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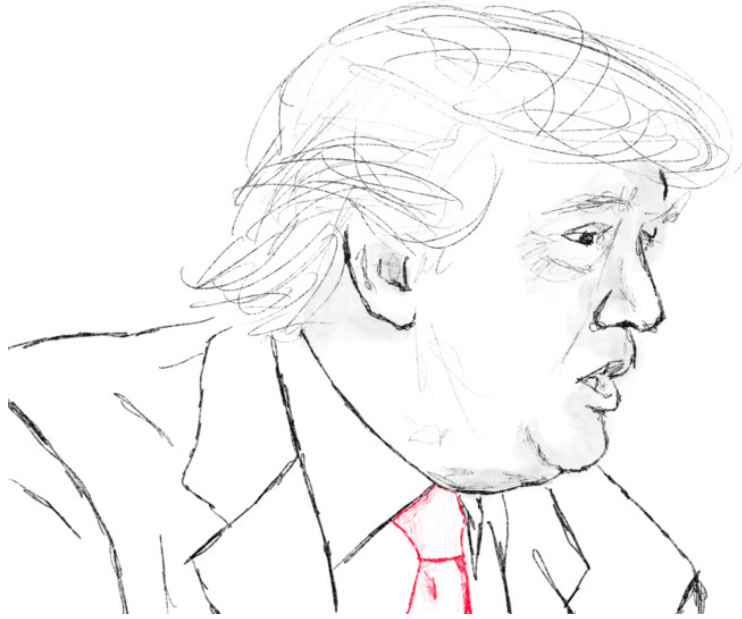
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by ANTHONY DIMAGGIO  
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## *The “Trump Recovery”: Behind Right-Wing Populism’s Radical Transformation*



Drawing by Nathaniel St. Clair

Trump’s unique brand of right-wing populism has long been sold in “mainstream” discourse via a narrative that his supporters are angry as hell over mounting personal and economic insecurity, in an age that affords fewer and fewer opportunities to the “working class.” This story was popularized in part because of Trump’s rhetoric, and because of his higher support among those (especially whites) with low levels of education, who were angry (at the time of Trump’s election) at the state of the nation and economy, and who

were opposed to corporate “free trade” agreements. But this narrative was always highly misleading. As social scientists have documented in recent years (see some examples [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#)), there is little evidence that Trumpeters are economically insecure relative to non-supporters. And their opposition to “free trade” is largely a function of being socialized to oppose it via Trump’s rhetoric, rather than due to personal experiences being harmed by the outsourcing of manufacturing jobs. There is no indication that Trumps supporters are more likely to come from rustbelt areas of the nation that are disproportionately affected by outsourcing. Rather, the story of 2016 was one of Democratic demobilization of the working class, not Republican mobilization. This was most evident in the finding that the Democrats lost 3.5 times as many working-class votes from the 2012 to 2016 presidential elections than Republicans gained. In other words, the Democrats gave us Trumpism as much as Republican right-wing “identity politics” and Trump’s activation of the reactionary right did.

But the “Trump working-class” phenomenon has taken a dramatic turn in the last two years, with rapid changes in the economic attitudes of Trumpeters in favor of the president’s “economic recovery.” My analysis of data that was recently made available from the Pew Research Center’s 2018 national surveys demonstrates a swift change in economic attitudes among Trump’s rank-and-file. Let’s get this out of the way first: Trump supporters have maintained the same commitment to his reactionary policies that they always had, and these agreements with the president are central to his continued political support, despite his increasingly authoritarian policies on immigration. Undertaking an original statistical “regression” analysis of the January, March, and May 2018 Pew surveys, I find the following results regarding the attitudes of Trump supporters.

On public policy preferences, Trumpeters exhibit more of the same-old, same-old by embracing reactionary, plutocratic, pro-business views. They are significantly more likely to support the Trump tax cuts that were concentrated overwhelmingly on the top 1 to 5 percent of income earners (Pew, 1/2018), to support the president’s broadly applied tariffs “on steel and aluminum imports” (5/2018), to disagree the U.S. government is “run by a few big interests looking out for themselves,” and to agree that government under Trump “is run for the benefit of all the people” (3/2018), to hold favorable views of American business corporations (5/2018), and a preference for the Republican austerity agenda

under Trumpism, via support for “a smaller government providing fewer services” to the people (5/2018).

Trumpeters also embrace the president’s authoritarianism and his creeping fascist agenda, particularly on immigration. They are significantly more likely to support building Trump’s wall with Mexico (1/2018), to agree with the racist and misogynist Constitutional “originalism” doctrine, which endorsed slavery and opposed women’s rights (3/2018), to embrace Trump’s noxious form of insult politics (directed heavily against immigrants and people of color) by agreeing that “personally insulting political opponents” is “fair game” (3/2018), to agree that the U.S. “does not have a responsibility to accept refugees” from other countries and from warzones (5/2018), and to embrace the dictatorial notion that “Many of the country’s problems could be dealt with more effectively if U.S. presidents didn’t have to worry so much about Congress or the courts” (3/2018).

On foreign policy, Trumpeters’ values align with the presidents, to the extent that they care about the world outside U.S. borders. Unsurprisingly, Trump supporters are more likely to be suspicious of the Russiagate-collusion claims – to disagree with claims that Trump had “improper contact with Russia during the 2016 campaign” (3/2018), and to distrust that Robert Mueller would “conduct a fair investigation into Russian involvement in the 2016 election” (1/2018). They are more likely to support Trump’s efforts to engage in North Korea (5/2018), although they are not more likely to express an opinion one way or another on Iran and its nuclear program (5/2018).

Regarding partisanship, Trump’s supporters are true believers in the Republican cause. They are significantly more likely to believe the Republican Party has “good policy ideas” and “high ethical standards,” and to feel that the Democratic Party has poor ideas and ethics (5/2018). These findings will be of surprise only to pundits and intellectuals who continue to scratch their heads about Trump’s continued support in polls and in his job approval ratings, assuming (without foundation) that Trump’s supporters are simply dupes who understand little about his beliefs, rather than being enthusiastic supporters of his reactionary-racist agenda.

In a saner political world, none of the above findings would be a surprise. But in American political discourse, Trump is endlessly framed as an economic populist savior of the economically downtrodden – a challenger of corporate power in American politics

and economics. This narrative is unsustainable. His supporters indulge in far-right Republican policies that target people of color, enhance corporate power and profits, and intensify repressive attacks on democratic principles. I've documented over the last three years, across dozens of economic metrics, how there is virtually no evidence of economic insecurity among Trump's base. Pew's 2018 surveys reinforce this point. Trump supporters are no more likely to earn low incomes than non-supporters, across all the 2018 Pew polls. They are no more likely to worry about retirement, compared to non-supporters (5/2018). Nor are they more likely to report poorer health, contrary to the common lament that the white working-class in "Trump's America" is experiencing a crisis of declining living standards and mortality rates. On a metric as simple as individuals' self-reported blood pressure, Trump supporters are no more likely than the rest of the population to indicate they are in poor health (5/2018). This finding is reinforced by my analysis of previous polls over the last few years, which finds that Trump supporters are no more likely than others to put off medical treatment or to struggle in affording health care.

The most novel, unique finding from the 2018 Pew surveys is the radical transformation in Trumpeters' perceptions of the economy. This reversal is dramatic for a population that has been endlessly celebrated as economic malcontents who are disgusted with the longstanding status quo of deindustrialization and stagnating wages among working Americans. There is little truth to this claim. Feelings that the U.S. economy was doing poorly were a significant predictor of Trump support in 2016. According to Pew's June 2016 survey, only 12 percent of Trump supporters agreed the economy was in "good" or "excellent" shape. By comparison, the numbers who felt the same increased dramatically in the next two years. In Pew's October 2017 survey, 69 percent of Trump supporters said the economy was in good or excellent shape, and that number reached an astounding 81 percent in Pew's March 2018 survey, with feelings about the state of the economy being a significant predictor of Trump support in 2017 and 2018. This represents a 57 percentage point growth in just one year, and a 69 percentage point growth in less than two years.

The problem with this rapid growth in economic euphoria is that Trump has done little to deserve it when reflecting on his actual policies. The U.S. average economic growth rate under Obama (measured in GDP change) was 2.2 percent in the post-recession period from 2010 to 2016. By comparison, Trump's growth rate was 2.6 percent annually between 2017 and 2018. These numbers are not substantively different, although Trump's

are slightly higher. Trump's "economic recovery" was largely a continuation of Obama's recovery, and neither leader has much to write home about considering they both come in well under the average annual GDP growth rate of 4.3 percent a year in the post-World War 2 period, from Harry Truman through George W. Bush. Furthermore, alternative indicators of economic health suggest the masses of Americans have done even more poorly under Trump than Obama – a tall order considering the large growth in inequality and economic insecurity (via spiraling health care and education costs) that occurred under the latter. As data from the U.S. Census Bureau indicates, while real median household income growth increased 2.6 percent a year from 2012 to 2016 under Obama, the rate of increase was just 1.8 percent for the one year of data we have under Trump – 2017. In other words, the idea of a unique "Trump recovery" is a fiction, one that exists in the minds of the president and his supporters, not in the real, observable world.

Far from revealing mass anger about economic stagnation under the neoliberal economy, these survey findings demonstrate that Trump supporters' economic attitudes are driven largely by partisan spin and manipulative rhetoric from the president and his foot soldiers in the media. The Republican bases' anger over "free trade" was non-existent in the Bush and Obama years, and it isn't meaningfully tied (today) to any really-existing harm caused by deindustrialization. If skepticism toward free trade is largely a product of a cultish devotion to Trump – rather than springing from actual negative experiences related to free trade – then there is little reason to think it will continue after Trump's administration ends. And there is no reason to believe this abstract frustration will be marshalled to provide any constructive solutions to manufacturing's decline, considering it revolves around Trump the politician, who has done nothing to provide a plan for "bringing jobs back" to American soil.

Trump supporters' economic attitudes are largely superficial and malleable. They can be simply characterized as fitting a two-part calculus based on my survey results – a calculus that occurs independently of the actual state of the economy: A. the economy is "bad" whenever a Democrat's in the White House; B. the economy is "great" whenever a Republican holds that office. This infantile assessment also applies more broadly to the state of the nation in the minds of Trumpeters. As my analysis of Pew survey data from 2016 shows, dissatisfaction with "the way things are going in this country today" was a significant statistical predictor of Trump support in the immediate run up to Trump's election, after controlling for various demographic factors from survey respondents. But

by (October) 2017, Trump support was positively and significantly linked to satisfaction with the state of the nation, a trend that continued in my (January, March, and May) 2018 Pew findings. In other words, the writing is on the wall when summarizing the swinging moods of trumpeters, which can be adequately summarized as follows: Democratic America = bad; Republican America = good. Trumpeters' happiness is inextricably tied, not to economic performance and to the raising of the living standards of the masses, but to Trump the man remaining in power and leading the nation via his reactionary political and economic vision.

American political culture is notoriously reactionary. It has devoted incredible resources to promoting all types of propaganda narratives. These claims are everywhere. Only right-wing Democrats can win elections, assuming one ignores neoliberal Democrats' mass demobilization of the party under Obama and Hillary Clinton. Raising the minimum wage is "bad" for working Americans, despite decades of data showing that minimum wage increases were associated with higher living standards and declining inequality. Climate change is a "hoax" created by the Chinese to destroy American industry, despite the overwhelming consensus of climate scientists that it is real and wreaking havoc on the planet. Trump the billionaire and most elitist president in modern history is really a warrior for the downtrodden and the "working class," despite his pursuing policies that have significantly increased inequality and enhancing corporate power. Only Republicans can effectively promote economic growth, despite the generally poor economic results under Trump, which suggest less household income growth than even the lackluster Obama years. And the list goes on and on in a propaganda state that would make George Orwell blush. The findings in this essay regarding the economic superficialities that drive Trumpism shouldn't surprise anyone committed to assessing Trumpism as it exists in the real world, and as revealed in countless national surveys. That these conclusions are still seen as controversial reveals the poverty that continues to dominate American political discourse in the age of Trump.

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