

# How identity politics defined the 2016 Presidential Elections

*Lucy Cowie delves into the identity politics driving Trump's victory in the 2016 US Presidential Elections, following one of the most hostile election campaigns in recent history.*

**I**n 2016, Donald Trump won the US presidential election after one of the ugliest and most divisive political campaigns in American history (Schlozman, Brady and Verba 2018, 8). Identity became a central feature of the election as an increasingly diverse nation became more polarised while Democrats and Republicans argued over what it meant to be 'American' (Sides, Tesler and Vavreck 2018, 3). Hillary Clinton focused on recreating the "Obama Coalition" of racial minorities, unmarried women, younger voters and progressives and, in doing so, neglected the concerns of white working-class voters in the Rust Belt (Peele et al. 2018, 81). Since the election, a vast number of scholars and journalists have cited countless reasons, both speculative and concrete, for the Democrats' loss. These ranged from political malfeasance by the FBI to gender bias faced by Hillary Clinton. However, prominent amongst these factors was that 11-15% of voters who had voted for Obama in 2008 and 2012 had now voted for Trump, with higher concentrations in critical Midwestern swing states (states which do not consistently vote for one party, making them highly contested in presidential elections) awarding Trump his win in electoral votes (Cohn 2015). 'Party sorting' is defined as the transfer of voters from one party to another, on the belief that their interests are better represented (Fiorna 2016, 5). Trump's politics of social and racial resentment, economic insecurity, and narratives of elite corruption accelerated the party sorting of white working-class voters, transferring their votes from the Democrats to the Republicans.

The significance of the white working-class vote to the success of the Democratic Party must be explored. Traditionally, white working-class voters across America voted for Republicans, but in the labour heartlands of the Rust Belt/Upper Midwest region, working-class voters had been strong bastions of Democratic support (Masket 2017). Going into 2016, these states had been considered "safe states", with a belief that these voters would hold true. However, in 2016, these voters proved to be a strong core of the Trump coalition, with Trump defeating Clinton 61% to 34% among working-class white women and 71% to 23% among working-class white men (Abramowitz and McCoy 2019, 140), compared to Obama who received 33% compared to 64% (Teixeira and Halpin 2012, 7). Working-class voters have been shifting towards the Republican party since 1970 (Abramowitz and McCoy 2019, 141), yet the shift in



2016 indicated a reshuffling within American politics. The last time Wisconsin voted Republican in a presidential election was 1984, suggesting that the Trump campaign reinforced a longer-term trend.

Simultaneously, college-educated voters have shown a sharp trajectory into the Democratic constituency, creating a “diploma divide” between the Democrats and Republicans. Educated voters discontented with the Republican party have been defecting to the Democrats, whose share of college-educated voters has increased from 42% in 1994 to 58% in 2018 (Pew 2018). Trump’s candidacy, and now presidency, has repelled white college graduates and contributed to his decreased vote share amongst this demographic (Sides, Tesler and Vavreck 2018, 224). Michael Stances (2019, 671), using a county-level system of analysis, found that counties calculated to be highly educated had a 28-point swing in favour of the Democratic party over lower-educated counties. This difference increased from just 16 points in 2012, further demonstrating a shift of college-educated voters away from the Republicans, towards the Democrats.

Crucially, however, there are more white voters in America without college degrees (47% of the electorate) than with (22% of the electorate) (Sides, Tesler, and Vavreck 2018, 163). Accordingly, the growing tendency of non-college-educated voters to vote Republican was significant to Trump’s win; Clinton would have won by 30 electoral votes if the least-educated 20% of counties had followed the same voting pattern as in 2012 (Stances 2019, 667). A clear pattern of party sorting was apparent in 2016, demonstrating the closer alignment of parties with economic and education levels.

These patterns of party sorting were accelerated by Trump in several key ways. Abramowitz and McCoy (2018, 146) compared the levels of racial/ethnic resentment among educated and non-educated white voters, finding that those with high levels of resentment voted overwhelmingly for Trump, regardless of education. Trump received 87% of support from the most racially resentful white, working-class voters, whilst the Republican party, overall, has witnessed support from the least racially resentful voters fall from 48% in 2000 to 24% in 2016 (Abramowitz and McCoy 2018, 143). Significantly, 50% of non-college graduates showed high levels of racial resentment overall, compared with 31% of college graduates in 2016 (Abramowitz and McCoy 2018, 143). Thus, while the education divide in 2016 was considerable, the role of racial resentment was stronger.

By linking diversity and globalisation into a single narrative and railing against it, Trump was subsequently able to link racial resentment and economic insecurity (Abramowitz and McCoy 2018, 122). High racial resentment became the strongest predictor of voting intention, next to partisan alignment (Abramowitz and McCoy 2018, 144), as Trump created a strategy based on racial resentment that resonated with many white, working-class Americans. Trump campaigned on economic insecurity, for example, condemning layoffs of American workers due to manufacturing outsourcing (Kivisto 2019, 216). Thus, the perception of economic ‘deservingness’ became a crucial factor, as demonstrated through complaints in rural areas of Ohio which were adopted by the Trump campaign to argue that job insecurity was created by minorities and, specifically, immigrants (Sides, Tesler, and Vavreck 2019, 176). The historically high level of non-white support for the Democratic party, enjoyed during the Obama years, masked the parallel decline in white support and increase in resentment (Peele et al. 2018, 20). Trump’s leading role in the “birther” movement of intense racial paranoia alone indicates the role of racism in his campaign. Thus, partisan alignment was particularly distinct in 2016 as economic factors were refracted through social identities (Sides, Tesler, and Vavreck 2018, 80).

Resentment was a critical aspect of Trump’s 2016 politics, as socio-racial resentment among the working-class was used to galvanise support. A ‘coalition of symbols’ is formed by voters around candidates to determine what they stand for (Mast and Alexander 2019, 38). In 2016, Trump successfully built such a ‘coalition’ which established him as the populist candidate, standing against the political and social elite (Norton 2019, 45). He incorporated ‘nostalgia narratives’ which constructed a collective identity around race, ethnicity and class (Polletta and Callahan 2019, 58). Katharine Cramer’s analyses in *The Politics of Resentment* demonstrate how powerful this association with social identity was; those who felt disaffected and ignored by the mainstream political establishment were inclined to support the Republican candidate (Cramer 2016, 9). The ‘us versus them’ mindset was also clearly evident, as individual experience was submerged into that of the identity group (Jacobs 2019). Carl Schmitt’s *Concept of the Political* explains how group identity is the core of politics, particularly the animosity which inevitably arises between groups and how it can be used for political aims (Schmitt 2007, 32-3). Trump’s campaign became bizarrely akin to Obama’s 2008 promise of change, but

with the promise of reverting to more traditional values (Norton 2016, 49). Therefore, through his nostalgic narrative, calling for a return of the white working class to its 'traditional' place at the centre of conceptions of American identity, and for exclusion of those who did not conform to it, Trump was able to accelerate the party sorting of the white working-class into the Republican fold. In 2016, America's electorally dominant group, white Christians, reduced in numbers for the first time due to increasing racial and ethnic diversity on the national level (Sides, Tesler and Varveck 2018, 4). Whilst demographic changes affecting the politics of white voters were not new in 2016, Trump's explicit connection between this consequence of globalisation and the loss of white working-class economic prosperity drew significant support for the Republican Party.

This resentment from the working-class was further linked in the media, as well-rooted identification, as well as class, became a key feature of the election cycle (Crammer 2016, 9). Only four months before the November election, two thirds of Trump supporters who participated in a poll about media preferences stated that their most trusted news source was the deeply and dogmatically conservative Fox News (Suffolk Poll 2016). The frequent discussion of political correctness and the 'dangers' of multiculturalism reinforced viewers' beliefs of a genuine cultural loss, which became a crucial part of the Trump campaign (Polletta and Callahan 2019, 68). While cities are increasingly diverse, outside of these liberal hubs is a predominantly white, rural population with ever-stronger Republican tendencies in recent years (Cramer 2016, 14). Major East coast publications tended to disregard the genuine appeal of Trump in these states where industry had suffered significantly (Jacobs 2019, 92) and where the spread of Republican-leaning voters was critical to the electoral, less so to the popular, outcome. Clinton may have won the popular vote, but she lost the election due to the Electoral College system. If the most predominantly liberal states, New York and California, were removed from the Electoral College, she would have lost the popular vote by three million votes (Mast and Alexander 2019, 2).

It is therefore necessary to consider whether the American public have significantly changed their political views, or if partisan media has allowed more ideologically extreme candidates to surface. There has been significant party sorting amongst the working-class since the late twentieth century (Fiorina 2013, 60) which chronologically corresponds with a decrease in numbers of swing voters (Stances 2019, 672). The Republicans have more closely aligned with disaffected white Americans, and the Democrats with racial minorities and immigrants (Fiorina 2013, 60). Thus, as social identity converges with partisanship, we see a similar kind of fierce election cycle as 2016 (Abramowitz and McCoy 2019, 134). This is also reflected in two of the defining influences of the 2016 election: negative partisanship (disliking the opposing party more than liking one's own) and affective polarisation (the belief that the opposing party is not only wrong, but dangerous) (Iyengar and Krupenkin 2018, 201). Economic and political dissatisfaction were powerfully shaped by political identities, while partisan alignment was increasingly linked to race and ethnicity by Trump's campaign. (Sides, Tesler and Vavreck 2018, 168.)

There are other plausible reasons behind the election's outcome. Fierce debates between Clinton and Sanders in 2016 split the Democratic Party, which struggled to re-align itself in time for the June Convention and isolated certain voting groups (Bitecofer 2018, 84). Clinton was labelled as 'corrupt' by Sanders' campaign early in the nomination process, which haunted her for the duration of the campaign and was magnified by investigations alongside the election (Mast and Alexander 2019, 40). Notions of trustworthiness in presidential campaigns concern whether a candidate is perceived to be truly serving the interests of their voters (Crammer 2016, 38). Trump's emphasis on the untrustworthy political agenda of the liberal elite was crucial in a campaign which revolved around personality and Clinton's arguments against Trump were evidently less convincing to the white working class than his focus on elite corruption in his appeal to new voters (Norton 2019, 49). The notion of untrustworthiness proved to be decisive.

Trump's 2016 election win was a shock to many who failed to recognise the wider trends of party sorting prior to 2016. Trump's election campaign utilised high levels of racial resentment and economic discontent within the white working-class and alienated college-educated voters. Trump's denunciations, directed at 'elites' in Washington working against the working and middle classes, also fell directly on the previous eight years of Democratic government (Abramowitz and McCoy 2018, 139). The gradual shift of white working-class support from the Democrats was, therefore, rapidly accelerated through Trump's 2016 campaign, creating a powerful coalition of socio-racial resentment and elite corruption, exacerbated by the media and the Electoral College system.

*This article has been edited by Alex Kerr (North America & Caribbean Editor) & Abigail Adams (Chief Regional Editor), peer reviewed by Tobin Van Bremen and Samantha Kichman (Chief Peer Reviewer), copy edited by Grace-Frances Doyle, Veronica Greer, Alexander Gaplin, Evie Patel and Ben Malcomson (Chief Copy Editor), checked and approved by the following executives: Robert Jacek Włodarski (Editor-in-Chief) and Emily Hall (Deputy Editor-in-Chief), and produced by Astoria Linh DeTuncq (Digital Production Specialist).*

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