



Economic Anxiety or Cultural Backlash

Which Is Key to Trump's Support?

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In the aftermath of Donald Trump's surprising victory in 2016, political commentators advanced two competing narratives. For some,

2016 Was the Year White Liberals Realized How Unjust, Racist, and Sexist America Is.¹

For anyone who voted for Donald Trump, bald-faced racism and sexism were not the deal-breakers they should have been. Hatred of women was on the ballot in November, and it won.²

Donald Trump has won the presidency, despite an unprecedented level of unfitness and in defiance of nearly every prediction and poll. And he's done this not despite but because he expressed unfiltered disdain toward racial and religious minorities in the country.³

Others viewed the 2016 results differently:

You have to accept that millions of people who voted for Barack Obama, some of them once, some of them twice, changed their minds this time. They're not racist.⁴

Where Were Trump's Votes? Where the Jobs Weren't.⁵

The reason Donald Trump was elected was that we automated away four million manufacturing jobs in Michigan, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin.⁶

Given that 85–90 percent of Trump's (and Clinton's) vote came from partisans—people who nearly always vote Republican or Democrat—claims like these applied to the behavior of a relatively small proportion of the electorate, although one residing disproportionately in states critical for the outcome.⁷ In particular, among other factors, the 2016 outcome hinged

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on support for Trump by White non-college-educated voters who had previously voted Democratic, as well as the surge in turnout of such people in the same areas.⁸ My impression is that commentators somewhat sympathetic to Trump’s supporters were more partial to economic explanations, whereas those dismayed and disgusted by Trump’s election favored the claim that his voters simply were “deplorables.”⁹ Any such association was far from perfect, however; note that all the preceding quotations are from commentators on the political left.

The COVID-19 pandemic relegated these competing narratives to a lower level in the 2020 election season, and Joe Biden’s vanquishing of Trump seemed to further decrease the attention to whether culture or economics better explained Trump’s appeal. Given another election involving Trump in 2024, however, the debate seems worth revisiting so that analysts can be better prepared to adjudicate the debate than when they first examined it in 2016.

This essay critically examines the findings of studies that consider economic versus “cultural” explanations for Trump’s surprising victory. While recognizing the heterogeneity of the category, I use the term “cultural” for the collection of noneconomic reasons offered as explanations for Trump support: racial prejudice, ethnic prejudice, religious prejudice, nativism, misogyny, and various social-psychological conditions that incorporate or reflect (at least partially) such motivations; for example, “social dominance orientation,” “status anxiety,” “White consciousness,” “hostile sexism,” and “hegemonic masculinity.”¹⁰ Both economic and cultural motivations surely played a role in voting for Trump, but the bottom line is that, contrary to many premature conclusions in the literature, it is extremely difficult, perhaps impossible, for even a disinterested and methodologically sophisticated analyst to identify the relative contribution of each class of motivation. The relevant literature is large, so what follows is not a comprehensive literature review. Rather, I select some prominent studies that illustrate various problems of inference.¹¹ For purposes of discussion, I divide the problems into five categories, although they overlap in some cases. I begin with the most obvious of the five categories.

PROBLEMATIC MEASURES

Economic concepts—the unemployment rate, real income per capita, household income, and so forth—generally have more precise meanings and measures than do psychological concepts, such as status anxiety, White consciousness, social dominance orientation, and racial resentment. The latter typically are measured by batteries of survey items that purport to capture the theoretical concept. However, even if economic variables have less measurement error than cultural measures, analysis after analysis concludes that cultural variables show much stronger relationships to Trump’s vote than do more precisely measured economic variables, consistent with the conclusion that culture trumps economics.

One reason for the apparently greater importance of cultural variables may be that some commonly used economic measures, although they may be more precisely defined, fail to

capture the concepts of interest. For example, casual journalistic accounts and even a few academic analyses dismiss the economic basis of Trump support because it has little or no cross-sectional relationship with absolute *levels* of economic conditions.¹² But as liberal John Judis, a proponent of globalization as an explanation for the rise of Trump, notes, a specific level of unemployment, household income, or some other economic measure may or may not reflect economic distress, which is a commonly hypothesized explanation for Trump support.¹³ Two communities may have the same value on some indicator, but if one is trending upward while the other is trending downward, the political implications are different. The obvious fix is to measure trends *or relative differences* in economic measure, not just levels, as in some analyses.

Some of the cultural measures may have the opposite problem: they capture too much—more than the concept they are designed to measure. One of the long-standing examples in the political science literature is the concept of “racial resentment,” which frequently appears in the analyses under consideration.¹⁴ Four survey items comprise the measure:

1. How much R agrees or disagrees that Blacks should work their way up without special favors, like the Irish, Italians, and Jews have
2. How much R agrees or disagrees that slavery and discrimination have created difficult conditions for Blacks to work out of
3. How much R agrees or disagrees that Blacks have gotten less than they deserve over the past few years
4. How much R agrees or disagrees that if Blacks would try harder they could be as well off as Whites

Critics of the racial resentment measure charge that someone who strongly believes in traditional values like personal responsibility and hard work will necessarily appear to be racially resentful: the scale measures American individualism as well as or perhaps even more than racism.¹⁵ This objection is particularly pertinent to Trump’s working-class supporters inasmuch as many are descendants of immigrants who experienced relative deprivation without the benefit of government aid or programs that are available to new immigrants today. The scale’s creators have labored strenuously to meet such criticisms, but four decades after its creation the debate continues.¹⁶ Thus, skeptics tend to discount the myriad analyses that find a strong association between the racial resentment measure and support for Trump. The empirical relationship is strong, but does measured “racial resentment” actually reflect only racial prejudice or other things as well?¹⁷

To take another prominent example, one woman’s cultural variable may be another man’s economic variable. Consider the lengthy exchange between political scientist Diana Mutz and sociologist Stephen Morgan about the former’s claim that “status threat, not economic hardship, explains the 2016 presidential vote.”¹⁸ Much of the exchange centered on statistical questions, but for present purposes I focus on Mutz’s measures of status threat that

Morgan challenges.¹⁹ Mutz uses survey items on attitudes toward immigration, free trade, and China:

Please indicate whether you favor or oppose each of the following proposals addressing immigration: (i) provide a path to citizenship for some illegal aliens who agree to return to their home country for a period of time and pay substantial fines, (ii) increase border security by building a fence along part of the US border with Mexico, (iii) return illegal immigrants to their native countries.

Do you favor or oppose the federal government in Washington negotiating more free-trade agreements? Thinking about the increasing amount of trade between the United States and other countries, do you think this has helped the US economy, hurt the US economy, or not affected the US economy?

These days, there are different views about China. Some people see China as more of an opportunity for new markets and economic investment, while others see it as a threat to our jobs and security. Still others are somewhere in between. Which view is closer to your own?

Mutz writes,

All three of these measures capture potential racial and global status threat. For example, immigration captures the perceived threat of allowing those who are racially different into one's country. Trade opposition captures Americans' fear of takeover by more dominant economic powers as well as racial opposition based on resentment of "others," including foreigners and businesses in countries that are racially different. . . . Finally, China can be considered an out-group threat both racially and with respect to threatening American global dominance.²⁰

A general reader might reasonably wonder how attitudes toward immigration, trade, and China reflect *only* threats to one's racial or social status and not to one's economic status. Although studies are not unanimous, some economists argue that low-skilled immigrants negatively affect the wages of low-skilled native workers.²¹ Certainly there are Democratic commentators (not to mention union leaders) who believe in and decry the negative wage effects on native workers of competition with low-skilled immigrants and foreign workers.²² More generally, economic studies report that free trade has had significant negative impacts on US labor markets.²³ As Goldstein and Gulotty summarize, "Estimates of the effect of China's entry into the WTO [World Trade Organization] show that trade has produced a discontinuous shift in global production patterns and is a major cause of subnational labor displacement in the United States and elsewhere."²⁴ Morgan constructs a table in which he offers different—mostly economic—interpretations of a number of the measures that Mutz considers to be measures of status anxiety (table 1). Not surprisingly he concludes that economic factors play a far more important role in support for Trump than Mutz does.

Few would deny that considerations of racial and social status are entirely absent from the measures Mutz uses; rather, the concern is that attitudes toward immigration, trade, and the rise of China surely reflect both status and economic considerations—and perhaps other ones as well.

TABLE 1 ECONOMIC OR CULTURAL?

Variable	Mutz (2018)	A fair critic's alternative
Looking for work: unemployed or laid off (indicator variable)	Economic indicator	Material interests
Worried about expenses: healthcare affordability, money for retirement, and cost of education for self or family (3-item scale)	Economic indicator	Material interests
Safety net: spend more taxes on safety net, cut taxes to eliminate government programs and services (2-item scale)	Economic indicator	Material interests
Current personal finances: better or worse than last year	Economic indicator	Material interests
Nation's economy: better or worse than last year		Material interests
Social dominance orientation: consider all groups when setting priorities, group equality should be our ideal, should not push for group equality, superior groups should dominate inferior ones (4-item scale)	Status threat	Status threat
Outgroup prejudice: other groups are hardworking/peaceful or lazy/violent (multiple-item scale; number not provided by Mutz)	Status threat	Status threat
Reverse discrimination: discrimination against high-status groups greater than against low-status groups (6-item scale)	Status threat	Status threat
Worried about America: worried that the American way of life is under threat	Status threat	Status threat
Support for free trade: support federal government negotiating more free-trade agreements, past increases in free trade have helped or hurt the US economy (2-item scale)	Status threat	Material interests
China is a threat to jobs: China provides new markets and is an investment opportunity or is a threat to our jobs and security	Status threat	Material interests
Support for inclusive immigration policy: support path to citizenship, border fence with Mexico, return of illegal immigrants to native countries (3-item scale)	Status threat	Material interests and foreign policy
Support for isolationism: active role in solving conflicts around the world, take care of the well-being of Americans and not get involved with other nations, essential to work with other nations to solve problems, best for the future of the country if we stay out of world affairs, have a responsibility to fight violations of international law and aggression wherever they occur (5-item scale)	Status threat	Material interests and foreign policy

Source: Adapted from Morgan 2018; see note 18.

PROBLEMATIC MODELING

Even assuming appropriate measures, a second problem arises from the fact that few analysts make any serious attempt to model how economic and cultural attitudes affect the vote. Instead, they treat economic and cultural attitudes as logically independent and include both in their model specifications. But economic and cultural variables may be causally related and not independent as many analyses implicitly assume. The post-World War II sociological literature argued that economic distress gives rise to increased xenophobia, nativism, and other sentiments that are problematic for democracy.²⁵ The rise of Hitler as the German economy collapsed in the 1930s is the *locus classicus*.²⁶ As Inglehart and Norris observe, “Although the proximate cause of the populist vote is cultural backlash, its high present level reflects the declining economic security and rising economic inequality that many writers have emphasized.”²⁷ Commentators who attribute the rise of Trump to American racism and sexism often fail to consider the experience of other countries. Britain has seen ethnic resentment directed against the Polish (White, Christian) plumber. In France, Algerians are the target. In Italy, workers in the textile industry target the Chinese.²⁸

Thus, even where no questions of measurement validity arise, if economic considerations partially cause cultural resentments, economic considerations would appear weaker in statistical analyses that do not recognize the causal sequence and treat the two categories as independent.²⁹

Moreover, it is also likely that for some people economic and cultural variables are causally related to the vote in the opposite direction from that which is usually assumed. Considerable research suggests that candidate preference causes policy attitudes, as well as vice versa. For example, during Trump’s campaign and after his election, surveys showed that Republican voters became less interventionist in foreign policy, more protectionist on trade, and less hostile to Putin and Russia.³⁰ Enns and Jardina argue that in 2016 some voters first decided whom to vote for and then adopted the economic and cultural positions of that candidate.³¹ In particular, they report that racial hostility did not only cause support for Trump; support for Trump caused people to express more racially hostile attitudes. The possibility of such endogeneity rarely is seriously considered when cultural issues are under examination, even though it is widely recognized in other contexts.

Finally, there is a level of analysis problem independent of the preceding measurement issues. Sometimes economic variables are measured at the individual level. For example, a frequently used survey item reads, “During the past year has your financial situation gotten better, gotten worse, or has it stayed the same?” Or survey respondents may be asked whether they lost their jobs in the past year. More often, however, economic variables are measured at the aggregate level: the unemployment rate in the county or zip code or some other administrative unit. On occasion cultural variables are also measured on the aggregate level; for example, the percentage of immigrants in an administrative unit such as counties or precincts.³² But far more often, cultural variables are measured at the individual level: a number of survey items are combined into an index or scale by some statistical procedure.

Although this issue leads us into the statistical weeds, other things being equal, combining individual- and aggregate-level indicators in a statistical analysis disadvantages the aggregate-level indicator(s), unless methodologically procedures that are more sophisticated than simple linear regression are used. Unfortunately, such procedures rarely are utilized in political science. The section “Mixing Individual- and Aggregate-Level Variables” takes up this issue at greater length.

INTERPRETING TEMPORAL CHANGE

When political scientists are confronted with some seemingly interesting factoid at a dinner party, their professional training often leads them immediately to ask, “Is that higher or lower, more or less than what we have seen before?” Simple facts have different interpretations depending on their temporal context. Various analyses of the 2016 election report that some variable had a statistically significant relationship to the vote and, by implication at least, was a key component of the surprising outcome. Attitudes toward Blacks and other ethnic minorities, women, immigrants, and Muslims; views on issues like abortion, climate change, and trade; predispositions such as authoritarianism, nationalism, and narcissism; and various economic measures all received attention. Insofar as we are interested in explaining the surprising 2016 outcome, however, the critical question is whether any such measure had a different—usually larger—impact on the vote than in past elections. No doubt, all US elections (as well as elections in other democracies) have elements of racism, misogyny, and other characteristics that Hillary Clinton’s supporters decried, but is it true that “Donald Trump’s support in the 2016 campaign was clearly driven by racism, sexism, and xenophobia?”³³ Did such factors appear to play a larger than usual role in the 2016 voting? Despite the claims of some commentators, this simple question can be surprisingly difficult to answer.

Political scientists have addressed the question of temporal change using our standard tool, regression analysis, comparing the coefficients of specific variables in 2016 with those estimated in earlier elections. Williamson’s and Gelfand’s claim references (among others) work by Schaffner, MacWilliams, and Nteta who estimate vote models for the 2012 and 2016 elections, finding that “the coefficients for hostile sexism and denial of racism are more strongly associated with 2016 vote choice than they are in 2012.”³⁴ Sides analyzes Voter Study Group panel data and shows that “attitudes related to immigration, religion, and race were more salient to voter decision-making in 2016 than in 2012.”³⁵ Enders and Scott pool American National Election Study (ANES) presidential surveys from 1988 to 2016 and find that, although the relationship between racial resentment and the vote has not significantly increased over the years, racial resentment’s association with candidate evaluations and issue attitudes that presumably affect the vote has increased significantly.³⁶

But the explanatory power of variables can vary across time for multiple reasons. Most obviously, we may observe a change in the distribution of a variable, which is commonly referred to, naturally enough, as distributional change. So, for example, if “racial resentment” more strongly relates to Trump voting than to Romney voting, a plausible hypothesis is that Trump

voters are more racially resentful than Romney voters. Surprisingly, however, the 2012 and 2016 ANES surveys indicate that the racial resentment scores of Trump’s White voters differed very little from the scores of Romney’s 2012 White voters (table 2). In fact, White Republican voters were no more racially resentful in 2016 than in 2012, but White Democratic voters show a swing in the opposite direction between 2012 and 2016 that dwarfs the movement of Trump voters (table 3).³⁷

TABLE 2 RACIAL RESENTMENT OF WHITE REPUBLICAN VOTERS, 2012 VS. 2016

	2012 (%)	2016 (%)
<i>Blacks should work their way up like other groups</i>		
Strongly agree	57	50
Agree somewhat	28	30
Neither agree nor disagree	7	11
Disagree somewhat	6	6
Disagree strongly	2	2
<i>Slavery and discrimination make it difficult</i>		
Strongly agree	5	6
Agree somewhat	23	24
Neither agree nor disagree	11	9
Disagree somewhat	26	30
Strongly disagree	34	31
<i>Blacks have gotten less than they deserve</i>		
Strongly agree	1	3
Agree somewhat	7	10
Neither agree nor disagree	17	17
Disagree somewhat	30	30
Strongly disagree	45	40
<i>Blacks should just try harder</i>		
Strongly agree	31	30
Agree somewhat	29	34
Neither agree nor disagree	23	18
Disagree somewhat	11	13
Strongly disagree	6	4

Source: ANES

TABLE 3 RACIAL RESENTMENT OF WHITE DEMOCRATIC VOTERS, 2012 VS. 2016

	2012 (%)	2016 (%)
<i>Blacks should work their way up like other minorities</i>		
Strongly agree	29	11
Agree somewhat	25	21
Neither agree nor disagree	17	15
Disagree somewhat	19	24
Disagree strongly	11	28
<i>Slavery and discrimination make it difficult</i>		
Strongly agree	17	33
Agree somewhat	38	36
Neither agree nor disagree	8	8
Disagree somewhat	19	15
Strongly disagree	17	8
<i>Blacks have gotten less than they deserve</i>		
Strongly agree	6	23
Agree somewhat	19	33
Neither agree nor disagree	27	19
Disagree somewhat	29	15
Strongly disagree	19	10
<i>Blacks should just try harder</i>		
Strongly agree	19	8
Agree somewhat	22	11
Neither agree nor disagree	18	14
Disagree somewhat	22	26
Strongly disagree	18	40

Source: ANES

Most analyses that find that racial resentment is a more important correlate of voting in 2016 interpret the finding as behavioral change: the campaign raised the salience of race, leading Trump voters to weight race more heavily relative to other factors in 2016. Engelhardt traces the sorting of the parties on race between 1988 and 2016, particularly between 2012 and 2016.³⁸ He concludes that changes in the regression coefficients reflect both distributional and behavioral change: the significantly increased liberalism of Democrats and the campaigns' increased emphasis on race.

Unfortunately, things are even more complicated. Not only can voters change their positions (distributional change) or the emphasis they place on an issue (inducing behavioral change) but statistical relationships can change for a third reason—the different positions taken by the contending candidates. The following discussion adapts an example developed in an earlier work.³⁹

Figure 1 depicts the familiar spatial model of elections.⁴⁰ The electorate is distributed across a single economic dimension ranging from, say, total government control of the economy on the extreme left to a completely laissez-faire economy on the extreme right. As on most issues the electorate is centrist, with voters getting steadily scarcer as we move toward the extremes (although the shape of the distribution is irrelevant for the following argument).⁴¹ Voters choose the candidate who is closer to them. If both candidates locate at the median, the election is a tie—the standard median voter result. However, in the real world, candidates represent parties, so they take off-center positions reflecting their party platforms. In figure 1, the Democrat locates one standard deviation left of the median and the Republican one and a half standard deviations right of the median. The result is a 60:40 landslide for the Democrat, much like say, the 1936 election between Democrat Franklin Roosevelt and Republican Alf Landon where economics was the principal, if not the only, issue.

Beginning in the 1950s and accelerating in the 1960s and 1970s, issues such as race, gender, and family values joined economics in the space of electoral competition. Much public opinion research finds that domestic issues now break into at least two dimensions: an economic/social welfare dimension and a social/cultural dimension that is at least partly independent of the economic dimension.⁴² Although these dimensions are highly correlated at the elite level, they are more distinct at the voter level. Let's assume that they are independent, although that is not important for the conclusions that follow. So, now we use a hump, as in figure 2, to represent the two-dimensional voter distribution, and we change our perspective to look at the hump from the top rather than the side, as in figure 3.⁴³ The Democrat and Republican candidates retain their positions on the economic dimension, but they do not differ (yet) on the social dimension. The heavy vertical line just to the right of the median separates the distribution into those voters closer to the Democrat on the left and those closer to the Republican on the right.

FIGURE 1 Candidate competition in one dimension

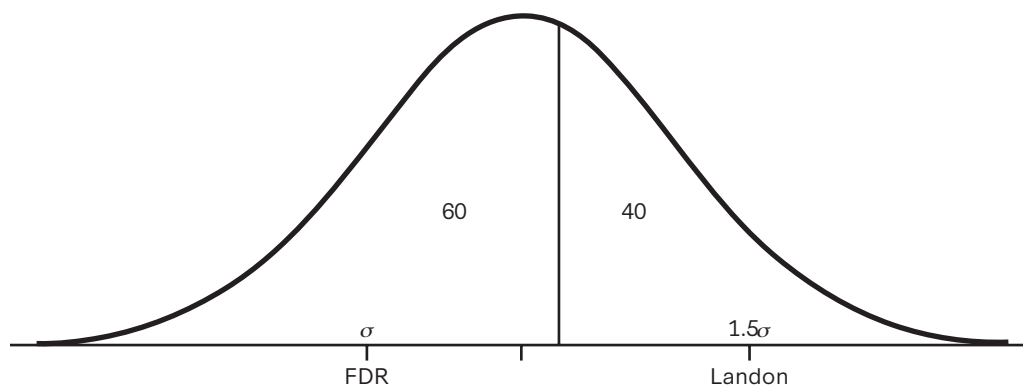


FIGURE 2 Candidate competition in two dimensions

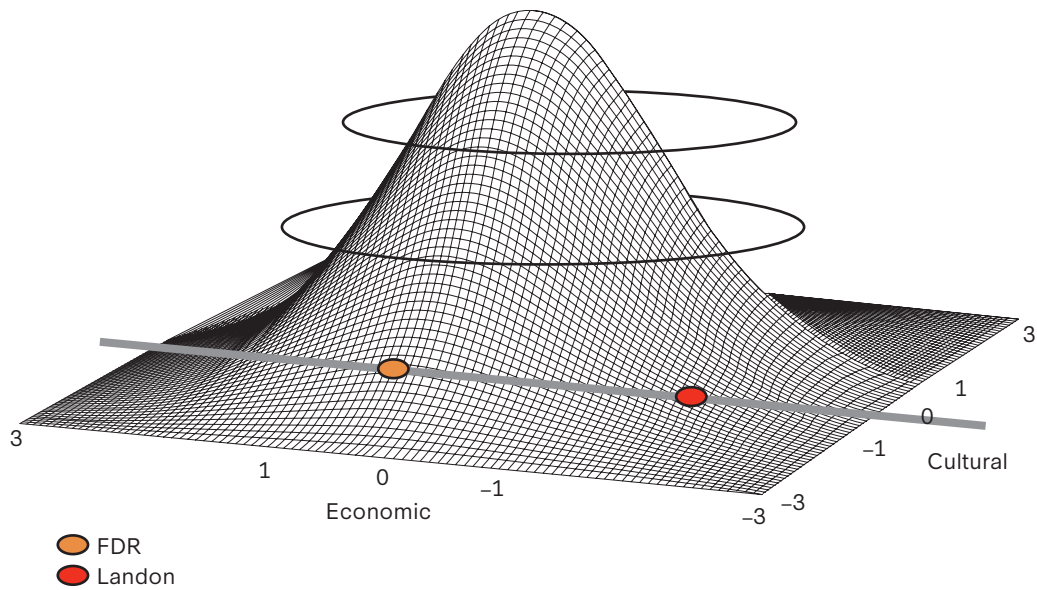
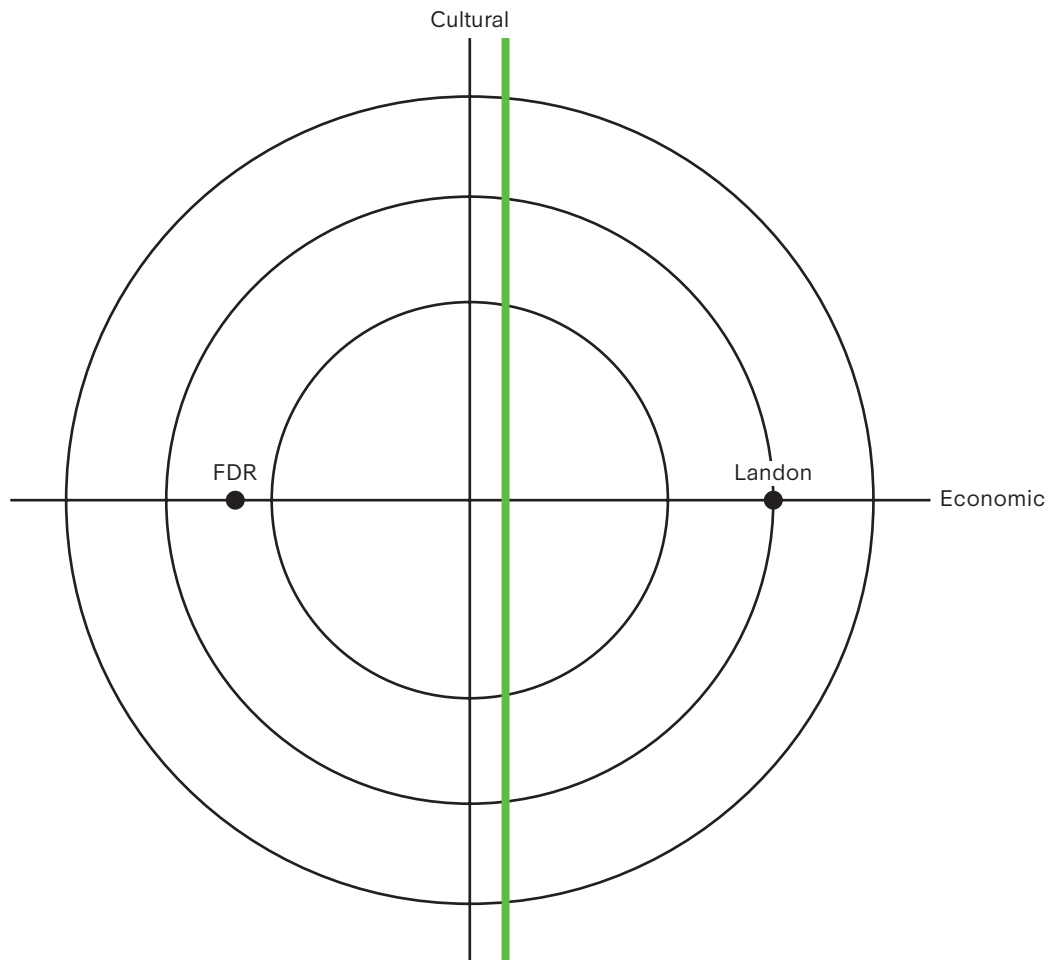


FIGURE 3 Competition in two dimensions: arial view



As noted earlier, since the 1960s the parties have separated on the racial/social/cultural dimension, with Democrats moving in a more liberal direction (north in the figure) and Republicans in a more conservative direction (south in the figure). Figure 4 depicts a stylized version of this separation across four elections. By the end of the process, the cutting line that separates voters closer to the Democratic candidate from those closer to the Republican shifts from a straight north-south position to a northwest-to-southeast orientation, and in addition to liberals and conservatives we have populists and libertarians, to use Carmines’s terminology.⁴⁴

Here is the surprising conclusion of this exercise. In each of the four contests during which there is neither distributional nor behavioral (voter) change, the coefficients from regressing the vote on the voter’s economic and cultural positions are different.⁴⁵ Specifically, as the Democratic and Republican candidates separate on the cultural dimension, the vote coefficient associated with that dimension gets larger, and the coefficient associated with the economic dimension gets smaller, as plotted in figure 5.

To reiterate, in this example there is no distributional change: the voter distribution stays the same. Nor is there any behavioral change: voters were not “activated” by the campaigns but simply vote for the candidate closer to them. What has changed is how close or far the candidates locate themselves from voters: *candidate* behavior is what has changed.

FIGURE 4 Unchanging voters, moving candidates

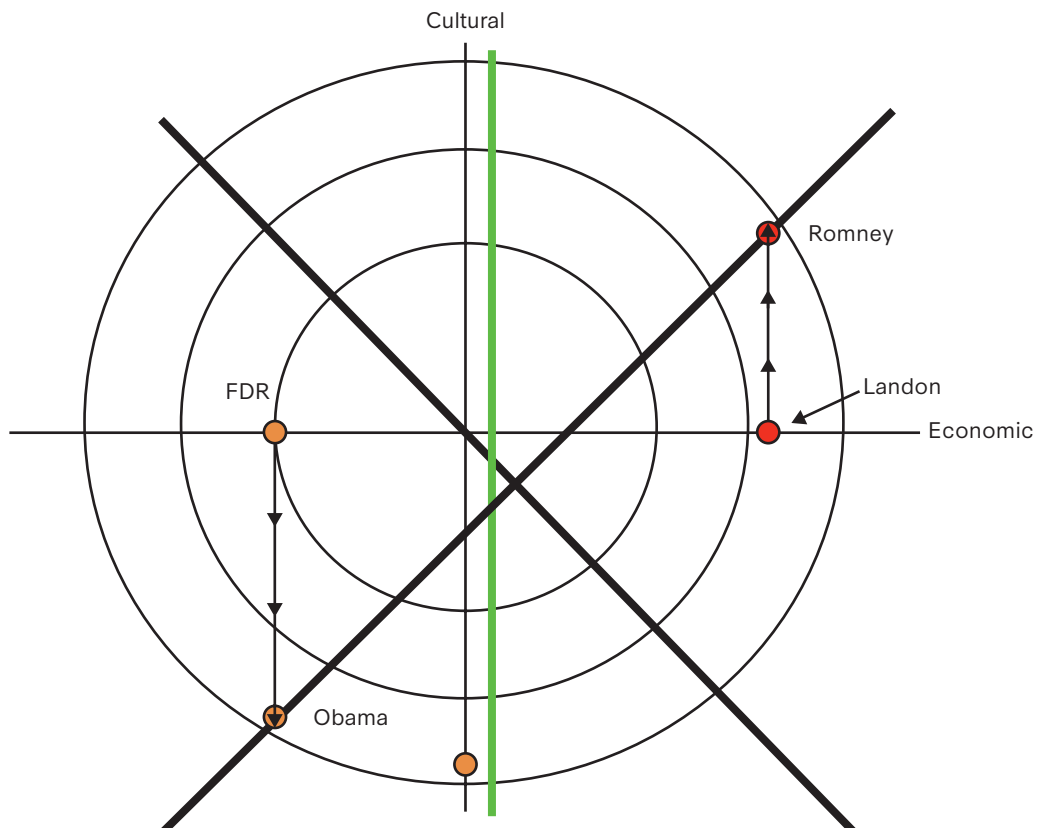
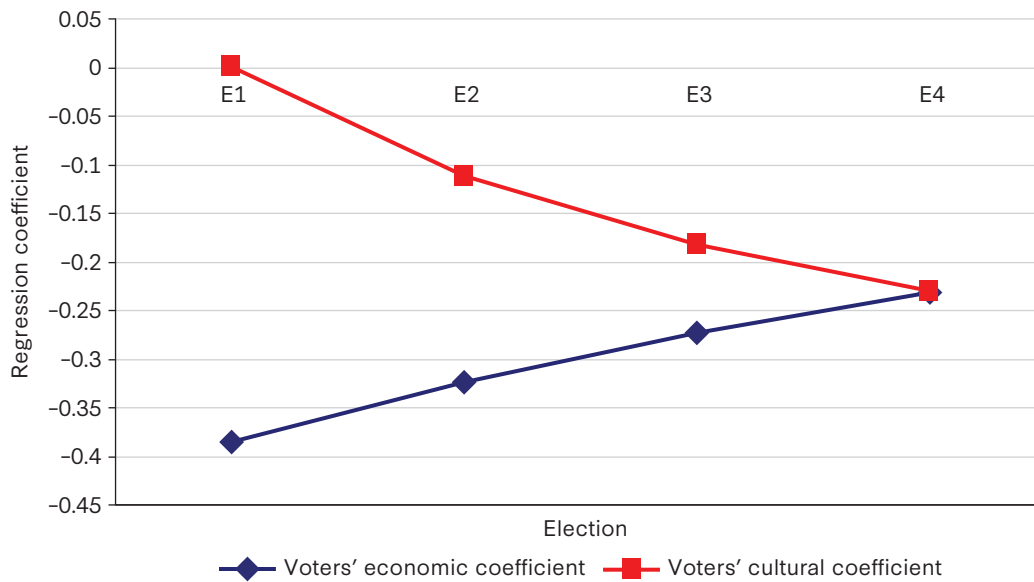


FIGURE 5 Unchanging voters appear to change as candidates move



There is every reason to believe that changes in candidate positions in some part underlie the larger statistical relationship of cultural attitudes in 2016 relative to earlier elections. Sides, Tesler, and Vavreck write, “Americans have rated the Democratic presidential candidate as the more supportive of federal aid to blacks in every single survey since the question’s inception in 1972. . . . Then, in 2016, this disparity increased to record levels. . . . Whites saw Clinton as more liberal than Obama in 2012 (a 0.13 shift on the scale) and Trump as significantly more conservative than Romney (a 0.37 shift).”⁴⁶ Similarly, after analyzing a panel survey, Hopkins observes that respondents in 2016 viewed Clinton as slightly more liberal on immigration than Obama in 2012, and Trump as far more conservative than Romney.⁴⁷ My conjecture is that other things being equal, as *candidates move apart on an issue, the voter coefficients associated with that issue grow larger*. Unless analysts explicitly incorporate candidate positions into their statistical estimations, we cannot identify whether an *apparent* increase or decrease in importance of a variable reflects voter change, candidate change, or some mixture of the two. Of the analyses I have located, only Mutz explicitly considers changes in candidate positions in her analysis, concluding—consistent with the preceding arguments—that changes in candidate positions were more important than distributional change for explaining the difference between 2012 and 2016 voting.⁴⁸

TESTING THE APPROPRIATE HYPOTHESIS

During the 2016 campaign and its aftermath, various surveys reported a finding that some found surprising: Trump’s supporters were not particularly poor or suffering from joblessness. In fact, Manza and Crowley reported that “Trump’s voters were, on the whole, significantly more affluent and better educated than the average voters in primary states.”⁴⁹ Given that one explanation of the election focused on the prevalence of economic hardship, these findings seemed counterintuitive to some people in the media.

Such findings, however, would not have surprised anyone even slightly familiar with the vast literature on economic voting. Since the inaugural work of Kinder and Kiewiet forty years ago, political scientists have known that measures of individual economic conditions, such as personal income or employment status (“pocketbook”), have weak and inconsistent associations with voting.⁵⁰ In contrast, collective (“sociotropic”) measures that reference broader impacts show consistently strong associations. Kramer goes so far as to argue that there are so many nonpolitical causes of individual economic conditions that empirical analyses should ignore them altogether; rather, aggregate measures that net out nonpolitical impacts are the only ones that analysts should use.⁵¹ That raises other problems, to be discussed in the next section, but the general finding that national or other collective economic measures dominate individual measures has been established for four decades.

Somewhat strangely, although that finding surely is well known to those scholars who attempt to adjudicate between economic and cultural explanations of Trump’s appeal, their analyses in many cases do not incorporate it. Pocketbook measures abound in their voting models. Reny, Collingwood, and Valenzuela use change in household income over the preceding four years.⁵² So do Schaffner and coworkers.⁵³ Mutz’s analysis includes household income, whether the respondent is looking for work, changes in personal finance, and the personal impacts of trade.⁵⁴ Sides and colleagues use responses to survey questions about the respondent’s current financial situation and whether they worry about losing their job or missing a rent or health payment.⁵⁵ Enns uses YouGov measures of family income and the respondent’s employment status.⁵⁶ Pocketbook measures like these typically show little or no association with Trump’s vote once control variables and cultural variables are included in the models. In the statistical horse race with cultural variables, the pocketbook variables trail badly.

But why should anyone have expected otherwise? Consider Krystal Ball’s (a Bernie supporter) colorful postelection rant:

One after another, the dispatches came back from the provinces. The coal mines are gone, the steel mills are closed, the drugs are rampant, the towns are decimated. . . . And we offered a fantastical non-solution. We will retrain you for good jobs! . . . And as a final insult, we lectured a struggling people watching their kids die of drug overdoses about their white privilege. Can you blame them for calling bullshit?⁵⁷

Ball clearly refers to suffering communities, not suffering individuals. Similarly, Coontz reports, “As a recent CNN poll shows, white working-class and rural voters without a college degree are not the poorest of Americans, but they are the most pessimistic about their future prospects. A full half expect their children’s lives will be worse than their own, and less than a quarter expect their children to do better.”⁵⁸

Political scientist Matthew Dickinson spent his sabbatical year talking to attendees at Trump rallies. He writes, “It quickly became clear that two themes dominated the thinking of

Trump supporters. The first, expressed—unprompted by me—by every person I talked to, was economic anxiety. Interestingly, that anxiety was not directed so much at their own situation, but toward that of their children, or others close to them.”⁵⁹

Clearly, Ball, Coontz, Dickinson, and other commentators identify not just voters’ concerns about their personal economic situations but also fear for the future of their progeny and their communities and despair over the social dysfunctions produced by areawide economic distress. I may have a secure public sector job with good benefits, but that is small consolation if my community is going to hell.

In sum, a fourth problem in the debate over the relative importance of economic versus cultural considerations in the 2016 voting is more specific than the first two. Many analyses do not include the appropriate economic concepts, substituting a pinched notion of personal economic hardship for general economic distress, almost guaranteeing a finding of apparently weak effects of economic considerations.⁶⁰

MIXING INDIVIDUAL- AND AGGREGATE-LEVEL VARIABLES

An objection to the arguments in the preceding section is that some analyses do include aggregate economic indicators that capture broader, more sociotropic notions of economic distress. In addition to a survey item on job loss, Green and McElwee’s analysis includes zip-code-level unemployment insurance receipts.⁶¹ Mutz adds zip-code-level civilian unemployment, manufacturing employment, and median income measures to the survey measures discussed earlier in this essay.⁶² Reny and colleagues include county-level manufacturing loss and unemployment, as well as a survey item on household income. Nevertheless, their analyses conclude that culture dominates economics.

Rarely in this literature do analysts recognize that including both aggregate- and individual-level measures in a regression creates complications that require more sophisticated analyses. Other things being equal, simply regressing indicators of individual behavior such as voting on both individual and aggregate right-hand-side variables disadvantages the variables measured at the aggregate level. Again, I adapt an illustration from an earlier work that encountered an analogous problem.⁶³

In the 1970s and early 1980s, research on congressional elections generated a puzzle. In that era of candidate-centered elections, members of Congress firmly believed that activities on behalf of their constituents resulted in electoral payoffs, and therefore, they allocated significant resources to such activities. For their part, surveys showed that constituents who felt their members were attentive and helpful evaluated them positively and voted for them. The puzzle was that attempts to relate what congressional offices reported doing with what constituents reported experiencing or how they voted showed weak, inconsistent, or even negative relationships, as in Gary Jacobson’s classic contrarian finding that “the more they spend, the worse they do.”⁶⁴

A large part of the puzzle was caused by endogeneity, a problem rarely recognized by political scientists in those days. Newer members who were less well known and less electorally secure were more active, so even if their efforts had positive payoffs, their reputations still might pale in comparison to those of more established members. But there was a second, purely statistical explanation as well. In 1978 the ANES conducted a major off-year study, interviewing 2,300 constituents in about 100 congressional districts. Independent analysts gathered office-level data for the same districts.⁶⁵ This meant that on average 230 constituents were assigned the same values of the office-level variables. Much of the literature under discussion in this essay displays the same feature. In almost all studies, individual voters are the units of analysis. Typically, the voter has personal scores on various background (“control”) variables, as well as on cultural variables of interest. But multiple voters are assigned the same zip-code-level, county-level, or other administrative-level economic value. The following simple example shows the potential effect.

Table 4 depicts six counties each containing five voters. The variables in the table are binary. Column 1 is 2016 vote (Trump=1). Column 2 contains the economic variable (hardship=1). The counties vary from wealthy ones that contain no economically distressed voters to severely depressed units where everyone is distressed. By assumption, economic hardship perfectly determines the vote: every person who is distressed votes for Trump, while every person not distressed votes for Clinton. Every voter also has a cultural score (column 3; prejudice=1). These scores are very highly related to the vote but not perfectly so: county 1 contains a Clinton voter who is prejudiced, and county 6 contains a Trump voter who is not prejudiced.

TABLE 4 ILLUSTRATIVE DATASET

Vote	Personal economic	Personal cultural	Aggregate economic
<i>County 1</i>			
0	0	1	0
0	0	0	0
0	0	0	0
0	0	0	0
0	0	0	0
<i>County 2</i>			
1	1	1	0.2
0	0	1	0.2
0	0	0	0.2
0	0	0	0.2
0	0	0	0.2

(continued)

TABLE 4 (Continued)

Vote	Personal economic	Personal cultural	Aggregate economic
<i>County 3</i>			
1	1	1	0.4
1	1	1	0.4
0	0	1	0.4
0	0	0	0.4
0	0	0	0.4
<i>County 4</i>			
1	1	1	0.6
1	1	1	0.6
1	1	0	0.6
0	0	0	0.6
0	0	0	0.6
<i>County 5</i>			
1	1	1	0.8
1	1	1	0.8
1	1	1	0.8
1	1	0	0.8
0	0	0	0.8
<i>County 6</i>			
1	1	1	1
1	1	1	1
1	1	1	1
1	1	1	1
1	1	0	1

The regressions of the Trump vote on the cultural and economic variables are shown here:

$$\text{Trump Vote} = 0.0 + 1.00 \text{ Hardship}$$

$$R^2 = 1.0 \text{ (standard errors} = 0)$$

$$\text{Trump Vote} = .067 + .867 \text{ Prejudice} \\ (.067) (.094)$$

$$R^2 = .75$$

When the regression includes individual-level measures of both economic and cultural concepts, the estimates again reflect the perfect determination of the vote by economic considerations:

$$\text{Trump Vote} = 0.0 + 1.0 \text{ Hardship} + 0.0 \text{ Prejudice} \quad R^2 = 1.0 \text{ (standard errors} = 0)$$

As is often the case, however, suppose the economic measure is available only at the county level (column 4), so every voter is assigned the average figure for the county. The economic regression is

$$\text{Trump Vote} = 0.0 + 1.00 \text{ Hardship} \quad R^2 = .47 \\ (.122) \quad (.202)$$

The slope and intercept remain the same as in the individual-level regression, of course, but the explained variance has been more than halved. This development reflects the fundamental identity of the analysis of variance: Total variance = within-unit variance plus between-unit variance. When measured at the aggregate level the economic variable can only explain between-unit variance, which from the aggregate economic regression is only 47 percent of the total variance in this constructed dataset.

But when the regression includes the individual-level cultural variable and the aggregate-level economic variable, the regression is as follows:

$$\text{Trump Vote} = -.100 + .500 \text{ Hardship} + .700 \text{ Prejudice} \quad R^2 = .84 \\ (.069) \quad (.129) \quad (.088)$$

Although the cultural variable was previously irrelevant in the presence of the economic variable, because it can access the within-unit variance, its coefficient now becomes larger in magnitude than the economic coefficient. In sum, even though by assumption economic distress perfectly determines the vote in this example, an analyst using an aggregate-level economic variable would attribute greater importance to the cultural variable.

Other research subfields have long recognized problems like this one. Education researchers for example, regress student achievement on individual student characteristics, classroom characteristics, school characteristics, and sometimes even larger units. When the observations are “nested” within larger units, techniques more sophisticated than single regression equations are required.⁶⁶ Although these methods appear here and there in the political science literature, they are rare or absent in this area of research where the nature of the data clearly calls for them.

CONCLUSION

This selective review justifies no definitive conclusion, other than that no study of which I am aware provides a conclusive answer to whether cultural or economic considerations were the

more important contributor to Trump's vote. I do think, however, that we can conclude with some confidence that the measurement and modeling decisions that characterize this literature very likely work to enhance the apparent impacts of cultural variables and understate the apparent impacts of economic variables.

Unfortunately, announcing conclusions that are not well-rooted in the data may have negative real-world consequences. As Enns notes, "If social scientists and journalists over-emphasize the role of racist attitudes in the election, they risk inflaming political divisiveness."⁶⁷ Trump supporters motivated by economic concerns felt rightly resentful when their concerns were dismissed as disguised racism, sexism, or other social pathologies. And Trump opponents did not realize that they may have had more common ground with Trump supporters than they believed. The research conducted after the 2016 elections may inadvertently have contributed to the toxic quality of contemporary debate.

We should do better in the aftermath of 2024.

NEXT: THE WHITE WORKING CLASS IN 2016 (AND EARLIER)

NOTES

1. L. V. Anderson, "2016 Was the Year White Liberals Realized How Unjust, Racist, and Sexist America Is," *Slate*, December 29, 2016, http://www.slate.com/blogs/xx_factor/2016/12/29/_2016_was_the_year_white_liberal_learned_about_disillusionment.html.
2. Christina Cauterucci, "In 2016 America Was Forced to Face the Reality of Sexual Assault," *Slate*, December 28, 2016, http://www.slate.com/blogs/xx_factor/2016/12/28/_2016_was_the_year_america_learned_what_sexual_assault_looks_like.html.
3. Jenee Desmond-Harris, "Trump's Win Is a Reminder of the Incredible, Unbeatable Power of Racism," *Vox*, November 9, 2016, <http://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2016/11/9/13571676/trump-win-racism-power>.
4. James Barrett, "Michael Moore Slaps down Attempts to Smear Trump Voters as 'Racist,'" *Daily Wire*, November 12, 2016, accessed via Internet Archive, <https://web.archive.org/web/20161114043754/http://www.dailywire.com/news/10742/michael-moore-slaps-down-attempts-smear-trump-james-barrett#>. It should be noted that Michael Moore was all over the map on this issue.
5. Eduardo Porter, "Where Were Trump's Votes? Where the Jobs Weren't," *New York Times*, December 13, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/13/business/economy/jobs-economy-voters.html>.
6. Andrew Yang, as quoted in Kevin Roose, "His 2020 Campaign Message: The Robots Are Coming," *New York Times*, February 10, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/10/technology/his-2020-campaign-message-the-robots-are-coming.html?module=inline>.
7. Such high partisan loyalty figures are somewhat exaggerated because they treat leaning independents as partisans. Considerable evidence indicates that some independents decide how to vote first and then indicate how they lean based on how they intend to vote. This reverse causation artificially inflates the relationship between partisanship and voting. See Morris Fiorina, *Unstable Majorities* (Stanford CA: Hoover Press, 2017), chap. 6.
8. In the Economist/YouGov panel, about two-thirds of 2012 Obama White voters supported Clinton in 2016, whereas about three-quarters of Romney white voters supported Trump. Fiorina, *Unstable Majorities*, 197. The blue-ribbon post-election American Association for Public Opinion Research (AAPOR) report concluded that the errors in 2016 state polls in part reflected polling samples that contained too many

college-educated Whites. AAPOR, "An Evaluation of 2016 Election Polls in the United States," January 2023, <https://aapor.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/AAPOR-2016-Election-Polling-Report.pdf>.

9. John B. Judis makes a similar suggestion in *The Nationalist Revival* (New York: Columbia Global Reports, 2018), 68.

10. Highton makes a persuasive case that the racial and cultural dimensions, such as abortion and gay rights, are distinct. Gun control may constitute still another dimension. My arguments in this essay apply to all the cultural dimensions, whether considered separately or collectively. Benjamin Highton, "The Cultural Realignment of State White Electorates in the 21st Century," *Political Behavior* 42 (2020):1319–41.

11. Most of the research considered here appeared after the 2016 election. Trump's defeat in 2020 seems to have reduced interest in the subject, although some research continues to address the question. See, e.g., Perry Undam, *Understanding the 2020 Election, The Electorate and the Trump Years*, April 13, 2021, <https://perryundem.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/PerryUndem-Post-Election-Survey-Report.pdf>.

12. For example, see Alan Abramowitz, *The Great Alignment* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018), 148–50.

13. Judis, *Nationalist Revival*, 40.

14. Born as "symbolic racism" around 1980, the present incarnation of the concept is known as "racial resentment." See Donald R. Kinder and David O. Sears, "Prejudice and Politics: Symbolic Racism versus Racial Threats to the Good Life," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 40 (1981):413–31.

15. Paul M. Sniderman is a long-standing critic of the concept. See, for example, *The Democratic Faith: Essays on Democratic Citizenship* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017), 101–6; Edward G. Carmines, Paul M. Sniderman, and Beth C. Easter, "On the Meaning, Measurement, and Implications of Racial Resentment," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Sciences* 634 (2011):98–116.

16. Christopher Tarman and David O. Sears, "The Conceptualization and Measurement of Symbolic Racism," *Journal of Politics* 67 (2005):731–61; Stanley Feldman and Leonie Huddy, "Racial Resentment and White Opposition to Race-Conscious Programs: Principles or Prejudice?" *American Journal of Political Science* 49 (2005):168–83; Riley K. Carney and Ryan D. Enos, "Conservatism and Fairness in Contemporary Politics: Unpacking the Psychological Underpinnings of Modern Racism," 2017, <https://scholar.harvard.edu/files/renos/files/carneyenos.pdf>.

17. In a recent contribution Abramowitz argues that conservative ideology best explains White working-class defection from the Democratic Party and that racial resentment is the strongest predictor of conservative ideology. To the skeptics this is a demonstration that one measure of conservative ideology predicts another measure of conservative ideology. Alan Abramowitz, "Can Democrats Win Back the White Working Class?" Center for Politics, 2021, <https://centerforpolitics.org/crystalball/articles/can-democrats-win-back-the-white-working-class/>

18. Diana C. Mutz, "Status Threat, Not Economic Hardship, Explains the 2016 Presidential Vote," *PNAS: Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 2018, <https://www.pnas.org/content/115/19/E4330>; Stephen L. Morgan, "Status Threat, Material Interests, and the 2016 Presidential Vote," *Socius: Sociological Research for a Dynamic World* 4 (2018):1–17, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2378023118788217>. Used under CC BY-NC.

19. Morgan, "Status Threat, Material Interests," Table 2.

20. Mutz, "Status Threat, Not Economic Hardship," 4.

21. For example, see George J. Borjas, "Yes, Immigration Hurts American Workers," *Politico*, September/October 2016, <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2016/09/trump-clinton-immigration-economy-unemployment-jobs-214216>.

22. See, e.g., Thomas Frank, "How the Democrats Lost Touch on Trade," *Politico*, September 2016, <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2016/09/2016-election-working-class-trade-tpp-trade-democrats-214219>. See also Nelson D. Schwartz and Quoc Trung Bui, "Where Jobs Are Squeezed by Chinese Trade, Voters Seek Extremes," *New York Times*, April 26, 2016, <https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/2016/04/26/business/economy/where-jobs-are-squeezed-by-chinese-trade-voters-seek-extremes.html>.

23. On NAFTA, see Shushanak Hakobyan and John McLaren, "Looking for Local Labor Market Effects of NAFTA," *Review of Economics and Statistics* 98 (2016):728–41. On the WTO, see David H. Autor, David Dorn,

and Gordon H. Hanson, "The China Shock: Learning from Labor-Market Adjustment to Large Changes in Trade," *Annual Review of Economics* 8 (2016): 205-40. A left-leaning think tank calculates that trade with China cost more than three million American jobs as of 2017. Economic Policy Institute, "The Growing Trade Deficit with China Has Led to a Loss of 3.4 Million US Jobs between 2001 and 2017," October 23, 2018, <https://www.epi.org/press/the-growing-trade-deficit-with-china-has-led-to-a-loss-of-3-4-million-u-s-jobs-between-2001-and-2017/>.

24. Judith Goldstein and Robert Gulotty, "The Globalization Crisis: Populism and the Rise of an Anti-Trade Coalition," *European Review of International Studies* 6 (2019):57-83.

25. See, e.g., Seymour Martin Lipset, *Political Man* (New York: Doubleday, 1960), chaps. 4 and 5. For a contemporary contribution along these lines, see Leonardo Baccini and Thomas Sattler, "Austerity, Economic Vulnerability, and Populism," 2020, <https://wp.nyu.edu/gripe/schedule/august-19-baccini/>.

26. The Nazi Party received 2.6 percent of the vote in the elections of 1928, 18.3 percent in the 1930 elections, and 37.3 percent in the elections of 1932. Closer to home, the Great Depression of the 1930s saw the rise to prominence of demagogues like Huey Long, Father Coughlin, and Gerald L. K. Smith.

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28. Peter Goodman and Emma Bubola, "The Chinese Roots of Italy's Far-Right Rage," *New York Times*, December 5, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/05/business/italy-china-far-right.html>.

29. Zingher is one of the few analysts who attempts to take account of this point. He reports a path analysis in which social class affects the Trump vote both directly and through its effects on authoritarianism and racial resentment. Joshua Zingher, "On the Measurement of Social Class and Its Role in Shaping White Vote Choice in the 2016 US Presidential Election," *Electoral Studies* 64 (2020):102-19.

30. Verlan Lewis, "The Problem of Donald Trump and the Static Spectrum Fallacy," *Party Politics* 27, no. 4 (2019): 605-18, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1354068819871673#>.

31. Peter K. Enns and Ashley Jardina, "Complicating the Role of White Racial Attitudes and Immigrant Sentiment in the 2016 US Presidential Election," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 85 (2021):539-70. Agadjanian and Lacy report the most extreme example of such endogeneity that I am aware of. In an analysis of census panel data, voters who reported switching from a non-Republican vote in 2012 to a Trump vote in 2016 show a very slight tendency to change their racial identification from non-White to White. Alexander Agadjanian and Dean Lacy, "Changing Votes, Changing Identities? Racial Fluidity and Vote Switching in the 2012-2016 US Presidential Elections," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 85 (2021):737-52.

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34. Brian F. Schaffner, Matthew MacWilliams, and Tatishe Nteta, "Understanding White Polarization in the 2016 Vote for President: The Sobering Role of Racism and Sexism," *Political Science Quarterly* 133, no. 1 (2018): 9-34, quote on p. 27.

35. John Sides, "Race, Religion, and Immigration in 2016," Voter Study Group, 2017, <https://www.voterstudygroup.org/publication/race-religion-immigration-2016>.

36. Adam M. Enders and Jamil S. Scott, "The Increasing Racialization of American Electoral Politics, 1988-2016," *American Politics Research* 47 (2018):275-303.

37. Matthew Yglesias, "The Great Awakening," *Vox*, April 1, 2019, <https://www.vox.com/2019/3/22/18259865/great-awakening-white-liberals-race-polling-trump-2020>.

38. Andrew M. Engelhardt, "Trumped by Race: Explanations for Race's Influence on Whites' Votes in 2016," *Quarterly Journal of Political Science* 14 (2019):313-28.

39. Morris P. Fiorina, with Samuel J. Abrams and Jeremy Pope, *Culture War: The Myth of a Polarized America*, 3rd ed. (New York: Longman, 2005), chap. 9. I have always considered this argument the most

important intellectual contribution of that book—the other chapters were only corrections of popular misconceptions. Yet, the argument has been largely ignored.

40. Anthony Downs, *An Economic Theory of Democracy* (New York: Wiley, 1957), chap. 8.

41. If preferences are single-peaked and everyone votes, the median is the majority rule equilibrium whatever the shape of the voter distribution.

42. Of course, there could still be other dimensions, particularly international affairs, but these tend to be poorly defined statistically. The notion that the deep structure of Americans' political attitudes is two-dimensional (in contrast to congressional roll-call voting) has a long lineage, although the hypothesized content of the second dimension varies over time. In 1970 Scammon and Wattenberg warned that a class-based Democratic majority was threatened by its off-center position on an emerging "social" dimension. Shafer and Claggett argued in 1995 that contemporary politics was organized around two "essentially independent" principles, one economic/welfare and the other cultural/national. Most recently, Carmines and his collaborators have confirmed that the two-dimensional structure of domestic attitudes continues today. Richard Scammon and Ben Wattenberg, *The Real Majority* (New York: Coward, McCann & Geoghegan, 1970); Byron Shafer and William Claggett, *The Two Majorities* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995); Edward G. Carmines, Michael J. Ensley, and Michael Wagner, "Ideological Heterogeneity and the Rise of Donald Trump," 2016, <https://www.degruyter.com/downloadpdf/j/for.2016.14.issue-4/for-2016-0036/for-2016-0036.pdf>.

43. Just like a topo map of a mountain, only the contours represent voter distances from the median rather than elevation.

44. Carmines, Ensley, and Wagner, "Ideological Heterogeneity."

45. The graph plots logit estimates for the equation, $\text{Vote} = a_1 + b_1 (\text{voter economic position}) + b_2 (\text{voter cultural position})$. Coefficients are negative because the further the candidate is from the voter's position, the less likely the voter is to support that candidate, *ceteris paribus*.

46. John Sides, Michael Tesler, and Lynn Vavreck, *Identity Crisis: The 2016 Presidential Campaign and the Battle for the Meaning of America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018), 168–69.

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48. Mutz, "Status Threat, Not Economic Hardship," E4335–36.

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50. Donald R. Kinder and D. Roderick Kiewiet, "Economic Discontent and Political Behavior: The Role of Personal Grievances and Collective Judgements in Congressional Voting," *American Journal of Political Science* 23 (1979):495–527.

51. Gerald H. Kramer, "The Ecological Fallacy Revisited: Aggregate- versus Individual-Level Findings on Economics and Elections, and Sociotropic Voting," *American Political Science Review* 77 (1983):92–111.

52. Tyler Reny, Loren Collingwood, and Ali A. Valenzuela, "Vote Switching in the 2016 Election: How Racial and Immigration Attitudes, Not Economics, Explain Shifts in White Voting," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 83 (2019):91–113.

53. Schaffner, MacWilliams, and Nteta, "Understanding White Polarization."

54. Mutz, "Status Threat, Not Economic Hardship," Table 1.

55. Sides, Tesler, and Vavreck, *Identity Crisis*, 172–75.

56. Enns and Jardina, "Complicating the Role of White Racial Attitudes."

57. Krystal Ball, "The Democratic Party Deserved to Die," *Huffington Post*, November 10, 2016, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/the-democratic-party-deserves-to-die_b_58236ad5e4b0aac62488cde5.

58. Stephanie Coontz, "Why the White Working Class Ditched Clinton," CNN, November 11, 2016, <https://www.cnn.com/2016/11/10/opinions/how-clinton-lost-the-working-class-coontz/index.html>.

59. Matthew Dickinson, "How He Won," *Middlebury Magazine*, February 7, 2017. The second theme was a dislike of Hillary Clinton.
60. Jumping ahead an election, Martin writes that a 2020 Democratic Party postmortem reported that between 2012 and 2020 Democrats lost more than 2.6 million votes in the "factory towns" in the greater Midwest that have suffered losses of manufacturing jobs. Jonathan Martin, "Democrats Lost the Most in Midwestern 'Factory Towns,' Report Says," *New York Times*, October 5, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/10/05/us/politics/democrats-votes-midwest.html>.
61. See, for example, Jon Green and Sean McElwee, "The Differential Effects of Economic Conditions and Racial Attitudes in the Election of Donald Trump," *Perspectives on Politics* 17 (2019):358-79.
62. Mutz, "Status Threat, Not Economic Hardship."
63. Bruce Cain, John Ferejohn, and Morris Fiorina, *The Personal Vote* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), 130-34.
64. Gary Jacobson, *Money in Congressional Elections* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980), *passim*.
65. Cain, Ferejohn, and Fiorina, *The Personal Vote*.
66. Andrew Gelman and Jennifer Hill, *Data Analysis Using Regression and Multilevel/Hierarchical Modeling* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007).
67. Enns and Jardina, "Complicating the Role of White Racial Attitudes."



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