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# The Contribution of the White Working-class Toward Their Own Political and Economic Disenfranchisement

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THE CONTRIBUTION OF THE WHITE WORKING-CLASS TOWARD THEIR OWN  
POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC DISENFRANCHISEMENT

by

DANA D. DE CASTRO

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the Honors Undergraduate Thesis program in Political Science  
in the College of Science  
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at the University of Central Florida  
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Thesis Chair: Dr. Jonathan Knuckey

## **ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this study was to answer the following question: why are the white working-class in America complicit in their own political and economic disenfranchisement? Moreover, this paper utilizes two time periods in American history, specifically, the Antebellum period and the Jim Crow era, and examines the white working-class's behavioral pattern in these periods with the historical context in mind that took place in each of the eras. Through an analysis of the two studies, it is revealed that the white working-class has long been disenfranchised politically and economically. The white working-class of the past (specifically, the Antebellum period and the Jim Crow era) was then compared to the contemporary white working-class (specifically, the period from the 1960s to the present) to showcase how the white working-class contributed to their own political and economic disenfranchisement has been a consistent behavioral pattern that has been evident throughout American history. The 2016 Presidential Election was then used as a more situational example, rather than utilizing the historical context across American history to aid in answering the question of why the white working-class is complicit in their disenfranchisement.

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## **CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION**

A closer examination of exit polls displayed that 66 percent of the white working-class (those without a college degree in this instance) had voted for Donald Trump in the 2016 Presidential Election (Zweig, 2017). This data was a bit unexpected considering Trump is not exactly the ideal representation of an individual that would be considered part of the white working-class. Moreover, Trump is completely incongruous with those of the white working-class. Trump is wealthy while the white working-class is not. Trump resided in urban communities for the majority of his life while the white working-class reside in rural communities for most of their lives. Trump has a college degree and members of the white working-class do not. Trump's qualities would consider him as an elitist by the white working-class. Despite this, he still managed to appeal to the emotions of the white working-class through his heavy advocacy for alleviating the white working-class's frustrations by supporting things such as reducing job competition between the white working-class and minority working-class populations. Trump also chose to listen to the white working-class who have long felt ignored by American politicians. The white working-class felt like they were being cheated out of rewards that they deserved for decades of laboring and, instead, people of the non-white population are reaping the benefits.

Trump would successfully take advantage of the white working-class and their concerns; he appealed to their identity, or their whiteness, and interests, both political and economic. Trump sympathized with the members of the white working-class by claiming he understood their frustration with government officials failing to respect them and prioritizing other demographics instead. His interest in their concerns like the increase of job loss in the United

States convinced the white working-class to vote for him in 2016. After elected, Trump would eventually propose a variety of policies that would seemingly benefit the white working-class, such as a decrease in taxes and the creation of more jobs. These policies would prove to be ineffective for the white working-class as they ultimately went against their political and economic interests. For example, according to Hull (2020), Trump had initiated a trade war with China, and he claimed that the tariffs he imposed would result in an increase in jobs. However, the trade war led to a decrease in the Chinese demand and higher input prices which caused many factories in the Rust Belt states to hire fewer workers. Trump had ultimately hurt a majority of the members of the white working-class. Despite Trump's failure to fulfill the economic interests of the white working-class, the polls suggested that a majority of their members that voted for Trump in 2016 were going to vote for him again in the 2020 Presidential Election (Hull, 2020). This scenario of the white working-class engaging in their own political and economic disenfranchisement is not new and has been evident throughout American history, specifically during the Antebellum Period and the Jim Crow era, and is still very much prevalent today.

### Antebellum Period

The Antebellum period refers to an era in the Southern region of the United States, specifically from 1812 (the end of the War of 1812) to 1861 (the start of the Civil War). During this time, the state of the economy was booming. This period saw the plantation system in effect, which involved slavery and cotton, two things that heavily accounted for the increase of wealth

during these years (Gallman, 1970). However, according to Watson (1985), not everyone enjoyed that wealth as it was unequally distributed. In 1860, data provided in the research article by Watson (1985) showed that the Antebellum South was made up of 37.4 percent of slaves, 41.8 percent of non-slaveholding whites, and only 18.7 percent of slaveholding whites. Slaves had equated to wealth. In other words, there was a high percentage of wealth that belonged to the white elites as they were the slaveholding whites and there was a high percentage of the white working-class, or those that did not own any slaves, who did not reap any of the economic benefits from the cotton boom resulting in an unequal wealth distribution. This economic tension would translate into the social and political realms. Moreover, many of the white working-class members of the South pointed out how slavery, in particular, was contributing to disparities in the political power among the white race. The white working-class believed that upward mobility was impossible for them due to slavery and frowned upon the white elites that were faced with many advantages due to slavery, such as an expansion of political power (Watson, 1985). Eventually, two prominent political parties, the Whig Party and the Democratic Party, rose to represent the interests of the different groups of white people. The Whig Party usually found support from the white elites while the Democratic Party saw support from the white working-class (Watson, 1985). This displayed the class tension that resulted from the social and political stress that was evident during the Antebellum period.

### *White Working-Class*

According to Merritt (2017), author of *Masterless Men: Poor Whites and Slavery in the Antebellum South* (2017), the white working-class was looked down upon by the white elites.



They were viewed as nuisances. The white working-class participated in an underground economy where they traded with the slaves which the white elites sought to prevent. The white elites also contributed to the white working-class having little to no access to public education. Merritt (2017) argued this was because the white elites were worried about the members of the white working-class participating in the underground economy by trading lessons on reading and writing that they would learn in public schools to slaves for a pound of corn, for example. In addition, white elites deprived the white working-class from voting as they believed poor people should not be involved in politics. While these actions caused tension between the two classes of white people in the South, the white elites would defuse it through slavery (Watson, 1985). Moreover, the white elites saw that the political and economic interests of the white working-class and slaves usually aligned. They saw that the white working-class defied their racial hierarchy by interacting with the slaves. They saw how the white working-class was turning against slavery, a system that contributed to the white-working class being pushed out of agriculture and one that helped maintain the wealth of the white elites. They tried to prevent any alliances by increasing the focus on race. According to Watson (1985), despite the differences in the two classes, all groups of white people share the same fundamentals especially when it came to the preservation of slavery. The white working-class saw themselves as being above slaves. Watson (1985) claimed that this would ultimately cause a decrease in class conflict between the white elites and the white working-class but an increase in racial conflict with the white elites and white working-class against the slaves. In other words, the white working-class of the Antebellum South was politically and economically disenfranchised by the white elites,

however, still chose to align with them and support the very system that caused the disenfranchisement and that was slavery.

### Jim Crow Era

The Jim Crow era was prominent from the late nineteenth century to about the mid-twentieth century. This era saw a system of segregation which was upheld through practices of discrimination against Black people and was reinforced by white supremacy and the white patriarchy (Brown & Webb, 2007). Immediately following the Civil War that ended in 1865, also known as the Reconstruction era, the Southern economy was collapsing, according to Wilson (1976). It was not as prosperous as it was during the Antebellum period because of its transition from being dependent on slavery to the decline of slave labor after the war. By the late nineteenth century, industrialization was gradually becoming the main contributor to the economy. The changes in the system of production resulted in the following: a modified distribution of wealth as the white elites had to share their power with a rising middle class of merchant-bankers and factory owners, and economic dislocations of workers as white and Black workers were forced to interact in the economic field (Wilson, 1976). At the same time, there was a rise of a labor reform movement where the goal was to unify the white working-class and the Black workers to fight economic exploitation caused by the white elites, such as workers being forced to work at very low wages like Roback (1984) discussed in his study. However, this proved to be difficult, which led to the disenfranchisement of Black Americans by white people of all classes. This disenfranchisement was accompanied by the Jim Crow segregation laws as

they were becoming more apparent during this time and continued throughout the years ahead (Wilson, 1976).

### *White Working-Class*

The white working-class of the Jim Crow era was no different than the white working-class of the Antebellum period. Across the two time periods, this specific group had committed actions that were not aligned with their political and economic interests. Some labor reform organizations advocated for unity between the white working-class and the Black workers. For example, Voss (1988) claimed the Knights of Labor, which was the largest labor organization of the nineteenth century, had attempted to unify workers of all classes since political and economic interests of majority of workers usually aligned. The white elites started to see this as a threat to their political and economic power. The white elites enacted the Jim Crow laws to divide the union of the two classes and conquer the white working-class. Ultimately, the white working-class joined in the disenfranchisement of the Black people, as previously stated. Moreover, instead of unifying with another group of people that share similar political and economic interests, the white working-class during this time chose to align with the group of people that were guilty of exploiting them, therefore, committing to their own political and economic disenfranchisement. Furthermore, the Jim Crow laws that the white working-class made sure to uphold made it harder for Black people to vote in elections. For instance, there were about 130,000 of Black voters in 1896 but in less than 10 years, that number fell to 1,400 (Brown & Webb, 2007). However, the Jim Crow laws also negatively impacted the white working-class. This was shown to be the case when the poll tax requirement for voting affected more members

of the white working-class, specifically women, than the Black workers who were the intended target group (Freeman, 2002). Overall, the Jim Crow era highlighted the white working-class as this group that consistently supported a system that was intended to subordinate the Black people, but it had also negatively affected the white working-class in some ways, particularly when looking at the political and economic effects.

### Defining the White Working-Class

Throughout the previous sections, it has been established that the white working-class has been contributing towards their own political and economic disenfranchisement. However, before any further discussion on the matter takes place, it is important to define the white working-class. This paper recognizes the different measures that can be utilized to define the white working-class, such as the educational measure, occupational measure, and income measure. However, this paper will utilize the educational measure to aid in defining the white working-class. The educational measure consists of white people that possess a high-school diploma as their highest level of education, in other words, this paper will explore American white people that do not have a college degree.

Abramowitz and Teixeira (2009) had justified using the educational measure by giving two reasons why it could be used to define the white working-class. First and foremost, the researchers claimed that the educational levels often shape the economic trajectory of a member of the white working-class by affecting things such as the average real hourly wage. More

specifically, between the years 1979 to 2005, Abramowitz and Teixeira (2009) noted that average wages for people that possessed a college degree rose 22 percent while those that did not have a college degree faced a 2 percent decrease in the average real hourly wage. Second, Abramowitz and Teixeira (2009) argued that the educational measure is more practical. Moreover, they claimed that the educational measure uses data that is collected in political surveys and that data is collected from all respondents that fit that category, not just those that possess a job. However, utilizing the educational measure can lead one to face the limitation of it not acknowledging the actual job a person holds, which in turn deviates from the traditional definition of class that focuses on a worker's role in the economy. This can lead to situations where a person with low levels of education can have a highly skilled job and vice versa, according to Abramowitz and Teixeira (2009). The occupational measure can be used to alleviate that limitation, however, using occupation also creates its own set of limitations that can occur. As previously mentioned, the educational levels impact the economic trajectory of an individual (Abramowitz and Teixeira, 2009) and this paper involves the white working-class contributing to their economic, along with political, disenfranchisement. Therefore, it is important for this paper to choose the educational measure to define the white working-class. Specifically, this paper will explore members of the white working-class that do not possess a college degree.

### Conclusion

Throughout the sections that discuss the Antebellum period and the Jim Crow era, the white working-class has shown that they prioritize racial solidarity over class solidarity. They

would rather unite with the white elites that exploited them rather than join forces with other races that were also politically and economically exploited. Therefore, after examining the white working-class across two different periods, it raises the following question: why are the white working-class in the United States complicit in their own political and economic disenfranchisement? The 2016 Presidential Election serves as situational example of the fact that that this scenario is still ongoing decades later, which will be explored and expanded on in Chapter 4. This poses many implications in the future, such as how the two major political parties (the Republican Party and the Democratic Party) will garner support from the white working-class, for example. The white working-class partaking in their own political and economic disenfranchisement exemplifies their reinforced ideas of white supremacy and their commitment to prioritize racism instead of uniting with minority classes with similar political and economic interests. This study will focus on the comparison of the examination of the white working-class today and of the past, specifically, in the time periods such as the Antebellum period and the Jim Crow era. The analysis of the white working-class across the time periods will reveal how the white working-class has displayed a constant pattern in American history of being complicit in their own political and economic disenfranchisement. The paper will then move away from examining the white working-class in a historical context to a more specific and situational example with that being the 2016 Presidential Election serving as a recent example.

## CHAPTER TWO: WHITE WORKING-CLASS IN THE PAST

In 1935, W.E.B. Du Bois published a book called *Black Reconstruction in America*. The book is divided into a variety of chapters that highlight and provide analysis on the different aspects regarding the Reconstruction era in the United States such as slavery and the white working-class, for instance. Throughout the book, the main idea that Du Bois tries to make is very apparent and that is the following: Black people were the main actors on the stage known as the Reconstruction period and not just side characters that only appeared and were relevant when other groups were performing. To prove his point, Du Bois provided various instances in which the Black people during this time were important figures. For example, in the chapter titled “The Black Worker,” Du Bois had emphasized that it was slavery that led to the American Civil War and he continued to expand this notion in the following chapters. This idea that Black people were central players during the Reconstruction era fostered many discussions surrounding this particular group of people, specifically, the Black workers, and their interactions with other groups like the white working-class. One of the key discussions, as it pertains to this paper, involved the white working-class and their contribution to the disenfranchisement of the Black workers. To be more specific, Du Bois had concluded in his book that the white working-class had chosen to join forces with the white elites, or as he called them the “planters,” in disenfranchising Black workers (and Black people, in general) by means of racism despite sharing common political and economic interests with the Black workers. For example, in the “Looking Backward” chapter, Du Bois argued that the white working-class was one that was impoverished and impaired but instead of creating unity with the Black workers who were also in a similar position, they sought unity with the elite white people. In other words, Du Bois

claimed that the white working-class denied unity of the poor versus the rich or the worker versus the exploiter, instead, they wanted unity of Black versus white (Du Bois, 1935).

David Roediger's *Wages of Whiteness* (1991) also found similar patterns in the white working class. In his book, Roediger focuses primarily on the white working-class of the more developed areas of the industrial Northern region of the United States during the years of 1800 to 1865. To start off, in the chapter titled "Neither a Servant Nor a Master Am I: Keywords in the Languages of White Labor Republicanism," Roediger makes an important note of the usage of certain words or phrases serving the role of indicating how both the white working-class and the Black working-class were perceived. For instance, Roediger claimed that many of the white working-class in the eighteenth century were referred to as "servants," which is what those of the Black working-class were also called. However, the turn of the nineteenth century led America to experience a society that was starting to industrialize and gain a new social atmosphere, in other words, America had entered the start of its post-revolutionary era. This resulted in the perception of the white working-class to change. There was a decrease in the usage of the word "servant" as a way to describe the white working-class and an increase in terms such as "help" or "hired hand" (Roediger, 1991). Moreover, the white working-class did not want to be associated with a term that had been used to describe the labor that Black slaves had performed before entering the post-revolutionary era even though that was the same term that was once used to describe their labor. Instead, the white-working class wanted to highlight a separation between them and Black workers, or the white race versus the Black race, in order to become a better candidate for being accepted by the white elites at the time.



Roediger had made it a point to really emphasize the white working-class and their desire to use their whiteness to be one with the white elites, despite the major differences between the two groups, in order to not be associated with the Black working-class. This particular scenario was evident through Roediger's discussion of the working Irish immigrants. In the early nineteenth century, there was a debate of whether or not the Irish immigrants were considered to be part of the white race. This particular group of people were regarded on the same level of the Black workers by the white elites. They were shunned by society. The Irish immigrants craved to be considered "white" as they saw the benefits that came from being a white person, especially a white elite. Eventually, the Irish immigrants started distancing themselves from Black people as many pre-industrial ways were associated with Black people by the white elites. This resulted in the eventual acceptance of the Irish immigrants by the white elites. Overall, this example really displayed the importance of "whiteness" to those seeking to succeed as workers in the labor force. It showed how a group (in this case, the Irish immigrant workers) have more similarities with another group (or the Black workers), however, they chose to align with a group (the white elites) that share little to no similarities but their racial identity.

When it comes to research on matters dealing with race and class in American politics, many historians and researchers are usually guilty of separating the two. For instance, according to a research study published in 2020, the authors, Frederick C. Harris and Viviana Rivera-Burgos, concluded the following: there are very few empirical studies done that incorporate measures of racial and class identity in order to examine American political behavior. Harris and Rivera-Burgos (2021) claimed that the subjective measures of social class attachments (in this case, any evidence of the expression of identity) receive far less attention when race, on the other

hand, is a factor that is examined numerous times in studies. The authors noted that exploring the intersectionality of race and class when discussing American politics can result in more consistent findings on the impact that racial identities and class identities have had in American politics. For example, with the recent research on the political significance of white identities, Harris and Rivera-Burgos (2021) said that an increase in focus on both race and class can showcase how these particular identities matter and relate to the recent research. In terms of this research paper, the intersectionality of race and class is one of importance when looking at the white-working class's contribution to their own political and economic disenfranchisement. Therefore, by choosing to primarily focus on the white working-class in this particular paper, the evident display of the intersectionality of race and class in both political and economic affairs of America can help reveal the impact, such as how the white working-class and their behaviors aid in contributing to their own disenfranchisement in these two aspects of society.

While Harris and Rivera-Burgos (2021) had elaborated on the lack of research of both race and class, they had made sure to specifically emphasize that there are few major studies out there that explore the role of class in American politics, like American political behavior, for instance, as previously mentioned. There was a study conducted by Schlozman and Verba (1979) that did have an overall focus on social class and economic status. Moreover, Schlozman and Verba (1979) had conducted a survey to measure the level of class consciousness in American individuals and the results concluded that there was little class consciousness among blue-collar workers, or those part of the white-working class. In other words, Schlozman and Verba (1979) were part of a small group of researchers that viewed class as an identity and heavily engaged in social class in their study. This paper, in particular, will take a somewhat similar direction by

examining class identity, specifically, the white working class, and their interactions with other classes, such as the white elites, for example.

### Rich vs. Poor to White vs. Black

A closer examination of both Du Bois's and Roediger's work reveals the initial relationship dynamic and that was the following: the white working-class and Black people vs. the white elites. This scenario was especially prevalent in the years before the American Civil War, specifically in the Southern region of the United States during the years known as the Antebellum period. In the mid-nineteenth century, the white working-class mostly consisted of poor white people that did not possess any land or owned any slaves, additionally, there were some members of the white working-class that were farmers who possessed land. Furthermore, the Black people were either classified as slaves or freed from slavery, but very poor as they did not own any land. On the other hand, the white elites were the slaveholders with the land, money, and a high status, overall (Ash, 1991). When it comes to the earlier research done on the groups during the Antebellum period, the majority of historians tended to examine the white working-class population as a whole rather than looking at them in distinct classes such as the poor white people and white farmers, for instance. This was mostly due to Frank Owsley's *Plain Folk of the Old South* (1949) in which Owsley argued that a majority of white people that did not own slaves were not "poor white trash," instead, they were farmers who owned land and they looked up to the white elites as people to aspire to. While there were some historians that saw the poor white people in a much different light, Owsley had established the white people who were

not considered an elite as a largely homogenous group and this would be the base notion for various research done during this time. Decades later, however, historians would begin to examine the non-elite white population as distinct classes which comprised the poor white people that did not own land and the farmers that did own land (Glossner, 2019). As previously mentioned, this research paper makes sure to point out the class differences that were evident among different racial groups. However, it is important to mention that in this paper, references to the “white working-class” during the Antebellum period refers to those who were poor and did not own any land and those who were farmers that owned land as both groups could be collectively known as “laborers.” Moreover, this paper recognizes the importance of looking at these two distinct classes within the same racial group as one collective group in order to gain a better understanding of the white workers, whether classified as poor or a farmer, and their contribution to their own political and economic disenfranchisement. Aside from that, the overall social situation of the Antebellum period allowed for the maintenance of a racial hierarchy in society that established the white elites at the very top of the system and slaves at the very bottom. The freed Black people and white working-class were situated somewhere in the middle, however, these two groups were closer to the bottom of the stratification. The positioning of the white working-class, Black people, and the white elites had produced various interactions among those in the white working-class and those who were Black. According to Arroyo (1996), the white working-class would work in fields, factories, and mines with the Black people. The two groups would even attend churches together. In addition, the two groups shared a lot of political and economic similarities. For instance, Arroyo (1996) claimed that in Tennessee, all children were forced to live and work for others, despite their race, when their parents could not afford

them. In general, the standard of living for the two groups were similar and it was displayed through various things such as both having single-room homes and wearing home-spun clothes (Forret, 2004). Overall, the white working-class and Black people were alike in many ways and they had shared a coexisting relationship during the Antebellum period. The white elites had taken note of these similarities and interactions. However, the interactions between the white working-class and Black people only kept growing. There were some people in the two groups that had begun to participate in an illicit trade where stolen goods were being sold among each other. This resulted in the slaves having access to prohibited goods, such as liquor and guns, which did not sit well with the white elites. The white elites sought to prevent this new codependent relationship that had developed because they were anxious that an alliance between the white working-class and Black people would develop (Arroyo, 1996). For instance, Forret (2004) claimed that white elites would mark goods that they anticipated would be stolen so they could easily identify and retrieve their stolen goods. Furthermore, laws were pushed to prevent the illicit trade, like the South Carolina Act of 1817, which required anyone who traded with a slave must keep the permit or the slave. Moreover, the white elites feared that this new relationship dynamic between the white working-class and the slaves as they participated in the illicit trade of goods would threaten slavery, which was the very system that helped maintain the wealth of the white elites. It also did not help the case of the white elites as there was already conflict between the white working-class and the white elites. To be more specific, the two groups had various political and economic disagreements. For example, in Mississippi, the white elites sought property-holding restrictions on officeholding which was met with discontent from those of the white working-class, and in Alabama, the two groups argued over banking and debt

matters in the aftermath of the Panic of 1819 (Watson, 1985). It is also important to note how some opposed slavery as it was a system that went against the political and economic interests of the white working-class as it prevented the white working-class from experiencing upward mobility in the social stratification present, in other words, slavery helped to maintain the hierarchy of the white elites at the top and the white working-class closer to the bottom. Despite this, however, the dynamics of the white working-class, Black people, and the white elites would slowly jumpstart the transition from the white working-class and Black people vs. the white elites to the white population vs. the Black population. To start, the white elites began to appeal to the white working-class through the means of racism to promote racial solidarity and this served as a way to decrease the high possibility of class solidarity among the white working-class and the Black people during the Antebellum period. It worked. The racial barriers between the white working-class and Black people were not as weak as the political and economic barriers were. Therefore, this would result in the members of the white working-class easily turning against Black people to stand with white elites in support of slavery, a system that disfranchised the white working-class (Ash, 1991).

To continue, this relationship dynamic of the white working-class and Black people vs. the white elites was also present in later years during the Reconstruction era and the Jim Crow era. However, this paper specifically focuses on a closer examination of the white working-class in the Jim Crow era, otherwise known as the period in America from the end of the Reconstruction era in 1877 to the mid-1960s. During this time period, the white working-class was faced with the gradual industrialization that started to take place in the late nineteenth century. This resulted in the distribution of power that once existed in the Antebellum period to

become altered in the Jim Crow era (Wilson, 1976). Moreover, the aftermath of the American Civil War had forced the white elites (in this case, the planters) to begin to share their power with a rising middle class and the members of the white working-class (or in this case, the farmers) were faced with an increase of interactions with other minority working-class populations (in this case, the Black workers) (Scruggs, 1971). Wilson (1976) had found through examining other research that these increased interactions during the Jim Crow era through the rise of economic dislocation allowed for the white working-class to experience an increased competition for jobs with the millions of freed Black people. This was unlike the scenario in the past, such as the Antebellum period, more specifically, where members of the white working-class were separated from the other populations workers, especially slaves, as those groups were heavily marginalized. Now, the white working-class was forced to play in the same economic field as other working-class populations in the Jim Crow era. Around the late nineteenth century, the Jim Crow era began to see a series of segregation and disenfranchisement laws that enforced the ideas white supremacy. These laws disenfranchised the Black people in America as they were subjugated at the bottom of society during this particular period. However, it is revealed that these laws did not exactly bode well for the white working-class either. The white elites continued to enforce these laws as they had sought to increase their income and maintain their high position in society due to their white identity. The white elites had managed to succeed in their goal through a series of labor laws that treated Black workers unfairly. These laws included the following: enticement and contract-enforcement laws which ultimately had the intention of limiting competition for farm labor (mostly consisting of Black workers), vagrancy laws which made it a crime to be out the labor force, and finally, emigrant-agent laws which just made it

more difficult economically for Black workers to find other job opportunities outside of their local areas (Roback, 1984). It is important to note how these laws had utilized general terms like "workers," which indicated that the white working-class was also being disenfranchised by these laws, however, not to the degree of Black people as the laws more heavily influenced Black workers. Despite this, a majority of the members of the white working-class did not choose to unionize with the Black workers, instead, they chose to continue to align with the white elites like they had chosen to do in the Antebellum period. For instance, the white working-class could have chosen to form labor unions with Black workers to accomplish their similar political and especially their economic goals surrounding employment, but any organized labor usually prioritized the needs of the white working-class and excluded anyone that was not considered a member of that population group (Arnesen, 1998). The white working-class affirmed their position in society by choosing to align with the white elites by upholding their whiteness over aligning with Black workers, who shared similar interests. Moreover, the white elites made the white working-class feel as if they were in competition for resources, like access to jobs. They connected with them through their shared white identity which appealed to the white working-class as they did not like the fact that they were not on the same societal playing field as Black workers.

### Conclusion

Throughout this literature review, the examination of the white working-class of the past highlights the relationship they shared with both Black people and white elites. There was a clear



initial matchup of the white working-class and Black people vs. the white elites which was the closest to class solidarity in America. However, this dynamic eventually transitioned into white people vs. Black people due to the white elites' use of white supremacy to devitalize class solidarity between the white working-class and Black people and to motivate racial solidarity instead. This change in the white working-class' relationships showcases exactly how strong the racial barrier was between white and Black people, despite the weak economic barrier between the two groups, as Buck (1925) had stated. Additionally, it really does exemplify how the white working-class was committing their own political and economic disenfranchisement by aligning with a group (the white elites) that did not care for their interests, both politically and economically.

## **CHAPTER THREE: WHITE WORKING-CLASS TODAY**

In 2009, Abramowitz and Teixeira published a research article where they predicted that there would be around 41 percent of adults in the white working-class (those without a college degree) leading up to the 2020 Presidential Election based on various data they had collected (Abramowitz & Teixeira, 2009). According to Picchi (2019), the white working-class (in this case, those without a college degree) made up about 40 percent of the American population in 2019, which displayed the very accurate 10-year-old prediction of both Abramowitz and Teixeira (2009). Overall, this percentage showcased a significant decrease from the white working-class which once made up about 70 percent of the population in 1975. This raises the question: why has the population of the white working-class declined throughout the decades and is still declining today? Despite this decrease, however, the white working-class still prevails even though they take up a much smaller percentage of the adult population than they did in the previous years. For instance, Abramowitz and Teixeira (2009) claimed that even as the population of the white working-class decreases, they will still be a major force in American politics which this chapter will establish just that and the next chapter will aid in showcasing it. Moreover, this chapter will delve into the decline of the white working-class population today compared to the previous white working-class populations of the Antebellum era and Jim Crow era, along with briefly discussing how the white working-class remains a substantial force in American politics today. Ultimately, this will reveal how the contemporary white working-class contributes to their own political and economic disenfranchisement, similar to the white working-class of the Antebellum period and Jim Crow era.

To start, why has the white working-class decreased in population size over the past few decades? The white working-class was once a majority of the American population. For instance, in 1940, there was 82 percent of adults without a college degree that made up the white working-class, however, as the numbers in the beginning of this chapter has shown, the white working-class has declined significantly since then. There has been much speculation among researchers surrounding the reasons for this decline. First and foremost, the research staff at the Center for Household Financial Stability at the Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis formulated an essay that focused on the intersection of race, ethnicity, and education. They concluded three main findings and one of them included the following: certain factors that involve a combination of both race and education is a more appropriate way to devise a set of plausible explanations for the decline of the white working-class. Moreover, Emmons et al. (2018) had examined factors solely related to race and those factors were insufficient in explaining the reasons the white working-class has been declining the past couple decades. Emmons et al. (2018) claimed that if race was the key factor in the decline of the white working-class, then it is expected to see identical patterns in the group of white college graduate families over time. However, trends in the white working-class and the group of white college graduate families were mirror images of each other instead of parallel, for instance, the white working-class's median family income declined from 91 percent to 87 percent while the white college graduates' median family income increased from 181 to 193 percent. Similar to race, Emmons et al. (2018) had found that factors related to education alone were also not enough to explain the cause of the decline of the white working-class. Instead, Emmons et al. (2018) had agreed that it was due to factors relating to both race and education that contributed to the decline of the white working-class. In other words, according to

Emmons et al. (2018), the decline of the white working-class is due to their decreasing set of advantages relative to the minority working-class populations in terms of the following: high school graduation rates, access to relatively high-paying jobs, and freedom from explicit workplace discrimination. More specifically, high school graduation rates among minority working-class populations (in this case, the Black and the Hispanic populations) have been increasing which has aided in increasing the competition for low-and medium-skilled jobs. Furthermore, certain changes in the structure of the economy, such as deindustrialization and globalization, for example, may have reduced the amount of job opportunities. In addition, Emmons et al. (2018) said that the white working-class may have declined partly due to the change of racial discrimination laws becoming less and less significant, especially in the work environment. Overall, Emmons et al. (2018) suggested that a series of changes (or advantages being enjoyed by working-class populations that were solely for the white working-class), which were discussed above, along with trends in the labor market (like the one that favors workers with a college degree) resulted in members of the white working-class being faced with low growth in income and wealth, and increased competition for jobs that were just previously held by just the white working-class which all led to the decline of the white working-class within the recent decades (Emmons et al., 2018). On the other hand, author Palley (2021) claimed that the decline of the white working-class was a result of the death rates of members of the white working-class due to drug overdoses and suicides. Palley (2021) had referenced the book by economists Anne Case and Angus Deaton and their book, *Deaths of Despair and the Future of Capitalism* (2020) to aid in establishing his reasoning. Case and Deaton (2020) had argued that the white working-class (in this case, those without a college degree) has been experiencing high

rates of deaths from suicides, drug overdoses, and alcohol-related illnesses over a 30-year period due to several factors, such as globalization, for example. Palley (2021) used this to reinforce that the increase in mortality rates among the white working-class due to several factors like drug overdoses has contributed to the decline of the white working-class. He also referenced other factors for the declining population, such as the increase of minority working-class populations in the "working-class," which was similar to Emmons et al. (2018) as they had mentioned that the white working-class declining the past couple decades was a result of their set of advantages decreasing relative to the minority working-class populations. Despite the variety of factors that the various authors have listed in their articles, one thing is certain: the white working-class is not the same from the Antebellum period and the Jim Crow era; it has decreased significantly in size over the years to the present.

### The White Working-Class's Vote

On top of the decline of the white working-class, the white working-class is more frustrated today than they were during the Antebellum period and the Jim Crow era. According to Justin Gest's *The New Minority: White Working-Class Politics in an Age of Immigration and Inequality* (2016), Gest stated that the white working-class has realized that America has placed them at the bottom of the priority list when the white working-class used to be its main focus at one point in time. Gest also made note of the fact that members of the white working-class feel powerless to even do something about its current position in American society (Gest, 2016). Moreover, there is a frustration at the loss of social and economic status as the white working-

class feels like immigrant groups have recently been prioritized more than them. They feel like they have been ignored and given fewer resources, unlike other groups in the populations, especially those in minority populations. Furthermore, the white working-class is frustrated at their perceived economic decline (Kenworthy, 2023). There is roughly only 5 percent of the white working-class who had reported that they are in excellent financial shape while a majority (around 35 percent) claimed to have a fair financial standing. In addition, the white working-class feels frustrated at their perceived loss of culture and their identity, for instance, nearly 65 percent of the white working-class (in this case, those without a college degree) believe that American culture and way of life have both been decreasing since the 1950s (Cox et al., 2017). Overall, the white working-class today is one that is both similar yet very unlike the ones of the Antebellum period and the Jim Crow era. In the Antebellum period and Jim Crow era, the white working-class did not share many of the frustrations that white working-class faces today. For instance, the white working-class during both the Antebellum period and the Jim Crow era was at the center of society and their demands did not go unheard by officials in the political realm. There were politicians that would even try to garner the support from the white working-class, which reflected how much of an integral part of society that the white working-class was during both the Antebellum period and the Jim Crow era. This is unlike the experience of the white working-class today as most of the members in this group can agree that they feel ignored by the American government. Despite the differences between the three periods, there were some similarities involved. After a closer examination of all three periods, the white working-class has always been faced with few resources. For example, during the Antebellum period the white working-class did not have access to legal education resources, and today, the white working-

class has been facing fewer jobs due to an increased competition from the inclusion of minority populations in the workforce. While the white working-class of the Antebellum period and Jim Crow era had their own struggles to handle, a closer look at the white working-class showcases an overall feeling of defeat among members in the white working-class today due to a series of socioeconomic and political reasons. The feeling mostly derived from the belief that no one pays attention to them. During the Antebellum period and the Jim Crow era, the American government had created policies that accommodated the white working-class, however, the white working-class today feels like they are not even being heard and none of their needs have been met.

#### *Democratic Vote to Republican Vote*

This reduction of the white working-class throughout the years, coupled with their growing frustrations of the various socioeconomic and political factors previously mentioned, has contributed to the phenomenon that includes the following: the decline of Democratic party identification among the white working-class. According to a 2017 report done by Pew Research Center (2018), 58 percent of voting members of the white working-class (in this case, those without a college degree) identified with the Republican Party and only 36 percent identified with being Democratic (Pew Research Center, 2018). This scenario where the Republican Party holds the white working-class vote today was not the case a couple of decades ago.

In 1950, the U.S. Senate was fully Democratic, in other words, there was not one single Republican candidate (Harvey, 2008). A couple years later, in 1954, in the famous case, *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* (1954), the Supreme Court unanimously decided to make racial

segregation in public education illegal by ruling it was “unequal” (Byrd, 2018). This resulted in a majority white people (both members of the white working-class and white elites) to implement a strategy known as “massive resistance.” Essentially, it was a strategy based on countering the movement for desegregation as a majority of white people, especially those in the Southern region, heavily supported segregation (Byrd, 2018). This overall resistance to segregation started to translate politically as the white working-class in the South began to distance themselves from the Democratic Party. In 1964, Barry Goldwater’s defeat of Lyndon B. Johnson in the South marked the loss of the Democratic Party power in the Southern region and the white working class’s alignment with the Republican Party. In the late 1960s, George Wallace entered the political scene who committed to garner the vote of the white working-class by appealing to their feelings of being ignored by the political officials, being discriminated and favored over Black people, and being burdened with heavy taxes. Ultimately, a majority of Wallace’s support included the following: white conservatives who no longer felt aligned with the Democratic Party but not fully committed to the Republican Party (Harvey, 2008). Right alongside him was President Richard Nixon who had formulated what became known as the “southern strategy,” which was an attempt to appeal to Wallace’s supporters. The “southern strategy” was a way to appeal to the “silent majority,” which included the white working-class, by advocating for the opposition of the Civil Rights Movement, making his disdain for the liberalism present on the Supreme Court known, along with including the white working-class in politics like they were in the past (Graham, 1996). Nixon appeals were not outright, however. He utilized coded language and made hollow commitments to racial progress (Harvey, 2008). This use of coded racial appeals was known as dog-whistle politics which was the practice of speaking in code by



relaying what appeared to be neutral messages, but the messages were a way to appeal to certain groups, such as the white working-class in the South (Haney-López, 2013). This allowed for Nixon to be able to win his reelection in 1972 where the South voted majority Republican. This officially marked the successful transition of the vote of the white working-class from the Democratic Party to the Republican Party and it solidified the foundation of the Republican Party for future elections ahead (Harvey, 2008).

There are some researchers, however, that describe this shift of the white working-class's vote for the Democratic Party to the Republican Party as one that became more solidified in later years. In their research article, Abramowitz and Teixeira (2009) had explained the phenomenon of the white working-class abandoning the Democratic Party as part of providing a description of the dramatic shifts that have occurred with the American class structure in more recent American history. Abramowitz and Teixeira (2009) start by mentioning the shift of the white working-class from the Democratic Party to the Republican Party began with the New Deal Democrats. The New Deal initiative was a series of programs enacted by President Franklin D. Roosevelt in the United States during the Great Depression (Kennedy, 2009). During the New Deal era, the Democratic Party committed to helping the working class during the Great Depression by increasing government spending and promoting labor unions which allowed for the white working-class to fully support the Democratic Party when it came to elections during this era. The support of the white working-class for the Democratic Party allowed President Roosevelt to remain in office for four of his elections and it even gave President Harry Truman his victory. This support continued past the New Deal era in the 1950s with the election of President Dwight Eisenhower as the white working-class wanted to keep supporting a welfare state that was aiding

in bettering the country (like building roads, for example), according to Abramowitz and Teixeira (2009). Furthermore, the creation of the middle-class from the late 1940s to the late 1960s gave white working-class something to aspire to achieving which they depended on the Democrats to run the country in a way that provided them upward mobility to the middle-class. However, the 1960s came and the white working-class's support for the Democratic Party was starting to falter. The 1960s brought forth various political movements (like feminist movements and the Civil Rights Movement, for example) and it forced the Democratic Party to respond. For instance, Abramowitz and Teixeira (2009) claimed that the Civil Rights Movement, which called for equality for Black people in America, led to the Democratic Party losing support from the white working-class as they did not agree with the goal of the movement. Additionally, other social movements would be disregarded by the white working-class, moreover, feminism became associated with lesbians and opposition to a traditional family, the antiwar movement became associated with appeasement of Third World radicals, and so on. The Democratic Party chose to embrace these new social movements, but they had decided to still hold their previous commitment of maintaining a welfare state. This did not bode well with the white working-class. It became much more evident in the 1972 Presidential Election when George McGovern, who supported the new direction the Democratic Party was taking, was defeated. In 1960-1964, the white working-class vote (in this case, those without a college degree) for the Democrats was 55 percent and in 1968-1972, it had fallen to a mere 35 percent. In the 1970s, the economy was negatively impacted by things such as stagflation and this ultimately resulted in the white working-class starting to resent those who were part of the minority working-classes, especially over things like affirmative action. By the 1980 Presidential Election, President Ronald Reagan

averaged 61 percent of the white working-class's vote while his Democratic counterparts only garnered around 35 percent which had signified that the shift from the white working-class identifying with the Democratic Party to the Republican Party was successful (Abramowitz and Teixeira, 2009). As Gest had put it simply in his book *The New Minority: White Working Class Politics in an Age of Immigration and Inequality* (2016), the tension that the white working-class along with their overall received notion of loss has contributed to white working-class radicalization where they are departing from the Democratic Party and aligning with the Republican Party.

In examining the case of the white working-class shifting their party identification from the Democratic Party to the Republican Party, their contribution towards their own political and economic disenfranchisement becomes evident. For instance, the white working-class had elected President Ronald Reagan in office from 1980 to 1988 mostly due to economic reasons (Abramowitz and Teixeira, 2009). During his presidency, Reagan had emphasized welfare reform which garnered support from the white working-class like the research article by Abramowitz and Teixeira (2009) had detailed. To be more specific, the Reagan administration sought to cut a lot of federal welfare programs that benefited all members of the general working-class. Instead, they focused on promoting the reduction of the size of the federal government and a decrease of taxes. The administration held the belief that the working-class would be able to support themselves without welfare. Furthermore, President Reagan sought to increase budget cuts which in turn negatively impacted multiple programs in place to assist the members in the working-class. For example, Food Stamp benefits were reduced as a result of the budget cuts and this led to all members in the working-class to face the consequence of still

having a high income (Spitzer, 2024). While these are just a few instances of Reagan's policies that did not benefit the working-class in general, it still makes one question the following: why did members of the white working-class support Reagan? Reagan's campaigns used the fears of unemployment, recession, and inflation, in addition, he utilized racial appeals to garner the support of the white working-class (Primuth, 2016). Moreover, Reagan would make many of his policies sound appealing and beneficial for white working-class and they would support the policies even though those policies actually had no benefit to them and instead, hindered their growth, like Reagan's policies on budget cuts did. However, the white working-class would be inclined to vote for Reagan's policies because they would use their identity of being white to separate themselves from other working-class populations to vote for these policies that did not support working-class populations in general. In other words, the white working-class in the contemporary time has again politically and economically disenfranchised themselves, like they did in the previous Antebellum period and Jim Crow era, by prioritizing their racial beliefs over their class needs.

### The White Working-Class's Vote

Throughout this chapter, a discussion of the white working-class today provides insight on what this particular group is like now, compared to the white working-class of the Antebellum period and Jim Crow era. Today, the white working-class feels defeated because they believe that the American government is no longer paying attention to them like they were being paid attention to in the past. They are fearful because their numbers are declining and minority populations are starting to take the things that only the white working-class once enjoyed, such

as access to jobs, for example. On top of that, the context of the economy, more specifically, the slow growth and overall decline, has only frustrated the white working-class further. This all has led to the white working-class making a rightward shift to the Republican Party and to continually politically and economically disenfranchise themselves today. In Chapter Four, the 2016 Presidential Election will be utilized and discussed in detail to offer a more specific example of the rightward shift that the white working-class took place and the case of them voting against their political and economic needs, along with being complicit in contributing towards their own disenfranchisement.

## **CHAPTER FOUR: 2016 ELECTION**

The 2016 Presidential Election was one that exemplified an accurate portrayal of the white working-class possessing complicity in their own political and economic disenfranchisement. In Chapter Three, the contemporary political and economic context was established. The economical state of society was not the one that the white working-classes of both the Antebellum period and the Jim Crow era had experienced; the economy was in a steady decline. The white working-class started to face more competition for jobs that were easily accessible to them in the past, such as the blue-collared jobs in the Jim Crow era. In the political realm, the white working-class began to transition from the Democratic Party to the Republican Party as a result of a mixture of both their need to uphold and establish their white identity and their overall feeling defeated that their needs are not being met. They felt like the Republican Party was the solution to their problems. However, a closer look at the white working class's transition to the Republican Party reveals that it was actually not a beneficial choice. It is important to note that this paper does not seek to establish that the Democratic Party was more beneficial for the white working-class. The point of this chapter is to showcase how the white working-class today disenfranchised themselves politically and economically by aligning with the Republican Party through the examination of the Republican candidate, Donald Trump, during his 2016 Presidential Election.

In 2016, Donald Trump had managed to gain 71 percent of the vote consisting of men of the white working-class (in this case, those without a college degree) and 61 percent of the women of the white working-class, according to exit polls on CNN (CNN, 2016). These similar results also continued into the 2020 Presidential Election where 70 percent of men and 63

percent of women in the white working-class had decided to vote for Trump (CNN, 2020). These percentages are the largest they have been since the Presidential Elections during the 1980s, otherwise known as the Ronald Reagan era (Tyson & Maniam, 2016). Looking closely at different areas in the U.S., Zweig (2017) had explained how there were reports of members of the white working-class (in this case, those without a college degree) in Rust Belt areas, like Ohio and Michigan, for example, who decided to vote Republican unlike what they had been doing in the past which was vote for the Democratic Party. The frustration that white working-class faces today, which Chapter Three had touched on, along with the hard lifestyle associated with living in rural areas, specifically, the Rust Belt areas, had resulted in 66 percent of members of the white working-class to align with Trump in the 2016 Presidential Election (Zweig, 2017). In the urban areas, however, Trump did not do so well among the white working-class. According to a Pew Research Center article, only 12 percent of Trump's voters lived in urban areas versus Clinton who received 32 percent of the voters that lived in urban areas (Pew Research Center, 2018).

As mentioned, multiple times in this paper, the high percentage of white working-class voters voting for Republican candidate, Trump, in 2016 was significantly higher than in previous years. Therefore, this poses the question: how exactly did Trump manage to attract the voters of the white working-class in the 2016 Presidential Election? Lamont et al. (2017) had analyzed various aspects of 73 of Trump's electoral speeches to establish that they supported the white working-class's goal of upholding their white status through Trump's sideration of the following things: 1) he promised to fulfill the needs of the white working-class, 2) he expressed preference to the white working-class over the white elites, and 3) he affirmed the white working-class class

status and being above the groups they deem inferior. First and foremost, in all of his electoral speeches, Trump had managed to refer to the white working-class numerous times to the point where terms related to workers appeared 217 times in the 73 electoral speeches analyzed. Trump had presented himself as this presidential candidate that was beneficial for the white working-class and that he was the only one that cared about them. Additionally, Trump had promised to provide the one thing that the white working-class demanded since the end of the Jim Crow era and that was more jobs. According to Lamont et al. (2017), the word ‘jobs’ was mentioned 1036 times, which makes it one of the most frequently used word in the 73 electoral speeches. Trump had also managed to declare his preference for members of the white working-class, or blue-collar workers, over the white elites, or Wall Street executives. He positioned himself as a defender of the ‘common men’ and supported various populist policies. Trump even went as far as critiquing white elites, such as politicians, for instance, he criticized Hillary Clinton for her disdain for the ‘common men’ (Lamont et al. 2017). This allowed for Trump to be able to present as this relatable figure to the white working-class when in reality he was far from that. Trump was a white elite. However, despite the fact that members of the white working-class have shown disdain to the white elites throughout history, they still feel some sort of fascination towards the white elites that are very wealthy (someone like Trump) as they are two groups that are not often in close proximity. This allows for the white working-class to easily support a wealthy white elite like Trump even though he is someone that has lived far from the lifestyle that those in white working-class have lived. In contrast, the white working-class view white elites, such as public officials, as a group that does not treat them well (Williams, 2017). Finally, Trump appealed to the white working-class during his 2016 campaign by establishing that the



white working-class was indeed superior to groups that the white working-class had already thought was below them and some of those groups included Black people, immigrants, and women. It has been mentioned in previous chapters, since Chapter One, how the white working-class has always valued their whiteness and racial solidarity with the white elites who do not even support the upward mobility of those in the white working-class. They chose to deny solidarity with other groups, such as prioritizing racial solidarity over having class solidarity with Black people, a group that has faced similar challenges as them. Throughout Trump's electoral speeches, his negative references towards certain groups, whether it be as directly as referring to immigrants as a potential threat to the American people or as subtly as referring to Black people as "blacks," he ultimately positions the white working-class as better than these groups (Lamont et al., 2017). This just motivated the white working-class to want to vote for a Republican candidate like Trump as he fed into many of the racist, homophobic, anti-immigration, etc. beliefs that the white working-class held among its members. In his own research, Cherlin (2021) had examined the city Dundalk, Maryland and he also concluded that Trump had appealed to the white working-class because he had addressed their economic grievances and their anti-immigration concerns. In Dundalk, the white working-class was faced with a decline in industrial employment as many large plants closed down in the 2010s. The decline of the steel industry in Dundalk led many to call for tariffs on imported steel, however, both Democratic and Republican candidates ignored the white working-class of Dundalk. It was not until Trump signed an order that supported the white working-class's demand of requiring tariffs on imported steel, that is when Trump had appealed to the white working-class's political need which fulfilled their economic needs. This was consistent with the research that economists had found where they

concluded that there was a negative correlation between the reduction of manufacturing employment in counties and a high percentage of white working-class voters that voted for Trump in 2016 (Altick et al., 2018). The white working-class of Dundalk also experienced a higher percentage of immigrants in their places of employment which has caused them to depend on their white identity to position themselves higher than the immigrant groups and use it as a way to justify their hatred for these groups, along with their need to take back one of the many advantages they think they have lost throughout the decades that that is having easy access to jobs (Cherlin, 2021).

All in all, during the 2016 Presidential Election, Trump appealed to the white working-class by presenting himself as someone who was relatable to the members in the white working-class. He addressed various of their concerns, especially their main one being a decrease of employment access as they are now in competition with a majority of minority working-class populations. Trump even played into many of the white working-class's beliefs that they had developed throughout history (this paper specifically begins with an examination of the Antebellum period) which mostly consisted of them fortifying themselves above minority populations, in general. Similarly to Reagan, Trump had built on Reagan's approach to appeal to economic concerns and cultural grievances among the voters of the white working-class. Moreover, both of these Republican candidates had chosen to attract voters of the white working-class by addressing their feelings on the overall decline of the economy over the years and their battle with minority populations (Hull, 2017). Trump was an excellent candidate in truly listening and understanding the demands of the white working-class. This was what they had wanted for so long; they wanted a political candidate that would listen and adhere to their

needs. Trump became that person to the white working-class, in other words, he was an appealing Republican candidate which would lead to his eventual succession to the American presidency. Cherlin (2021) shows that even as Trump became President, he still appealed to the white working-class. They believed that he was benefiting them and aiding in their upward mobility in American society.

### The Effects of Trump on the White Working-Class

In 2016, Trump had managed to win the Presidential Election and serve as the 45th President for four years. After the discussion on how Trump managed to appeal to the white working-class throughout his campaign, it is important to analyze the effects that the Trump administration and its policies has had on the white working-class. More specifically, how did the policies that were issued under the Trump administration politically and economically affect the white working-class? Did the white working-class vote against their political and economic interests by choosing to align with Trump? A report was published on how some of Trump's policies during his first year in office had affected the working-class populations in general. In relation to the white working-class, Trump had signed the Tax Cuts and Jobs Act into a law by the end of 2017 which provided a permanent cut to the tax rate of the very wealthy white elites. Trump had also managed to include some cuts that could have potentially benefited the members of the white working-class, however, it is important to note that these cuts are temporary not permanent like the ones for the white elites (Bivens et al., 2018). According to the Tax Policy Center (2017), 83 percent of the benefits from the Tax Cuts and Jobs Act will accrue to the very wealthy white elites by 2027 (*Tax Policy Center*, 2017). To continue, in 2016, the Department of

Labor had strengthened a regulation that has not been modified in over 40 years to require employers to pay workers more if they work more than 40 hours per week. However, Trump's administration chose to appeal the rule which led to the regulation to no longer be active. This was estimated to cause the working-class populations, especially including the white working-class, around \$1.2 billion a year (Bivens et al., 2018). In these two cases alone, the white working-class had voted against their interests, especially economically, by voting for Trump. Many members of the white working-class chose to uphold racial solidarity with the white elites, like they did in the Antebellum and Jim Crow era, by falling for his campaign's messages which upheld racist and white supremacy messages and still chose to vote for Trump in 2016. Instead, the white working-class could have aligned with other working-class populations as their needs usually go hand in hand, especially their economic needs, but they were complicit in their own disenfranchisement and are left to deal with the same political and economic concerns before electing Trump. Furthermore, among the white working-class, attitudes regarding cultural issues like anti-immigration and economic interest of free trade attitudes were very popular. Therefore, Trump was motivated to center his campaign around these issues like anti-immigration and anti-trade in order to gain the vote of the white working-class members. However, as Ojeda and Telles (2021) revealed, members of the white working-class who resided in many of the regions where the white working-class had possessed these anti-immigration and anti-trade attitudes and had voted for Trump, only experienced higher exposure of both immigration and trade. Therefore, the white working-class in these specific counties had only voted against the political interest of the promotion of anti-immigration and they voted against their economic interest of anti-trade as these issues only worsened under Trump's presidency. To go even further, the

House of Representatives had issued the Raise the Wage Act in 2019 which would raise the minimum wage to \$15 by 2025, but Trump had vetoed the bill as recommended by his administration (McNicholas et al., 2020). This is another example of the white working-class contributing to their own political and economic disenfranchisement. Next, according to McNicholas et al. (2020), Trump had repealed an executive order in 2019 which had provided job security for service workers. It is important to note how job displacement was a major concern among the white working-class, like Chapter Three had mentioned. A discussion of the various policies that the Trump administration had enacted during his presidency reveals how the white working-class had willingly voted for Trump for mostly his populist rhetoric of presenting himself as the only ideal candidate for the white working-class. He used their moment of defeat and their feelings of frustration with the political state and, most importantly, the economic state of society to appeal to them as this candidate that would save them from all the hardships that they have been enduring the past couple decades. However, by voting for Trump, the white working-class ignored class solidarity with minority working populations going through the same issues as them. For instance, Trump's administration had appealed the regulation that required employers to pay workers more if they work more than 40 hours per week which was not surprising as the administration had long voiced concerns with this specific part of the rule (Bivens et al., 2018). Moreover, Trump did not exactly deceive the white working-class about making changes to policies that have long benefitted members of the white working-class. The white working-class chose to prioritize their more racialized feelings when it came to electing Trump rather than support other working-class populations and vote for policies that would have benefited both groups.

## Conclusion

Chapter Four's main objective was to highlight the specific details of the 2016 Presidential Election as it relates to both Trump and the white working-class. In appealing to the white working-class, Trump made sure to target various of their concerns like those on increased immigration and increased job competition, which led to him ultimately securing his victory in the 2016 Presidential Election. However, research showcased how the majority of Trump's policies did not benefit the white working-class; the policies not only failed to provide any benefits, but some further negatively impacted the white working-class. In general, the white working-class tend to possess a pattern of constantly voting against their political and economic interests ever since the Antebellum period. This raises the concerns of the effect of what this disenfranchisement will do to this group in the future, along with how the Democratic Party plans to secure back the votes of the white working-class and how this will impact the group. Perhaps their complicity recognizes the failure of the opposing party to garner the votes of the white working-class. This will always be explored further in Chapter Five.

## **CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION**

This paper had one main purpose and that was the fact that it sought to answer the following question: why are members of the white working-class in the United States complicit in their own political and economic disenfranchisement? To answer this question, the Antebellum period and the Jim Crow era were examined to demonstrate the behavioral patterns of the white working-class in relation to the context of both the political and economic states of the societies of the two time periods. A closer analysis demonstrated how the white working-class was contributing to their own political and economic disenfranchisement by deciding to favor racial solidarity (in both periods, the discussion involved mainly white people vs. Black people) over class solidarity (in both periods, the discussion involved mainly white and Black workers vs. the white elites). This was due to the fact that in both the Antebellum period and the Jim Crow era, the white working-class aligned with the white elites (a group that did not support the majority of the political and economic interests of the white working-class), instead of uniting with other working-class populations (consisting mostly of minority working-class population groups) who shared very similar interests. This behavior of the white working-class's complicity in their disenfranchisement was examined even further in this paper by comparing the white working-class of the Antebellum period and of the Jim Crow era to see if it could be applied to the white working-class today or if it was simply just something that occurred in American history and was only relevant in the past. Analyzing various studies on the subject of the white working-class and their behaviors during the contemporary era (from the late 1960s to the present) displayed how their behavior has been consistent throughout American history. Moreover, the white working-class has shown a consistent pattern of being complicit in their

own political and economic disenfranchisement from the past to the present in America. Once it had been established that the white working-class was indeed committing to this particular behavior, the paper then had to tackle the aspect of thesis, more specifically, why do members of the white working-class contribute to their own political and economic disenfranchisement? This answer was also found through a closer examination of the white working-class and how they operated in the Antebellum period and the Jim Crow era, along with the contemporary era. To be more specific, the white working-class feels more defeated today. They feel ignored by their political leaders when they were once one of the most prioritized groups in the past. They do not like the fact that many advantages they once solely enjoyed in the Antebellum period and the Jim Crow era are now being enjoyed today by other groups, especially minority working-class populations. This motivated the white working-class to fall back on the one thing that they feel protects them from being on the same level of different population groups and that was their whiteness. The white working-class used their white status in all three time periods across American history to signify their alliance with other white people or the white elites, in this case, and to establish their overall separation from certain minority groups. Additionally, the study on the white working-class during the contemporary era showcased how the feelings of defeat and frustration that had been built up over the past couple decades has led to this group transitioning from the Democratic Party to the Republican Party.

While the three time periods were used to establish the fact that the white working-class had consistently been complicit in their own political and economic disenfranchisement throughout American history and used to reveal why they have been exhibiting this specific behavior, the paper utilized the 2016 Presidential Election as an example of this scenario. To be



more specific, the 2016 Presidential Election offered a more contemporary and specific demonstration of the white working-class disenfranchising themselves, along with portraying the effects of a more solidified rightward shift to the Republican Party. The election resulted in members of the white working-class voting for the Republican candidate, Trump, who positioned himself as this ideal candidate for the white working-class that hears their concerns. Trump would assume his presidential role. A closer look at his presidential years revealed how the Trump administration had issued various policies that were actually politically and economically detrimental to those in the white working-class even though he claimed to be for them. Therefore, from the Antebellum period to the Jim Crow era to the present, the white working-class has displayed a consistent behavioral pattern of being complicit in their own political and economic disenfranchisement, despite the historical context and even situational as they also had disenfranchised themselves in the 2016 Presidential Election. The reason is that through an analysis of the Antebellum period to the present, the white working-class has gone from being one of the most prioritized groups in the Antebellum period and Jim Crow era to now feeling disdain as they believe they are completely disregarded by political leaders, along with their economic concerns left unsolved or unheard.

The findings discussed are important in exposing the implication of how the white working-class's behavioral pattern has established an American society where racial solidarity is prioritized over class solidarity. The evidence from this paper showed the white working-class aligning with the white elites, a group that did not share similar interests with the white working-class at all, instead of aligning with populations like minority working classes who do share many similar political and economic interests. Another implication of the findings of this paper

includes revealing the loss of the white working-class vote among the Democratic Party from the 1960s to the present where the group's shift has become more apparent. More specifically, the white working-class continuously politically and economically disenfranchises themselves by supporting policies and groups that do not benefit them, especially the Republican Party. The research done on the white working-class across three different time periods showcased their growing frustration over the past decades and their eventual transition to the Republican Party from the Democratic Party around the late 1960s. As far as future studies, there are two important paths worth mentioning. To start, this paper has never claimed one specific way to measure the white working-class population. However, when mentioning specific research articles, this paper does intentionally gather data from white working-class members who do not hold a college degree, therefore, unintentionally utilizing an educational approach to measure the white working-class population. In other words, any data discussed in this paper was intentionally gathered with the purpose of being consistent for easy comparison across three different time periods in American history. However, research on other measures (occupational, income, etc.) may find that the white working-class's behavior in their complicity in their disenfranchisement has been far from consistent, therefore, it is something worth considering for future research. Furthermore, this paper mainly explores the white working-class in relation to the Republican Party. However, deviating from this paper's focus of looking at how the white working-class made a rightward shift to the Republican Party in the past couple decades, future studies on the white working-class losing interest in the Democratic Party could be explored to reveal why they are losing the white working-class vote and how can they gain it back for the next presidential election.

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