters in 1952 to 35.5 percent in 2016. The problem with

---

<sup>13</sup> For a good discussion of these alternatives see Alan Abramowitz and Ruy Teixeira, “The Decline of the White Working Class and the Rise of a Mass Upper-Middle Class, in Ruy Teixeira,” in *Red, Blue and Purple America: The Future of Election Demographics* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 2008), 109–46.

using those without a college degree is that over the last 40 years, among Whites with less than a college degree but more than a high school degree, 80 percent have been in the middle and upper thirds of the income distribution. In the last 30 years 40 percent have been in the upper third of the income distribution. An analysis of class divisions in which a substantial percentage of a group is in the upper third of the income distribution is likely to be very misleading.

Absolute income levels create similar problems. If absolute income levels steadily increase over time and there are fewer “lower” income voters does this mean that class is of less relevance? Although incomes have risen since we NES surveys started in the 1950s, economic inequality has also increased. The population in general might have greater income levels but there are large segments that are not faring well.

Given these problems with absolute education and income levels, the focus might be only on relative income groupings. The entire society may be faring better, but the crucial matter for many is their relative situation. Income is not a perfect indicator, as it can fluctuate from year to year, but it does capture the resources and possible opportunities that individuals have. Unlike education, which suggests where people might end up in society, it indicates how people are actually faring. For these reasons, relative income seems a reasonable indicator of class. Despite this appeal, most of the discussions of class in contemporary politics have revolved around those with a high school degree or less or those without a college degree, so the analysis will also use actual education levels and relative income groupings.

Even if the absolute versus relative issue can be resolved, there is still the issue of whether to include everyone or only Whites. Much of the discussion has focused on the political behavior of only Whites. That may have made sense when the electorate was almost all White. There were fewer non-White immigrants in the 1950s and many Blacks were prohibited from voting. As the population and electorate become more non-White and non-Whites comprise a substantial percentage of those with lower incomes, it seems very odd to conduct an analysis of class divisions while excluding a substantial percentage of those in the lower class. If the only concern is Whites, that focus is justified, but if the focus is whether class divisions occur, then everyone should be included. To provide results for both, the analysis will begin with only Whites and then move to everyone.

## The Political Context

Before reviewing the historical data, it is worth a brief summary of the political context. We presume that those in the lower/working class vote Democratic

and those in the upper-middle and above vote Republican because of the positions of the parties. Democrats support unions, job training programs, welfare and food stamp programs, more assistance to attend college, and worker safety regulations. Republicans seek less government and tax cuts (with the bulk going to those they see as job creators), fewer regulations, right-to-work laws in the states, and cuts in welfare and food stamp programs. These differences were pushed along during President Obama's tenure when Democrats enacted Obamacare to provide health insurance to those lacking it. The administration put forth rules to make those with salaries less than \$50,000 eligible for overtime. They established rules to make financial advisors have to put the interests of investors first. Republicans strongly opposed these initiatives. In short, the party differences, which have become more pronounced in recent decades, would seem to create a political context in which class political divisions would play out as expected.

## The Data and Questions

The data drawn here are from the ANES surveys which have been conducted since 1952. For 2016 results were provided by Edison Research, which conducted exit polls in November, 2016. The approach is to assess partisan presidential voting for those in different class groups. There are several questions to assess. Are those in the lower/working class voting less Democratic over time? How have those in the upper group behaved over time? Has a class inversion of class behavior developed, with the working class voting Republican and the upper class voting Democratic? Do the patterns for all respondents differ from those for Whites only?

To provide the reader with the raw data so he or she can form their own assessments, the data are presented graphically from 1952 through 2016. Since presidential changes have drawn the most attention, the focus here will be on results from that race. In reviewing the graphs there are three questions to focus on. Have those in different classes voted as we might expect, with those in lower groups voting more Democratic? Have there been changes over time? Has the difference between classes in Democratic support decreased or increased?

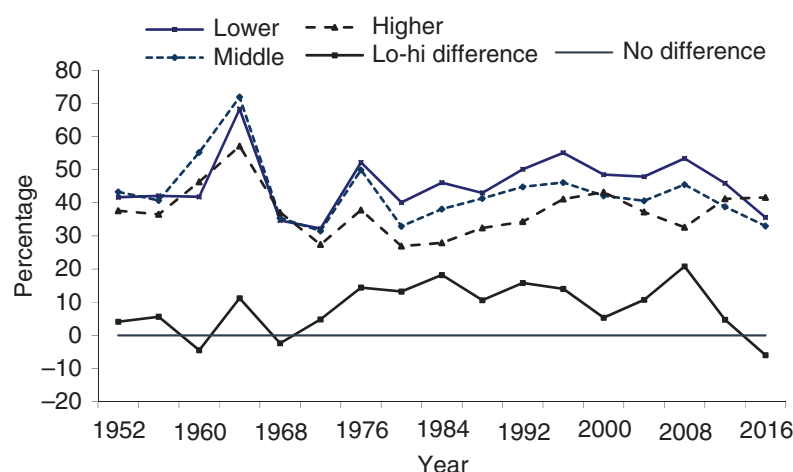
## Whites Only

Focusing first on only Whites and using education levels, over time generally only about 40 percent (with fluctuations) of those with a high school education

or less have voted Democratic. Whites with a high school degree or less have never voted strongly Democratic. Further, differences between those with a high school degree or less and those with a college degree have gradually declined. This decline, however, is not because those with less education have moved to the Republican column, but because college graduates have become more Democratic. With all the discussion of how Republicans have used cultural issues to attract the working class, the evidence suggests these emphases have alienated the well-educated.<sup>14</sup>

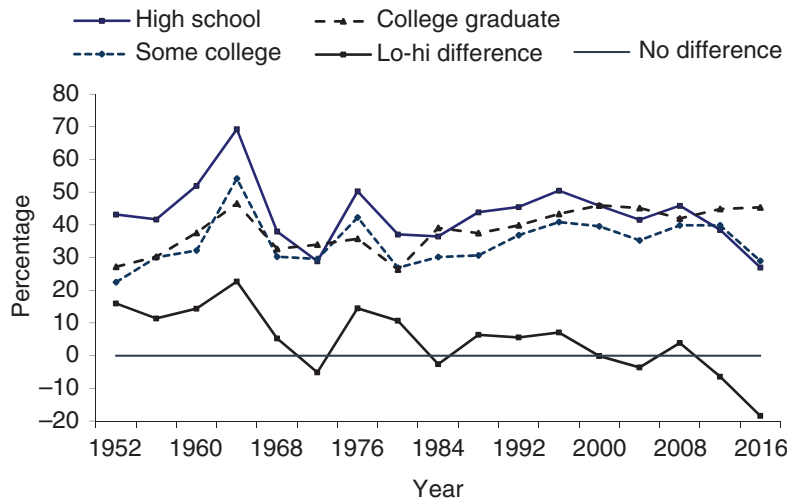
If the analysis focuses on relative income groupings for Whites, those in the lower third of the income distribution have generally voted slightly more Democratic. Again, it is important to note that despite all the discussion about Whites *recently* deserting the Democratic Party it has been an unusual year, going all the way back to 1952, in which more than 50 percent voted Democratic. It is *not* a new phenomenon for many working class Whites to vote Republican. With regard to the extent of differences in voting Democratic between lower and higher White income groups, they barely existed in the 1950s and 1960s. From 1976 through 2012 they were somewhat larger. Across all the years there is an expected class difference in voting, but it is by no means large.

For both class indicators the pattern of 2008–2016 results for Whites indicate a clear change. In 2008 lower class voters, using either indicator, were relatively strong supporters of Barack Obama. Both indicators show support for Democratic candidates declined in 2012 and in 2016 dropped significantly. The support for



**Figure 1:** Voting Democratic in Presidential Races by Income Groups, Whites, 1952–2012.

<sup>14</sup> Rebekah Liscio, Jeffrey M. Stonecash and Mark D. Brewer, “Unintended Consequences: Republican Strategy and Winning and Losing Voters,” in *The State of the Parties*, 6th ed. John C. Green and Daniel J. Coffey (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2011), 255–70.



**Figure 2:** Democratic Presidential Voting by Education Level, Whites, 1952–2012.

Hillary Clinton among Whites with a high school degree or less and those in the lower third of the income distribution is the lowest level recorded since 1952. The result is a significant class inversion among Whites in 2016.

These results support the interpretation that 2012 and 2016 were different from prior years. Among Whites class mattered, but inversely from almost all prior years. After decades of rough stability, Whites with a high school degree or less voted less Democratic. Those with a college degree have very gradually moved more Democratic. The net effect is a diminished and inverted class division. Does that mean that class, as we expect it to matter, no longer matters? Indeed, are Republicans on the way to becoming the party of the working class?<sup>15</sup> Are the electoral bases of American politics being fundamentally transformed?

## All Voters

There are reasons to pause before using an analysis of Whites to form that conclusion. Whites are a diminishing percentage of the American electorate. An analysis of Whites does not focus on the entire working class, but on the White working class. It is perfectly appropriate to be interested in how the White working class is voting in a changing economy, but that does not constitute assessing class divisions. All voters need to be considered before reaching any conclusions.

<sup>15</sup> Ross Douthat and Reihan Salam, *Grand New Party: How Republicans Can Win the Working Class and Save the American Dream* (New York: Anchor Books, 2009).



Figures 3 and 4 include all voters. For both indicators, the patterns are essentially the same. Aside from 1964, Democratic voting was relatively low during the 1950s–1960s, compared to later years. There was little difference in Democratic support across income groups, and modest differences across education groups. From 1976 to 2012 Democrats received their greatest support among those in the lower third of the income distribution and among those with a high school education or less. Perhaps the most interesting trend is that those with higher incomes and a college degree or more moved more Democratic after 1976. Differences across income and education groups have declined.

These results present some important issues as we struggle to decide whether class divisions have existed over time in American politics. The first

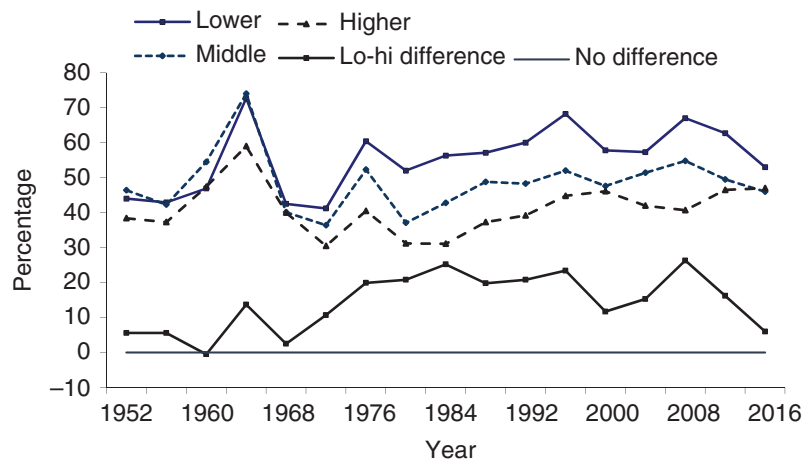


Figure 3: Voting Democratic in Presidential Races by Income Groups, All, 1952–2016.

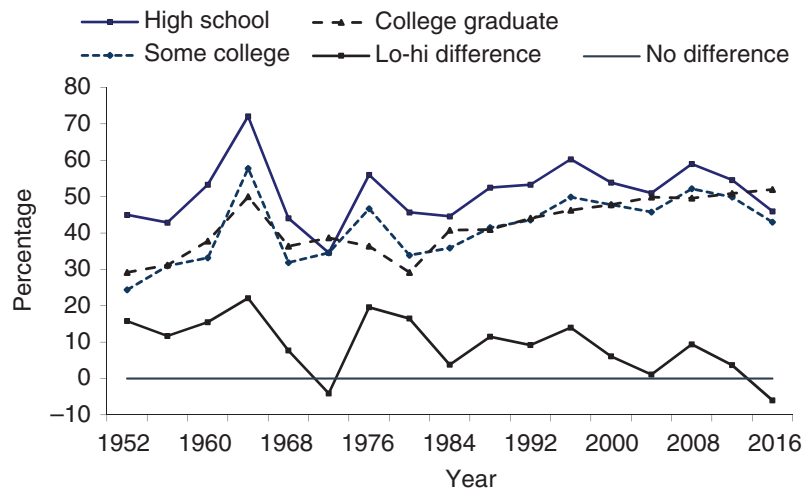


Figure 4: Democratic Presidential Voting by Education Level, All, 1952–2016.

matter is how we define “class politics.” If we define it by whether the working/lower class votes relatively more Democratic, the results indicate that for the last 40 years this occurred. If we focus on whether the working/lower class is providing an electoral base for Democrats who wish to argue for policies benefiting this group, the evidence indicates the party’s strongest support is among the working class.<sup>16</sup> If, however, we define it as the extent of difference between classes, there has been some decline in recent decades, but not for the reasons many presume. Republican candidates have alienated many of the well-educated and the more affluent, and they have moved somewhat more towards Democratic candidates, reducing differences by class. Perhaps most important, for the decades of the 1970s–2000s there is no evidence of a class inversion. These results are summarized in Table 1.

## The 2016 Election

Are 2016 results different? The results suggest that 2016 (and 2012) reflect significant changes in working class voting. If we choose the relatively high 2008 results as a comparison point, there is a decline of from 13 to 20 percent (depending on the group) from 2008 to 2016. Working class support declined significantly, enough to say an inversion occurred. Something happened. The issue for each party is

---

**16** Given these data, what explains the discrepancy from the refrain of many commentators that we have undergone a class inversion in American politics? Where did the inversion claim come from? It began with an analysis by Everett Carl Ladd. In a 1978 book (*Transformations of the American Party System*) he presented the table below and stated: “... the contemporary realignment comprises an inversion of the old class relationship in voting, an inversion first evident at the presidential level but likely to penetrate the entire range of electoral contests ...” There was no inversion in the data he presented, but more of a compression in the comparison of 1964 and 1974. His inversion conclusion, however, was drawn upon by Thomas B. Edsall in *Chain Reaction*, published in 1991, and appears to have become widespread. The evidence does not support the claim, unless the focus is only on Whites and education levels are used. For a history of this interpretation, see Jeffrey M. Stonecash, *Class and Party in American Politics* (Boulder: Westview Press, 2000).

---

### Democratic Percentage of the Congressional Ballots, White Voters by Socioeconomic Position, 1964 and 1974.

Status	1964	1974	Change
High	48	57	+9
Middle	65	62	–3
Low	74	67	–7

**Table 1:** Presidential Voting by Income and Education Levels, 1952–2016.<sup>a</sup>

	1952–1968	1972–1996	2000–2012	2016 and vs. 2000–2012	
				2016	Change
President by Income Levels – Whites Only					
Low	45.7	45.5	48.9	35.6	–13.3
Middle	49.3	40.7	41.8	33.0	–8.8
High	42.9	32.5	38.6	41.6	3.0
Difference	2.8	13.0	10.3	–6.0	
President by Education Levels – Whites Only					
HS or less	48.8	41.8	43.0	27.0	–16.0
Some college	33.9	33.9	38.7	29.0	–9.7
College +	34.9	36.6	44.5	45.4	1.1
Difference	13.9	5.2	–1.5	–18.4	
President by Income Levels – All					
Low	49.8	56.5	61.2	53.0	–8.2
Middle	51.5	45.4	50.8	46.0	–4.8
High	44.4	36.4	43.8	47.0	3.2
Difference	5.3	21.1	17.4	6.0	
President by Education Levels – All					
HS or less	51.5	49.6	54.6	46.0	–8.6
Some college	35.7	40.9	48.9	43.0	–5.9
College +	36.9	39.5	49.6	52.0	2.4
Difference	14.6	10.1	5.0	–6.0	

<sup>a</sup>2016 exit poll data were acquired from Edison Research for whites and for all voters the results are taken from <http://www.cnn.com/election/results/exit-polls>.

what these results indicate. Why did voters move and what do the changes suggest about the existence of politics and policy discussions focused around class?

Multiple interpretations were offered in 2016 for why the working class, and particularly the White working class, has moved away from the Democratic Party. Some focus on the cultural views of the working class. Others on their resentment of how liberal elites speak about them. Others focus on the economic situation the working class is facing. The interpretations have vastly different implications for whether class politics is still relevant in American politics.

The “cultural” interpretations all focus on opinions held by the working class. Perhaps they are filled racial resentment, with the working class arguing that the problems Blacks face are not due to oppression by Whites but the behavior of Blacks.<sup>17</sup> Perhaps it is because working class Whites are more prone to

<sup>17</sup> David Horowitz, “Is the Left Even on America’s Side Anymore?” *National Review*, 8 Jan. 2016. [http://www.nationalreview.com/article/429423/lefts-betrayal-america?utm\\_source=taboola&utm\\_medium=referral](http://www.nationalreview.com/article/429423/lefts-betrayal-america?utm_source=taboola&utm_medium=referral).

authoritarianism.<sup>18</sup> Perhaps the White working class is dominated by people who fear immigrants, many of whom are Muslim.<sup>19</sup> Perhaps the White working class is filled with resentment at how elites characterize them. They see snobbery in how they are portrayed.<sup>20</sup> “Whether they are the academic, media, and entertainment elites of the Left or the political and business elites of the Right, America’s self-appointed best and brightest uniformly view the passions unleashed by Trump as the modern-day equivalent of a medieval peasants’ revolt. And, like their medieval forebears, they mean to crush it.”<sup>21</sup> All these interpretations presume that the White working class has turned to Donald Trump and the Republicans because they are responding to some of the more culturally conservative views within that party.

These explanations for why the White working class moved away from the Democratic Party all are based on the argument that those holding specific opinions – racial resentment, authoritarianism – responded to Donald Trump’s appeals and voted Republican. There is no doubt that people vary on these issues, and that those with high scores on these matters are more likely to vote for a candidate espousing these opinions. The issue is whether these variations sufficiently explain changes in White working class behavior and whether such behavior signals a decline in the relevance of class as an important factor in presidential elections.

The first matter is what responses to the questions comprising these scales reflect. What does it mean to agree that “Blacks should work harder to succeed” or to choose “good manners” when asked “Please tell me which one you think is more important for a child to have: curiosity or good manners?” The premise is that someone who agrees that Blacks should work harder is filled with resentment toward Blacks, and is perhaps racist. It is also possible that someone has a mind frame that says individual hard work is the way to succeed and doubts that this work ethic has been sufficiently established. Is that resentment or expression of a sense of how the world works? The premise of the second question is that a response of “good manners” provides “a way to identify people who fit the authoritarian profile, by prizing order and conformity, for example, and desiring

---

**18** Amanda Taub, “The rise of American authoritarianism,” *Vox*, 1 Mar. 2016. <http://www.vox.com/2016/3/1/11127424/trump-authoritarianism>.

**19** Klinkner, “The easiest way to guess if someone supports Trump?”

**20** Victor Davis Hanson, “The Privileged vs. the White Working Class,” *National Review*, 10 Nov. 2015. <http://www.nationalreview.com/article/426810/privileged-vs-white-working-class-victor-davis-hanson>.

**21** Henry Olson, “To Attract Disillusioned Voters, the GOP Must Understand Their Concerns,” *National Review*, 25 Jan. 2016. <http://www.nationalreview.com/article/429744/republicans-disillusioned-voters-their-concerns>.

the imposition of those values.” It is also possible that those in the working class live in a world where doing what is expected is seen as a way to a good job. Creativity and independence may be valued in upper-middle class families, but perhaps less so in working class families. Those scoring high on these traits may be adhering to traditional interpretations of how the world works more than resenting Blacks or wanting to impose certain values on the world. There is not space here to conduct a full-fledged reviews of these scales, but there does not seem to be much caution in forming a conclusion about what these scales might reflect. Much more research is needed on these issues.<sup>22</sup>

A more important problem is that the studies done are all cross-sectional in nature. They tell us about co-variations in opinions and voting inclinations within a year. There is no assurance that they explain changes from 2008 to 2016 in White working class voting. Did authoritarianism or racial resentment increase from 2008 to 2016? Perhaps that has occurred, but no evidence to that effect has been presented. In 2008 White working class voting for Democratic candidate Barack Obama, a Black man, was relatively high, as Figures 1 and 2 indicate. To explain the declines in 2012 and 2016 we must assume authoritarianism and racial resentment increased. Without evidence of such increases, some caution is in order.

If there is one thing that is clear from recent economic reports and interviews with the White working class during the last year or so, it is that this group is not faring well. We have countless reports that wages have been declining in recent decades for those with less education.<sup>23</sup> They are having social problems of social isolation,<sup>24</sup> more health problems,<sup>25</sup> and higher suicide rates.<sup>26</sup> There has been steady job growth in recent years, but the economy is changing and those with

---

**22** For an effort to explore the views of conservatives, see Arlie Russell Hochschild, *Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right* (New York: The New Press, 2016).

**23** David Leonhardt, “The Great Wage Slowdown of the 21st Century,” *New York Times*, 7 Oct. 2014. <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/10/07/upshot/the-great-wage-slowdown-of-the-21st-century.html?smid=tw-share&abt=0002&abg=0>; PEW Research Center, “The American Middle Class Is Losing Ground,” 9 Dec. 2015. <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2015/12/09/the-american-middle-class-is-losing-ground/>.

**24** Victor Tan Chen, “All Hollowed Out: The lonely poverty of America’s white working class,” *The Atlantic*, 16 Jan. 2016. <http://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2016/01/white-working-class-poverty/424341/>.

**25** Barbara Ehrenreich, “Dead, White, and Blue: The Great Die-Off of America’s Blue Collar Whites,” *Vox Populi*, <https://voxpopulisphere.com/2016/01/21/barbara-ehrenreich-dead-white-and-blue/>.

**26** Anne Case and Angus Deaton, “Rising morbidity and mortality in midlife among white non-Hispanic Americans in the 21st century,” *PNAS*, 8 Dec. 2015, Vol. 112, No. 49. <http://www.pnas.org/content/112/49/15078.full.pdf>.

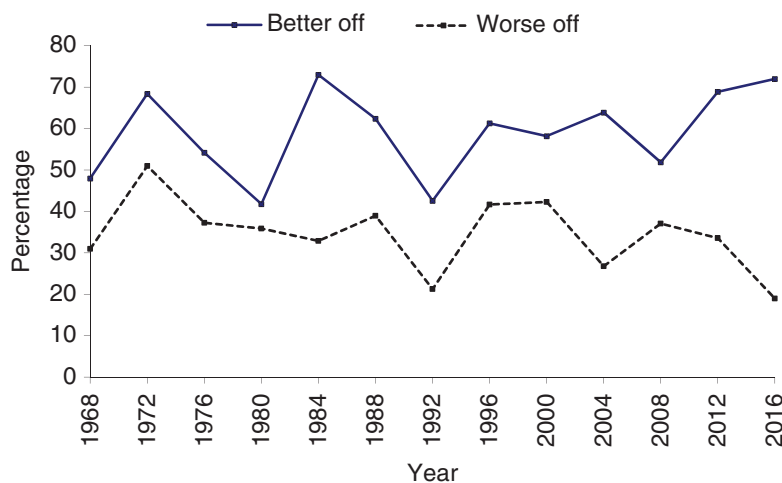
less education have not fared well. Those with more education are obtaining good jobs and wage gains.

Barack Obama may have represented a moment of hope for the White working class. The evidence, however, does not suggest that the recovery of recent years did much for them. Their wages have not gone up. Indeed, many have experienced wage declines and cuts in benefits. If a group fares poorly under a presidency, what alternative do they have? One response would be to turn against the party of the current administration and vote for the other.

The suggestion is that retrospective voting plays a significant role. Voters fluctuate in their partisan voting according to which party has produced benefits for them. Does this happen? One way to assess this is to examine the voting of those who say they are better off in the last few years and those who say they are worse off. Figure 5 shows the voting of these two groups since 1968. Voting is presented in terms of how those in the two groups voted for the party currently holding the presidency. For 2016, that means voting Democratic.

The pattern is clear that those who have fared well under an administration vote for that party. Those who have not vote against the party currently in office. The 2012–2016 results present a particularly important case of this. The divergence between those better and worse off increased in 2012 and in 2016 is greater than in any prior year. Those worse off, who are primarily but not exclusively those with lower incomes and less education, rejected the current party to a degree not seen before. Only 19 percent of those worse off voted for the Democratic Party candidate. Prior to 2016 the lowest level was 21 percent.

How does class figure in this? People certainly consider long-term party images and recent policy stands when voting for president. The parties differ on such matters. During President Obama's tenure he sought to save car manufacturers



**Figure 5:** Vote for Current Presidential Party by Recent Economic Situation, All, 1968–2016.

and the accompanying jobs. He and the Democrats passed legislation mandating equal pay for women and the Affordable Care Act to provide health insurance to those without. He passed regulations to force financial advisors to put the interests of clients first. He issued regulations to require that those making less than \$48,000 in salary be paid overtime if required to work more than 40 hours per week. The previous threshold was \$23,000. These and other policies were announced with great fanfare as a message to those less well-off that Democrats were helping them. In terms of images of helping the working class or business, it is easy to presume that the working class would vote Democratic, at least based on short-term benefits.

Although these general party images matter, immediate experiences also matter. Democrats believe they took actions to help the working class. But what if someone in that class sees no benefit? Republicans mounted a strong critique of these actions and many other regulations, arguing that they made it harder for business to function and limited the extent to which business and jobs would grow. They argued that their policies would provide jobs. To partially assess that we can examine class reactions to the Obama administration from 2008 to 2012. A review of 2016 will be possible when NES data from that election are available. Table 2 presents data on the joint effects of class and recent economic experience from 2008 to 2012.

In 2008 class, as defined by income clearly mattered. Lower income respondents went for Obama 67–31, while higher income respondents went for McCain 58–41. Reactions within each income group by recent economic experience varied a little, but not by much. By 2012 *overall* reactions within each income group were not significantly different from 2012. It is the variations within income groups that are important. By 2012 voters had 4 years to

**Table 2:** Presidential Voting by Income and Recent Experience, 2008 and 2012.

	Lower Income		Higher Income	
	Democrat	Republican	Democrat	Republican
2008				
All	66.8	30.7	41.0	58.0
Better off	63.1	31.7	35.6	63.0
Worse off	70.0	28.1	47.2	51.8
2012				
All	62.7	33.9	46.5	50.2
Better off	81.4	16.9	60.9	35.8
Worse off	45.0	49.7	24.5	72.1

assess whether the policies of the Obama administration were helping them. As noted above, President Obama had made many policy decisions intended to help those less affluent. But personal experiences can also matter a great deal. Those in the lower income group who were better off voted strongly for Obama in 2012, but among those worse off support for Obama dropped 25 percentage points. The same pattern emerged among those in the higher income group. Personal experiences played a significant role in how voters reacted to the Obama presidency. NES data are not yet available for 2016, but given the significant drop in Democratic support among those worse off and among those with a high school degree or less (Whites and all), it is very likely that the decline seen in 2012 continued in 2016. The economic recovery that began in 2009 did not benefit many with less education and they chose Trump as an alternative with more potential to help them. They acted on their interests as they saw them.

## How do We Assess the Relevance of Class?

Our logic for assessing the relevance of class is straightforward. We examine the policies proposed and enacted by party candidates and form conclusions about who benefits. We then assume that those same conclusions are shared by the electorate. If Democrats enact the Affordable Care Act which largely helps those with lower incomes, we assume they see that as a benefit and vote Democratic. If they vote Republican we assume something other than class economic issues must be driving the vote. There must be racial resentment or some aspect of cultural intolerance that is creating a vote less than expected.

The difficulty with this logic is that this presumes that the concerns of the working class are programs that address some of their needs, such as health care or college loans for their children. But to many the concerns of Democratic lawmakers do not translate into jobs. In recent years Democrats have enacted laws to regulate the financial sector (Dodd-Frank and rules that financial advisors must put the interests of clients first) and rules that those making less than \$48,000 cannot be designated management and not receive overtime. These laws or regulations do not generate jobs. There has been steady job growth since 2009, but the evidence suggests that this has not benefited the working class a great deal.<sup>27</sup> The

---

<sup>27</sup> Robert Reich, "Why the White Working Class Abandoned the Democratic Party: A key turning point in American politics," *AlterNet*, 21 Jan. 2016. <http://www.alternet.org/economy/robert-reich-why-white-working-class-abandoned-democratic-party?akid=13900.234904.AUHZFS&rd=1&src=newsletter1049268&t=10>.



decline in economic situations in rural areas has been particularly pronounced, and Trump did very well there.<sup>28</sup>

While we assume that the working class should recognize which party will help them economically is the Democrats, they may not see it that way. Donald Trump may have many questionable personal traits, but he also has a reputation as a successful businessman. For those seeking good-paying jobs, Trump represented an alternative that might pay off. Hillary Clinton indicated she would continue many of President Obama's policies. It would not be irrational to decide Trump presented more positive possibilities than Clinton.

Justin Guest, author of *The New Minority*, summarizes this perspective well:

What is the attraction between these strangest of bedfellows [Trump and the working class]? It is three-fold.

First, White working-class voters have proven increasingly unpredictable and unfaithful to any single party. Their fickle nature is not indecisiveness, but rather the sense that neither party has done much for them over the past 40 years. The Rust Belt population has confronted post-industrial economic collapse and depopulation. This sentiment encompasses much of today's Republican base. A mere 16 percent of Republicans feel like they are represented in Washington – even though both houses of Congress are currently controlled by the GOP.

Second, Trump addresses people who have felt silenced and sidelined. Many White working-class voters, for example, point to often erroneous stories to help make sense of their disastrous fall from grace. These narratives feature characters like the welfare queen who collects checks while driving a Cadillac – a favorite of President Ronald Reagan, who attracted many blue-collar Democrats to the GOP. They also talk about collusion between corporations and politicians because Congress bailed out major banks and car manufacturers in 2008 – but not homeowners underwater on their mortgages. Trump's off-color remarks about women and minorities, his frustration with “disgusting” people and his baseless assertions about Mexico's deliberate exportation of criminals across the US southern border fit this mold. The amplification of these ideas renders credibility to a subset of voters who have felt silenced and sidelined.

Third, Trump bluntly acknowledges an acute sense of loss that has been uniquely felt by the White working class.<sup>29</sup>

---

**28** Eduardo Porter, “Where Were Trump's Votes? Where the Jobs Weren't,” *New York Times*, 13 Dec. 2016. [http://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/13/business/economy/jobs-economy-voters.html?hp&action=click&pgtype=Homepage&clickSource=story-heading&module=first-column-region&region=top-news&WT.nav=top-news&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/13/business/economy/jobs-economy-voters.html?hp&action=click&pgtype=Homepage&clickSource=story-heading&module=first-column-region&region=top-news&WT.nav=top-news&_r=0).

**29** Justin Guest, “Strange Bedfellows: Donald Trump and the White Working Class,” *Reuters*, 25 Aug. 2015, <http://blogs.reuters.com/great-debate/2015/08/23/strange-bedfellows-donald-trump-and-the-white-working-class/>.

The central question in assessing the relevance of class in American politics is whether they vote in their own economic interests. In recent years there have been numerous suggestions that the working class is concerned more with conservative issues and have voted against their interests. The presumption is that the Democratic Party represents their economic interests. The difficulty with that presumption is many in the working class, faced with declining job and income prospects, may not see the policies of the Democratic Party as helping their prospects. Globalization has cost many well-paying working class jobs. Immigrants are seen as willing to accept lower wages and hurting job prospects for the White working class. In interview after interview during the 2016 presidential campaign, blue-collar workers expressed frustration with how little the policies of Barack Obama were helping them.<sup>30</sup> They and Republicans are very pessimistic about the direction of the nation.<sup>31</sup>

Trump's ability to connect with voters with a claim that his policies will improve the economy did not come out of nowhere. Liberals present interpretations that the rich are dominating the political process and enacting policies that hurt the working class.<sup>32</sup> At the same time that the White working class has been experiencing decline, Republicans have been persistently presenting a narrative to voters that the economy is stifled by high taxes, too many government regulations,<sup>33</sup> and too many government programs that make it easier for some people

---

**30** Mark Binelli, "Inside Trump County, USA," *Rolling Stone*, 25 Jan. 2017. <http://www.rollingstone.com/politics/features/inside-trump-county-usa-w462766>.

**31** Betsy Cooper, Daniel Cox, Rachel Lienesch and Robert P. Jones, "The Divide over America's Future: 1950 or 2050?" *Public Religion Research Institute*, 10.25.2016, <http://www.pri.org/research/poll-1950s-2050-divided-nations-direction-post-election>; and, Betsy Cooper, Daniel Cox, Rachel Lienesch and Robert P. Jones, "Anxiety, Nostalgia, and Mistrust: Findings from the 2015 American Values Survey," *Public Religion Research Institute*, 11.17.2015. <http://www.pri.org/research/survey-anxiety-nostalgia-and-mistrust-findings-from-the-2015-american-values-survey>.

**32** Larry M. Bartels, *Unequal Democracy: The Political Economy of the New Gilded Age* (New York: Princeton University Press, 2008); Jacob S. Hacker and Paul Pierson, *Winner-Take-All Politics: How Washington Made the Rich Richer – and Turned its Back on the Middle Class* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2010); Hedrick Smith, *Who Stole the American Dream* (New York: Random House, 2012).

**33** Mark Smith, *The Right Talk: How Conservatives Transformed the Great Society into the Economic Society* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007); Arthur C. Brooks, *The Battle: How the Fight Between Free Enterprise and Big Government Will Shape America's Future* (New York: Basic Books, 2010); and, *A Better Way: The Economy*, from the Office of the Speaker, The House of Representatives, <http://abetterway.speaker.gov/?page=economy> (accessed Feb. 2017).

to not be motivated to work.<sup>34</sup> Trump picked up on this long-developing narrative and made the case that he could help improve the economic fortunes of the working class.<sup>35</sup> He clearly also picked up on various resentments they have about other matters, but the possibility that their economic fortunes might improve are very important.

## The Future Role of Class

Interpretations of Donald Trump's win often stress his White working class base. That is somewhat a misrepresentation of his base. It is important to recognize that he won because the traditional conservative Republican base came home plus Trump won just enough of the working class to win by small margins in a few states to win the Electoral College. The working class provided the margin. The intriguing issue is what does the trend from 2008 to 2016 in working class voting suggest for their future role in presidential elections.

This takes us back to the issue of how class is defined. If the focus continues to be on the White working class defined as those with a high school degree or less, this group will become less and less important. They are a diminishing percentage of the American electorate and are likely to continue to decline. If instead we focus on all working class voters, whether education or income is used to define them, this group will likely continue to be very important.

The issue is what will drive their behavior and what do we make of what drives their behavior. Will they respond to Democratic policies presented as helping them, or will job growth and which party was in power motivate them? The Trump administration is making its policy preferences clear. They wish to roll back Obamacare. They are repealing regulations to expand overtime for salaried

---

<sup>34</sup> Nicholas Eberstadt, *A Nation of Takers: America's Entitlement Epidemic* (West Conshohocken, PA: Templeton Press, 2012); and, Charles Murray, *Coming Apart: The State of White America, 1960–2010* (New York: Crown Publishing, 2013). For an extended discussion of conservatives view of what makes America work well, see Mark D. Brewer and Jeffrey M. Stonecash, *Polarization and the Politics of Personal Responsibility* (New York: Oxford, 2015).

<sup>35</sup> Henry Olson, "To Attract Disillusioned Voters, the GOP Must Understand Their Concerns," *National Review*, 14 Jan. 2016. <http://www.nationalreview.com/article/429744/republicans-disillusioned-voters-their-concerns>; Chauncey DeVega, "Secrets of Donald Trump's Cult: Why the Angriest White Voters Will Not Leave His Side," *Salon*, posted on *Alternet*, 6 Feb. 2016. <http://www.alternet.org/election-2016/secrets-donald-trumps-cult-why-angriest-white-voters-will-not-leave-his-side?akid=13953.234904.OB0KOq&rd=1&src=newsletter1050268&t=12>.

workers and to require financial advisors to put clients first.<sup>36</sup> They oppose raising the minimum wage and thus far have sounded as if any tax cut plan will provide significant benefits primarily for the affluent. Republicans at the state level are cutting back on programs that help the working class.<sup>37</sup> In traditional analyses of class we would presume this will alienate the working class.<sup>38</sup> Given current policy differences between Republicans and Democrats, we generally assume that the relevance of class would be determined by the extent to which the working class votes Democratic. If that level is low, the argument is that Republicans are using other issues to distract the working class from voting for their economic interests.<sup>39</sup> The difficulty with that logic is that the working class may care more about good-paying jobs than the policies referenced above. Their lives may be defined primarily by whether they can get a job with good wages and benefits not social programs and federal legislation.

If the Trump administration can increase the growth rate of the economy and the result is many more well-paying working class jobs than he is likely to get more working class support. Does that mean that class does not matter? No, it means that a class is assessing how the policies of each party benefits them and voting accordingly. It would mean that a class is voting for its economic interests as they see them. Needless to say, it makes our assessment of the role of class much less simple.

It may also be that a class, in search of something better, can make a mistake.<sup>40</sup> In reviewing the cabinet appointments and announced policies of the Trump

---

**36** Juliet Eilperin, “Trump Undertakes Most Ambitious Regulatory Rollback since Reagan,” *Washington Post*, 12 Feb. 2017. [https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/trump-undertakes-most-ambitious-regulatory-rollback-since-reagan/2017/02/12/0337b1f0-efb4-11e6-9662-6eedf1627882\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.3138a9318d88&wpisrc=nl\\_headlines&wpm=1](https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/trump-undertakes-most-ambitious-regulatory-rollback-since-reagan/2017/02/12/0337b1f0-efb4-11e6-9662-6eedf1627882_story.html?utm_term=.3138a9318d88&wpisrc=nl_headlines&wpm=1).

**37** Alexander Burns and Mitch Smith, “State G.O.P. Leaders Move Swiftly as Party Bickers in Congress,” *New York Times*, 11 Feb. 2017. [https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/11/us/state-republican-leaders-move-swiftly.html?emc=edit\\_th\\_20170212&nl=todaysheadlines&nlid=3647501](https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/11/us/state-republican-leaders-move-swiftly.html?emc=edit_th_20170212&nl=todaysheadlines&nlid=3647501).

**38** Paul Krugman, “Springtime for Scammers,” *New York Times*, 6 Feb. 2017. [https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/06/opinion/springtime-for-scammers.html?rref=collection%2Fcolumn%2Fpaul-krugman&action=click&contentCollection=opinion&region=stream&module=stream\\_unit&version=latest&contentPlacement=4&pgtype=collection](https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/06/opinion/springtime-for-scammers.html?rref=collection%2Fcolumn%2Fpaul-krugman&action=click&contentCollection=opinion&region=stream&module=stream_unit&version=latest&contentPlacement=4&pgtype=collection); Robert L. Borosage, “Donald Trump Has Pulled an Epic Bait-and-Switch,” *The Nation*, 14 Feb. 2017 <https://www.thenation.com/article/donald-trump-has-pulled-an-epic-bait-and-switch/>.

**39** Frank, *What’s the Matter with Kansas?*

**40** David Ignatius, “Trump is selling Snake Oil to the Rust Belt,” *Washington Post*, 28 Feb. 2017. [https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/trump-is-selling-snake-oil-to-the-rust-belt/2017/02/28/a0074f74-fdf9-11e6-8f41-ea6ed597e4ca\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.f3582d0bea98&wpisrc=nl\\_opinions&wpm=1](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/trump-is-selling-snake-oil-to-the-rust-belt/2017/02/28/a0074f74-fdf9-11e6-8f41-ea6ed597e4ca_story.html?utm_term=.f3582d0bea98&wpisrc=nl_opinions&wpm=1).

administration and congressional Republican policy proposals thus far, it is difficult to see how any of it will benefit the working class in the short-run. Liberals believe there are likely to be disappointments. But that does not mean that the working class did not vote for their interests as they see them.