

Trump won because he cared- letter from Levittown

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'The institutions that used to help you are now working against you'

MAIN QUOTES

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'The rest of culture is telling them "it's not OK to be you" '

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Trump won because he cared – lessons from Levittown Henry Olsen 29 May 2018

Why would Americans elect a crude political novice who calls Third World countries “shithole countries”? That’s a question, 19 months on from Trump’s shock win, that many are still trying to answer. The common explanation is that Whites without college degrees were motivated either by economic distress or by racial resentment. But such an analysis ignores a fundamental part of Trump’s appeal. For many of his supporters, as I found on a recent trip to White, blue-collar Levittown in Pennsylvania,¹ voting for Trump was about values and identity.

Levittown, a medium-sized suburban community north of Philadelphia, was created by developer William Levitt, starting in 1951, as one of America’s earliest affordable suburban communities. Over sixty years after its first house was sold, it remains a White, working-class town, but unlike better-known Trump-friendly, White blue-collar places like Pennsylvania’s Lackawanna County or Ohio’s Mahoning County it is still economically well-off. Yet despite this relative affluence, it behaved just like these other places, moving dramatically away from a traditional Democratic voting history to make Trump the most successful Republican nominee in these areas in the last thirty years.²

My visit unearthed just how complicated and varied Trump’s appeal to these voters is. Some people mentioned economic concerns as an explanation for Levittown’s shift, while others mentioned immigration and the cultural and economic issues it raises. But more than anything people mentioned a deep psychological resonance that made Levittowners feel Trump understood and cared about people like them. They may not like Trump’s tweets, but his brash manner and his open embrace of the value of work was for them a breath of fresh air in an

otherwise long-stale political climate.

Although the town is doing well – the median household income is over \$72,000 a year above the US median – economics still resonates because of Levittown's past. Many of its original residents worked for one of five large manufacturers, the largest of which was United States Steel. As elsewhere in the Rust Belt, the factories gradually closed down or dramatically reduced in size. Jane,³ a sixty-year Levittown resident, told me that the U.S. Steel plant went from a high of nearly 10,000 employees in the 1980s to a current total of about 150. While Levittowners eventually adapted and found new jobs, they paid less and had less generous benefits than the old jobs that had gone. "Bringing manufacturing back was a big thing for Levittowners," says Jane. It's a now familiar refrain: "US Steel workers used to make \$25 an hour [close to \$50 an hour in 2018 money] and get up to 13 weeks of vacation each year. The jobs they have now don't pay anything near that well."

For Bill, a retired carpenter, Trump's economic message was personal. Telling me about how his union couldn't get work when competing against contractors employing foreign labourers, who may be in the US illegally, it was not hard to see why Trump's message resonated so deeply. "If Trump had been President," he says, wistfully, "I probably wouldn't have had to retire." Some people even think Trump will get them their old jobs back, says Jane, not just bring back manufacturing more generally.

The sense that these jobs were unfairly lost also helps explain this Trump-friendly narrative. Jane emphasises that US Steel's foreign competition was subsidised by foreign governments. "We sent our jobs overseas and then we sent money [via foreign aid] to countries that turned around to stab us in the back," she said. Bill went further: "immigration is a big thing because it is a big handout. We can't get big handouts like they can." It was a odd comment, US laws do not

offer legal immigrants anything different from what it offers citizens and immigrants not here legally are often not allowed to receive many government benefits, but whether Bill and Jane are correct is beside the point – what matters from a political standpoint is that voters like those in Levittown feel like their government has abandoned them.

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This sense of abandonment – of being “left behind” – came up time and again in my discussions with local people. “They want officials to pay attention to them,” Anthony, a young 30-year old anti-Trump Republican, told me. “They aren’t seeing any direct benefit from any of the policies” politicians talk about. In fact, the disaffection goes deeper. Levittowners, one astute local politico named Greg told me, tend to believe that “if I work hard and play by the rules it will work out.” But, as Greg said as we drove round the old steelworks, “there’s a sense that not everyone is playing by the same rules. Many of these folk think ‘I’m working my ass off, and this just isn’t working for me’.” That’s a common view among the White blue-collar workers who turned to Trump.

Disaffection with the status quo – the ‘establishment’ – drove voters to Trump the outsider: “The institutions that used to help you are now working against you, many people think. The game is rigged and it’s time to change it.” Interestingly, as both Bill and Greg told me, that outsider could just as well have been socialist populist Bernie Sanders. I was told about exchanges on primary day where Democratic voters told their GOP counterparts that they were voting for Hillary Clinton’s challenger, Sanders, but they were voting for Trump in November if Clinton won.

These pro-Trump feelings rarely extended to specifics. Time and again I would ask people what exactly voters thought they

would get from Trump, and time and again I found only a general sense that things would get better for people like them.

But perhaps they were already getting the specific thing they craved more than anything else: the feeling that someone in power cared. Bill surprised me by repeatedly saying that “Trump is a very compassionate person.” He mentioned a story he had heard from Trump’s personal airplane pilot about how Trump once sent his jet to pick up a young person who couldn’t get to a hospital for medical treatment he needed, but it was clear that this idea of caring extended well beyond that one specific example. “Supporting Trump was the second-best decision I ever made”, he said – quite a statement from a self-described “life-long Democrat” who voted for Obama in 2008.

To really understand this devotion-inspiring appeal, however, you have to look beyond the economic. For many blue-collar Whites, Trump’s pull was personal. Greg put it this way: “Trump is telling them ‘it’s OK to be you’. The rest of culture is telling them ‘it’s not OK to be you’.”

As Greg told me, whether the message is economic – “you have to go to college to succeed” – or cultural – “I like to listen to AC/DC; what’s wrong with that?” – Levittowners and people like them have felt the brunt of elite disdain. In voting for Trump, these blue-collar workers were rebelling against the idea that America is no longer for people like them.

“Levittowners just want a good Christmas for their kids and go to the Jersey Shore for a couple of weeks. They want some acknowledgement that is OK,” Anthony said. Trump gives them that, and they are willing to overlook nearly everything else in exchange.

It is against this backdrop that another aspect of Trump’s appeal starts to make sense. Anthony told me that one reason

his neighbours liked Trump was that he “says what everyone thinks”. And that even extends to some of his cruder comments. “If I was down at the bar, that’s exactly what people would say,” the young Republican says of Trump’s “shithole countries” remark. For these Americans, Trump’s blunt, crude talk is just another way of showing he understands and values their way of life.

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I left Levittown with more questions than answers. How would Levittowners feel if the US economy wasn’t roaring? Would they still overlook Trump’s shortcomings if he suffers a serious foreign policy reverse that threatens America, such as in the dispute with North Korea? Most importantly, I wondered how deep this psychic longing for recognition was.

Like almost everyone I know, I am a college graduate with a good job who enjoys all the benefits the wide global economy brings. My life experiences are largely those that are treated with respect by media and academic elites, and the unsubtle message Levittowners, and blue-collar workers like them across the country, get is that their children should be more like me than like themselves. Returning to Washington from Levittown I couldn’t help but reflect on what it felt like to be, if not on the bottom, then on the downslide. Rather than viewing global blue-collar discontent through an economic lens, we ought to be looking at populist-backing voters more as people like us, holding similarly cherished identities and hopes. And maybe if we did that, we might all be a little bit better off.

FOOTNOTES

1. .89 percent of Levittown’s residents are non-Hispanic Whites and over 83 percent do not have a four-year college degree. Yet it remains firmly middle-class: the

median household income is over \$72,000 a year, above the U.S. median and more than 60 percent higher than more well-known Trump-friendly white, blue-collar places.

2. Trump received 45.6 percent of the vote in Levittown the highest share received by a Republican nominee since at least 1988. Mitt Romney, the 2012 nominee, received less than 38% of the vote and lost by over 24% to President Obama. Trump, however, lost by less than 6%, an improvement of over 18% on the margin. Trump's improvement over Romney on the margin was roughly 24% in Lackawanna County and about 25% in Mahoning County. See <https://uselectionatlas.org/RESULTS/>
3. All names of interviewees are pseudonyms, allowing their ability to speak openly about their community

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