

Donald Trump and the Power of Narratives

Jeffrey M. Stonecash
Syracuse University, Emeritus

The election of Donald Trump presents an interpretative challenge. How did a man with such low character ratings triumph? He was seen throughout the primary process as lacking the temperament to be President. He had a long string of bankruptcies, raising questions about his business acumen. He would not release his tax returns. He taunted others and lied regularly. He inflamed passions against immigrants and Muslims, to name just two groups. He was a powerful divisive force. He relentlessly presented a portrait of a nation in decline. His slogan, Make America Great Again, summarized his theme: America had once been great, but no longer was. Manufacturing was in decline. Bad trade deals were destroying American companies. Cities were aflame. Illegal immigrants were over-running the country, taking jobs from Americans and threatening their safety. As he stated in his inaugural address, “carnage” was widespread.

Equally important was his explanation for how this happened. This was brought about by “stupid and corrupt” elites. He made that remarkably clear in campaign statements and in his inaugural address when he stated:

“For too long, a small group in our nation’s capital has reaped the rewards of government while the people have borne the cost. Washington flourished—but the people did not share in its wealth. Politicians prospered—but the jobs left, and the factories closed. The establishment protected itself, but not the citizens of our country. Their victories have not been your victories; their triumphs have not been your triumphs; and while they celebrated in our nation’s capital, there was little to celebrate for struggling families all across our land.....”

Government was diminishing our society. Regulations were limiting the ability of businesses to grow. His solution was to “drain the swamp,” a phrase that suggested that American government

was dominated by people who were destroying America for their own personal gain. This consistently negative presentation yielded 44 percent of the vote.

These positions are somewhat of a departure from those presented by the saint of the Republican Party, Ronald Reagan. He continually criticized government, suggesting the private sector could handle problems better. But he also projected a sense of optimism, a sense that America was a shining beacon on the hill and resilient. Elites were not evil or stupid, but misguided in their optimism that they could solve problems. The solution was less government.

The issue of concern here is what was it about Donald Trump's presentation that prompted voters to elect him? What was it within the electorate, and particularly the Republican electorate, that resulted in the election of someone of questionable character who painted such a negative view of American society? What has changed in recent decades that made such a negative presentation appealing, or at least acceptable, in one of the richest nations in the world? Even more interesting is who he attracted. By multiple accounts, his primary electoral base was the white working class. If that is accurate, why did those voters support a man with a long history of stiffing blue collar workers who built his projects?

Competing Approaches to Understanding Election Outcomes

There are two somewhat complementary approaches to trying to explain any election outcome. One explanation focuses on coalitional politics: what themes are expressed and what types of people support a candidate. The other focuses on broad social and economic conditions and the arguments and narratives each party presents as to how it will respond to those problems. Both are at work at the same time, but the emphases in conducting analyses differ. The former tends to draw on survey responses. The latter acknowledges and draws on the former approach

but focuses on the more diffuse argument that candidates present in an effort to connect with voters. The impact of these arguments is harder to capture.

The coalitional former approach focuses on how many voters have certain dispositions or opinions and how successful a candidate was in communicating stances, attracting those favorably inclined, and mobilizing them to vote. How many partisans were there, how strong was their commitment to their party and how effectively did each candidate attract their support? Trump's character was doubted, but Clinton was equally disliked, effectively nullifying character issues. With partisan polarization at high levels, perhaps tribalism set in, and Republicans were willing to vote for anyone other than Clinton. What policy appeals did Trump make, how many held opinions similar to his, and how well did he do in attracting their support? How many conservatives are there and how much support did he attract? Was he skilled at animating and attracting those driven by racial resentment, authoritarianism, cultural resentment, anger about illegal immigrants, or anti-intellectualism? Or, was he appealing to those experiencing economic stress?

The narrative approach focuses more on contextual conditions and how the candidates exploit and respond to them with arguments about how to respond to conditions. Franklin Roosevelt responded to the Great Depression by presenting government as a mechanism to problem solve and help those suffering. Lyndon Johnson capitalized on a time of liberal ascendancy by proposing programs to enhance equality of opportunity. Ronald Reagan responded to an economy in disarray by arguing government was interfering too much, and tax cuts and regulation would revive the economy. Donald Trump presented his own narrative, which will be reviewed below.

In an effort to try to explain the victory of Donald Trump, this analysis proceeds as follows. First, the conclusions of the coalitional politics approach will be briefly summarized. The reasons to be cautious in treating them as a full explanation will be presented. Then the narrative approach will be presented. The implications of this approach for assessing coalition issues will then be examined.

Coalitional Analyses of 2016 Results

A central theme of many analyses of the 2016 election is that Trump successfully appealed to two groups of individuals. First, with high levels of partisan polarization within the electorate, Republicans gradually came to the conclusion that he was better than Clinton, and they “came home” to vote for their party candidate. Second, he was also able to appeal to those seen as aggrieved about various matters or intolerant of those different. He received strong support among those resentful of blacks¹ and immigrants.² His language and criticisms of those different attracted those focused on white identity.³ His emphasis on law and order attracted strong support among authoritarians.⁴ In general, it was widely stated that he drew upon a less tolerant non-college educated electorate. These analyses are reflective of a broader argument

¹ Philip Klinkner, “The easiest way to guess if someone supports Trump? Ask if Obama is a Muslim,” *Vox*, June 2, 2016. <https://www.vox.com/2016/6/2/11833548/donald-trump-support-race-religion-economy>; Jesse A. Myerson, “Trumpism: It’s Coming From the Suburbs: Racism, fascism, and working-class Americans,” *The Nation*, May 8, 2017. <https://www.thenation.com/article/trumpism-its-coming-from-the-suburbs/>.

² Thomas Wood, “Racism motivated Trump voters more than authoritarianism,” *Washington Post*, Monkey Cage, April 17, 2017. https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2017/04/17/racism-motivated-trump-voters-more-than-authoritarianism-or-income-inequality/?utm_term=.1caf138a9321. Sean McElwee and Jason McDaniel, “Economic Anxiety Didn’t Make People Vote Trump, Racism Did,” *The Nation*, May 8, 2017. <https://www.thenation.com/article/economic-anxiety-didnt-make-people-vote-trump-racism-did/>.

³ Michael Tesler and John Sides, “How political science helps explain the rise of Trump: the role of white identity and grievances,” *Washington Post*, Monkey Cage, March 3, 2016. https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2016/03/03/how-political-science-helps-explain-the-rise-of-trump-the-role-of-white-identity-and-grievances/?tid=a_inl&utm_term=.9b38c8d68873.

⁴ Amanda Taub, “The rise of American authoritarianism,” *Vox*, March 1, 2016. <https://www.vox.com/2016/3/1/11127424/trump-authoritarianism>; Matthew MacWilliams, “The One Weird Trait That Predicts Whether You’re a Trump Supporter: And it’s not gender, age, income, race or religion,” *Politico Magazine*, January 17, 2016. <http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2016/01/donald-trump-2016-authoritarian-213533>.

that Republicans spent the past half-century winning over socially conservative, non-college-educated whites,⁵ to the point that these voters became the dominant faction within the party.⁶ Trump combined the Republican base prior candidates had attracted plus the aggrieved, but with perhaps greater support among the aggrieved than prior candidates.

All of the above may be true, but there are several reasons for being cautious about the emphasis that has been given to the roles of the aggrieved, intolerant, or resentful. First, analyses using various resentment / intolerant scales are cross-sectional within 2016. Clearly those higher on these scales voted strongly for Trump. Concluding that this explains Trump, with all his deficiencies, neglects three issues. Was the overall level of resentment higher than in prior years? If it was not, then it is questionable whether something different happened in 2016. Did Trump receive a higher level of support among the resentful than in prior years? That has not been documented. If not, is anything different from prior Republican electoral support? Even if he did accentuate his appeal among the resentful, there is the issue of whether his positions also alienated those less resentful such that his net support was no greater. These questions are not addressed by 2016 cross-sectional analyses and need to be before accepting interpretations that resentment played a particularly powerful and unique role in 2016.

Second is the issue of what such indicators as racial resentment and authoritarianism are capturing. The presumption is that these indicators capture the attitudes of voters about race and authoritarianism. If you don't think blacks work hard enough, you are resentful of blacks, and perhaps racist. If you are authoritarian you adhere to a rigid set of rules in life and may well be sympathetic to strong authoritarian leaders such as Trump. In short, voters scoring high on these

⁵ Thomas Frank, *What's the Matter with Kansas?*

⁶ Lee Drutman, "How race and identity became the central dividing line in American politics," *Vox*, August 30, 2016. <https://www.vox.com/polyarchy/2016/8/30/12697920/race-dividing-american-politics>.

indexes may have opinions or personalities not conducive to tolerance in American society and they find Trump attractive.

Another interpretation is possible. There are, to be sure Americans who are racists. That is, they believe non-whites are inherently inferior. There are those intolerant toward immigrants, diverse values, and homosexuals. There are those who do not like the cultural changes that began in the 1960s that gave individuals more freedom in the norms they follow. But the issue is whether these indexes are about these positions. It is also possible that there is an issue of whether one has to play by the rules and whether the “system” has become rigged against those who have lived by playing what they thought were the rules.⁷ Bill Clinton once said “The American Dream is that if you work hard and play by the rules you can go as far as your God-given talent can take you.”⁸ What if voters think that playing by rules is not working or that some groups are getting an advantage? The issue is one validity. Do these indexes measure the degree to which someone is in some way intolerant? We need to consider the context within which these questions are asked and the mind-frame that different groups might have in answering these questions before assuming they reflect what is presumed.

Conditions and Narratives

The focus here is on the larger context of the 2016 elections. Context always matters for elections. One of the most discussed condition in recent years has been the economy. How the economy affects individuals is a direct and immediate matter. In recent decades many voters have experienced sustained economic stagnation and others were experiencing outright decline.

⁷ Thomas B. Edsall, “The Trump Voter Paradox,” *New York Times*, September 28, 2017. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/28/opinion/trump-republicans-authoritarian.html?ref=collection%2Fsectioncollection%2Fopinion&action=click&contentCollection=opinion®ion=rank&module=package&version=highlights&contentPlacement=1&pgtype=sectionfront>.

⁸ Hochschild, *Facing Up to the American Dream*, 18.

Pensions were being cut and savings were being depleted. The other important matter is the narrative presented to voters to explain why economic stagnation is occurring. There are two main narratives of what is shaping job and economic prospects in America. These narratives are crucial to voters who are trying to understand the conditions of their lives. Conservatives have steadily developed the narrative that economic growth is being held back by government policies. The other narrative argues that only a “mixed economy” will thrive, protect citizens and distribute benefits widely. The former is simple, intuitive, and has become dominant. The latter struggles for recognition and understanding within the electorate. The former became central to the success of Donald Trump. He was able to exploit an enduring Republican narrative to win traditional Republicans and those seeking policies that might improve their fortunes. Before developing these two narratives, it is important to review the economic context - trends in the American economy in recent decades.

Shifting Economic Fortunes

The central economic fact of our recent decades is economic stagnation for some and significant gains for others.⁹ Median family incomes have not grown for years.¹⁰ Workers with less education are experiencing economic decline. Figure 1 indicates how real wages for men 25-34 have varied by education over time. Differences by education in wage levels are enormous and increasing. Taking 1963 wages as 1, those with a degree beyond a bachelor's

⁹ “Nine Charts about Wealth Inequality in America (Updated),” Urban Institute, accessed October 10, 2017. https://apps.urban.org/features/wealth-inequality-charts/?utm_source=newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_content=Nine%20charts%20about%20wealth%20inequality%20in%20America&utm_campaign=Urban%20Institute%20Update.

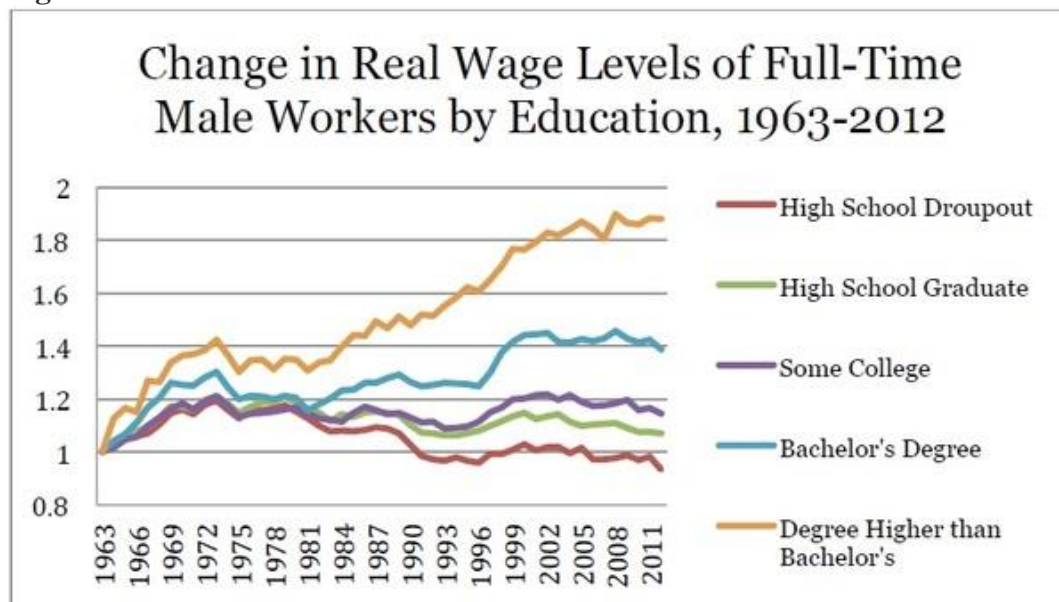
¹⁰ David Leonhardt, “The Great Wage Slowdown of the 21st Century,” *New York Times*, October 7, 2014. <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/10/07/upshot/the-great-wage-slowdown-of-the-21st-century.html?smid=tw-share&abt=0002&abg=0>; PEW Research Center, “The American Middle Class Is Losing Ground,” December 9, 2015. <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2015/12/09/the-american-middle-class-is-losing-ground/>.

¹⁰ Victor Tan Chen, “All Hollowed Out: The lonely poverty of America’s white working class,” *The Atlantic*, Jan 16, 2016. <http://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2016/01/white-working-class-poverty/424341/>.

have doubled their wages by 2012. Those with less than a high school degree or less have either stagnated or declined. Women have done better than men, but educational differences persist.

The differences in how people have fared by education levels go far beyond current wage rates. Inequality in net worth levels of households have increased, with those with less education suffering declines and those with more education experiencing increases.¹¹ Those with less education are less likely to be married, which means fewer units with two individuals earning income.¹²

Figure 1



Those with less education make less money and are less likely to have jobs that provide health insurance.¹³ They are more likely to experience social isolation,¹⁴ health problems,¹⁵ and

¹¹ Richard Fry and Rakesh Kochhar, "America's wealth gap between middle-income and upper-income families is widest on record, PEW Research Center, December 17, 2014. <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/12/17/wealth-gap-upper-middle-income/>; *The Demographics of Wealth: How Age, Education and Race Separate Thrivers from Strugglers in Today's Economy*, Essay No. 2: Education and Wealth | May 2015, Federal Bank of St. Louis, <https://www.stlouisfed.org/~media/Files/PDFs/HFS/essays/HFS-Essay-2-2015-Education-and-Wealth.pdf>.

¹² Kim Parker and Renee Stepler, "As U.S. marriage rate hovers at 50%, education gap in marital status widens," PEW Research Center, September 14, 2017. <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/09/14/as-u-s-marriage-rate-hovers-at-50-education-gap-in-marital-status-widens/>.

¹³ Jessica C. Barnett and Marina S. Vornovitsky, *Health Insurance Coverage in the United States: 2015*

higher suicide rates.¹⁶ In short, a multitude of problems come with less education and lower incomes, and these problems have been getting gradually worse since the 1970s. A 2017 report found that 40 percent of workers struggle at some time to pay for necessities.¹⁷

Seeking Answers: The Power of Narratives

The declining fortunes of less educated workers has been widely documented. The important matter for workers is finding an answer that connects to policies and politicians so they can support that answer. They need a narrative that explains why these changes are happening and suggests what responses will improve their fortunes.¹⁸ A narrative presents a set of causal arguments that suggests what policies can reverse changes occurring. There are two primary narratives about economic change. One argues for the virtues of free markets and the detrimental effects of government. The other focuses on the importance of government policies for shaping the distribution of the income generated by capitalism for preventing inequality and maintaining a population capable of consuming. Globalization is an effect of increasing importance, but plays out very differently in the two narratives.

Current Population Reports, Issued September 2016, P60-257(RV).

<https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/publications/2016/demo/p60-257.pdf>.

¹⁴ Victor Tan Chen, "All Hollowed Out: The lonely poverty of America's white working class," *The Atlantic*, Jan 16, 2016. <http://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2016/01/white-working-class-poverty/424341/>.

¹⁵ Barbara Ehrenreich, "Dead, White, and Blue: The Great Die-Off of America's Blue Collar Whites," *Vox Populi*, <https://voxpopulisphere.com/2016/01/21/barbara-ehrenreich-dead-white-and-blue/>

¹⁶ Anne Case and Angus Deaton, "Rising morbidity and mortality in midlife among white non-Hispanic Americans in the 21st century," *PNAS*, December 8, 2015, Vol. 112, No. 49.

<http://www.pnas.org/content/112/49/15078.full.pdf>.

¹⁷ Consumer Finance Protection Bureau, "CFPB's First National Survey on Financial Well-Being Shows More Than 40 Percent of U.S. Adults Struggle to Make Ends Meet," September 26, 2017.

<https://www.consumerfinance.gov/about-us/newsroom/cfpbs-first-national-survey-financial-well-being-shows-more-40-percent-us-adults-struggle-make-ends-meet/>.

¹⁸ The role of a narrative is different from ideology. The studies of ideology assess the extent to which voters have coherent liberal – conservative views on policy positions. Is a liberal position on one issue associated with a liberal position on another issue? We have excellent studies of the growing ideological coherence. See works by Alan A. Abramowitz: "Ideological Realignment Among Voters." In Jeffrey M. Stonecash, Editor, *New Directions in American Political Parties*. (New York: Routledge, 2010), 126-147; *The Disappearing Center: Engaged Citizens, Polarization, and American Democracy*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010); *The Polarized Public? Why American Government is So Dysfunctional*, (Boston: Pearson, 2013).

The Conservative Narrative

Conservatives have devoted considerable attention to developing the argument that free markets work better than government managed capitalism. Presenting this argument became essential following the Great Depression because the dominant conclusion was that unregulated capitalism was prone to excesses in financial practices that were ultimately detrimental to the economy. The need was for a counter narrative,¹⁹ one that argued that free markets were not only more efficient and productive, but maximized the prized value of freedom.²⁰

In recent decades, conservatives, funded by conservative think tanks, have pushed the specific narrative that the economy and incomes are not growing because government makes it difficult for businesses to grow.²¹ The corporate tax rate in the United States is among the highest in the western world. To the extent that government takes the profits of business there is less money to invest in new equipment and products and less money for hiring new workers. The ability of business to grow is further hindered by excessive regulations. There are costly labor regulations and too many expensive environmental regulations. “Our current regulatory burden is not only a strain on job growth, it is preventing many would-be entrepreneurs from starting their own business.”²² Adding to the burdens of government are the rules, rigidities, and

¹⁹ Amity Shlaes, *The Forgotten Man: A New History of the Great Depression*, (New York: HarperCollins, 2007); and, Angus Burgin, *The Great Persuasion: Reinventing Free Markets Since the Depression*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012).

²⁰ Milton Friedman, *Capitalism and Freedom*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962).

²¹ Mark A. Smith, *Right Talk*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007); Arthur C. Brooks, *The Battle: How the Fight Between Free Enterprise and Big Government Will Shape America's Future*, (New York: Basic Books, 2010).

²² Robb Mandelbaum, “The \$83,000 Question: How Much Do Regulations Really Cost Small Businesses? *Forbes*, January 24, 2017. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/robbmandelbaum/2017/01/24/the-83000-question-how-much-do-regulations-really-cost-small-business/#3a6e28831b25>. The data are taken from a survey conducted by the National Small Business Association and released as the 2017 NSBA Small Business Regulations Survey. <http://www.nsba.biz/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/Regulatory-Survey-2017.pdf>. For evidence of fewer business startups, see Robert J. Samuelson, “Are entrepreneurs a dying breed?” *Washington Post*, By Robert J. Samuelson

high wages and benefits when unions are involved. All these make it difficult for business to grow and compete. They limit the freedom of job creators to use their private property to create business and jobs.

The answer is to reduce taxes and regulations. That will allow businesses to expand. It will encourage entrepreneurs to invest and take risks that may generate more profits, and more jobs. That will in turn create more sales and higher incomes. Tax cuts and deregulation will expand economic activity and ultimately generate more tax revenue for governments, so there will not be larger deficits.²³

This narrative is part of a larger story that conservatives have built in the last 50 years that government actions and programs have a detrimental impact on American society. Children are not receiving a good education because government allows unions to resist accountability and protect bad teachers.²⁴ Government programs to help the poor create dependency and discourage the development of the personal responsibility that leads to economic success.²⁵ The ultimate effect of a too-generous safety net is that too many people become dependent on government and withdraw from the labor force. If there is a problem of many people not faring well in the American economy, it may be cultural in that many have lost the right work habits.²⁶ If businesses and work efforts were encouraged more, the economy would flourish.

September 27, 2017. https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/are-entrepreneurs-a-dying-breed/2017/09/27/e23a5f02-a39f-11e7-b14f-f41773cd5a14_story.html?utm_term=.960c4808dae5.

²³ Grover G. Norquist and John R. Lott, Jr. *The Great Debacle: Obama's War on Jobs and Growth and What we can do to Regain our Future*, (New York: John Wiley, 2012).

²⁴ *A Nation at Risk: The imperative for educational reform: a report to the Nation and the Secretary of Education, United States Department of Education (Volume 2)*. United States. National Commission on Excellence in Education, January 1, 1983.

²⁵ Charles Murray, *Losing Ground: American Social Policy, 1950-1980*, Tenth Anniversary Edition, (New York: Basic Books, 1994). For an overview of this debate, see Mark D. Brewer and Jeffrey M. Stonecash, *Polarization and the Politics of Personal Responsibility*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

²⁶ Michael Barone, *Hard America Soft America: Competition vs. Coddling and the Battle for the Nation's Future*, (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2004; Charles J. Sykes, *A Nation of Moochers: America's Addiction to Getting Something for Nothing*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2011); Charles Murray, *Coming Apart: The State of White America, 1960-2010*, (New York: Crown Forum, 2012).

There is, of course, a significant overlap between this narrative and the self-interest of those with very high incomes. The narrative sees businessmen as the “job creators” of the economy. Those who seek benefits supported by taxes paid by job creators are the “takers,” and responding to them requires imposing a burden on those achieving.²⁷ This narrative has been developed and disseminated by a growing number of think tanks, funded by the wealthy.²⁸ The argument that the problem with the economy is government is repeatedly presented as an empirical fact and not as the self-serving argument of the wealthy.²⁹

The Trump Embellishment

Despite all the discussion that Donald Trump was a wild card populist who did not fit with either party, he embraced the essential Republican logic, adopted one seemingly heretical stance and then added specific culprits causing the economic “carnage,” creating a politically appealing narrative for those not faring well. He accepted the argument that taxes were too high (“We are the highest taxed nation in the world”) and that there were far too many regulations. He embraced the essential supply-side logic that business would increase investment and jobs if only their profits were not taken by government. The issue of whether consumers have the income to consume products is not seen as relevant.

His heretical stance was that free trade was not helping workers because United States officials had negotiated bad trade agreements. Global elites and globalization were moving well-

²⁷ Nicholas Eberstadt, *A Nation of Takers: America's Entitlement Epidemic*, (West Conshohocken, Pa: Templeton Press, 2012). Ben Crow and Zach Carter, “Paul Ryan: 60 Percent Of Americans Are ‘Takers,’ Not ‘Makers,’” Huffington Post, October 5, 2012. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/10/05/paul-ryan-60-percent-of-a_n_1943073.html.

²⁸ Jason Stahl, *Right Moves: The Conservative Think Tank in American Political Culture since 1945*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016); and, Jane Mayer, *Dark Money: The Hidden History of the Billionaires Behind the Rise of the Radical Right*, (New York: Doubleday, 2016).

²⁹ Thom Hartmann, “How the Republican Party Has Conned America for Over 30 Years,” AlterNet, September 29, 2017. <https://www.alternet.org/news-amp-politics/how-republican-party-has-conned-america-over-30-years?akid=16146.234904.tFB-a&rd=1&src=newsletter1083221&t=5>.

paying jobs out of the country. Political elites were corrupt and were facilitating these changes. They were accepting trade agreements such as NAFTA that moved manufacturing jobs to Mexico and elsewhere. His crucial addition to the conservative narrative was to name specific culprits who were creating the problems for American workers. Immigrants were bringing drugs and crime, and exploiting welfare programs and living off taxpayers. They were threatening American culture. Elites were accepting the entry of millions of illegal immigrants who were willing to work for less than American workers, taking their jobs and driving wages down.³⁰

His promise was to renegotiate bad trade agreements and remove illegal immigrants. “Stupid” political elites were allowing the destruction of American manufacturing and he would reverse the trends. These actions would return well-paying manufacturing jobs, which would be filled with American workers. Much like FDR had his economic royalists, Trump had his elites who were harming America. Trump’s elites were politicians and The Establishment. He presented himself as a businessman who could implement the logic of this narrative. He was able to capitalize on a negative sense of the direction of America within the electorate.

He presented an answer to the tension within the Republican coalition. The party had spent the last few decades assembling a coalition that was libertarian economically and conservative in social policy.³¹ That created a continual tension within their party in that the churning of the economy, led by business decisions, could be destructive to communities. Factories and jobs were moved where costs were cheaper, often making life very difficult for workers. Trump recognized that many workers and families were losing as economic change unfolded. His uniqueness was in his answer to the tension created by continual economic

³⁰ Robert M. Merry, “Removing Trump Won’t Solve America’s Crisis: The elites are the problem,” *The American Conservative*, May 18, 2017. <http://www.theamericanconservative.com/articles/removing-trump-wont-solve-americas-crisis/>.

³¹ E.J. Dionne, Jr., *They Only Look Dead*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996).

change. The tension was that it was business decisions that were harming American workers. His creative answer was to not blame business but to take a populist stance and present himself as speaking for the people and against political elites. Political elites were out-of-touch “experts” who were benefiting and were corrupt. As he stated in a *Wall Street Journal* op-ed in April, 2016:

The only antidote for decades of ruinous rule by a small handful of elites is a bold infusion of popular will. On every major issue affecting this country, the people are right and the governing elite are wrong. The elites are wrong on taxes, on the size of government, on trade, on immigration, on foreign policy.³²

The answer was to cast aside political experts and rely on a businessman who was not part of the corrupt elites. As he stated in his convention acceptance speech, he would be “their voice” and “only I” can solve these problems. He would fund his own campaign. Republicans did not want to discuss the effects of the “creative destruction” that business creates as new businesses form and old ones die. He avoided the problem of the cumulative impact of business decisions by blaming political elites for problems.³³ His crass and blunt style contributed to his image as someone who would disrupt the cozy relationships among elites in Washington. He was a disrupter who would change a corrupt system, free businesses to grow, and provide good jobs for “the people.”

Just as important as his narrative, he was also the only one to be trusted to explain this to his supporters. He relentlessly criticized mainstream news outlets as corrupt, hiding the reality of what government was doing, and as producing “fake news.” That meant that criticisms of his arguments were driven by malice of the sources and were not to be trusted. He presented a

³² Cited in J. Eric Oliver and Wendy M. Rahm, “Rise of the Trumpenvolk: Populism in the 2016,” *Annals of the American Academy*, Volume 667, September 2016, 189.

³³ Oliver and Wendy M. Rahm, “Rise of the Trumpenvolk: Populism in the 2016, 194.

narrative that unemployment was very high, crime was rampant and growing, and trade deals were bad for Americans, and that he could solve these problems.

Donald Trump presented few policy details during the 2016 campaign about how he would achieve his goals. With a year of policy actions to assess, it is clear that he is pursuing a simple supply-side trickle-down economics plan and socially conservative policies. More will be said about this later, but he has brought industry lobbyists into his administration and proposed limits on workers' rights, a tax plan that awards most benefits to the wealthy, cuts to programs that provide benefits to those less affluent, and a series of policies catering to the religious conservatives. He may have successfully labeled himself as a populist disrupter, but his approach has hued more to the conservative narrative of the last 50 years than anything else.

The Liberal Narrative

The liberal narrative that explains changes in the economy and the distribution of income and wealth is very different. It emphasizes the factors driving economic change and manipulations of the flow of economic rewards as economic change churns. It is also much more complex and much less amenable to concise and understandable presentation during a campaign.

The alternative narrative begins with recognition that economic change is relentless and driven by technological innovation and transportation and labor costs. At one time production and consumption were confined to local communities because of the costs of moving goods. Then transportation costs declined and trading goods increased. Then the ability move the technology of production elsewhere to exploit lower labor costs increased. Apple could move

production of iPhones to China and then sell that product to US customers.³⁴ The result of these changes is a continual geographical displacement of jobs with high labor costs. Technology can be moved anywhere to produce goods. This process undermines high wage jobs in the United States. It moves manufacturing from high wage countries to low wage countries and takes advantage of lower transportation costs to bring goods back to industrialized nations. Although this process is presented as detrimental for workers, this process also generates enormous general benefits for the public. Products are available at much lower costs, making higher standards of living available.

The difference from conservatives is that liberals argue for support for workers as job transitions occur and have a very different explanation for the growing inequality that has accompanied these economic changes. Liberals argue that economic changes are likely to continue, but that government must provide job training programs and a safety net of social programs to help workers as transitions occur.

The crucial difference between conservatives and liberals is what explains the growing inequality of our society. Globalization has accelerated in recent decades and has been accompanied by steadily growing inequality in the distribution of income and wealth. To some this simply an unfortunate reflection of the growing returns to education. Those operating in an information and technology driven economy fare better and others do not fare as well. It may create difficult situations for some as jobs disappear or shift to metropolitan areas, but change is inevitable. Conservatives focus on business revenues and a supply-side logic. Liberals argue

³⁴ Richard Baldwin, *The Great Convergence: Information Technology and the New Globalization*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016). For a summary of Baldwin's argument see By: Christopher Caldwell, "Sending Jobs Overseas," THE CLAREMONT INSTITUTE, Vol. XVII, No. 2, Spring 2017. <http://www.claremont.org/crb/article/sending-jobs-overseas/>.

that unless policies create widespread distribution of income there will be less demand and no reason for business to invest. They argue demand drives the economy.

The issue then is whether inequality is an inevitable or created outcome of a changing economy? In recent decades the bulk of increased income has gone to the top 1 percent.³⁵ Liberal critics of growing inequality argue that much of the increase is not a natural development of capitalism or inevitable. Inequality has been created by policies adopted that diminish income gains for middle income workers and increased them for the most affluent.³⁶ These policies have been pursued by business and conservatives to alter the flows of income by class.

The diminishment of income flows to middle and lower income workers has come as a cumulative effect of numerous policy changes. For lower income workers in the private sector, unions provide a means of leverage to obtain higher wages. Conservatives have pushed for and attained right to work laws that make forming unions harder.³⁷ Employers have moved pension plans from defined benefit to defined contribution commitments.³⁸ More employers are making workers sign non-compete clauses, which prohibit workers from seeking offers of higher pay from competing companies.³⁹ Workers are increasingly being required to sign contracts mandating that they take employment discrimination cases to arbitration where they do not fare as well. These clauses ban workers from joining together in class action lawsuits.⁴⁰ Companies

³⁵ Thomas Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017).

³⁶ Jacob S. Hacker and Paul Pierson, *Winner-Take-All Politics: How Washington Made the Rich Richer – and Turned Its Back on the Middle Class*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010); and, Jacob S. Hacker and Paul Pierson, *American Amnesia: How the War on Government Led Us to Forget What Made America Prosper*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2016).

³⁷ Raymond L. Hogler, *The End of American Labor Unions: The Right-to-Work Movement and the Erosion of Collective Bargaining*, (New York: Praeger, 2015).

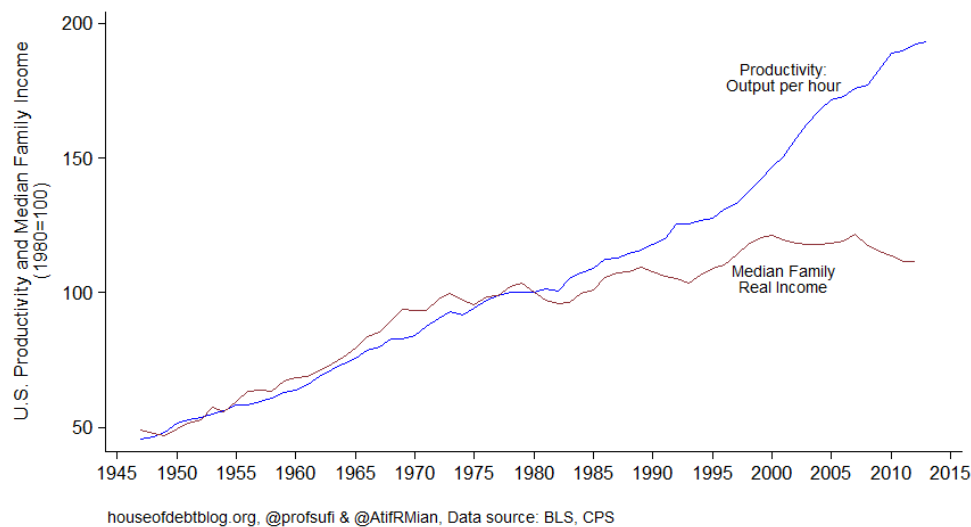
³⁸ Employee Benefit Retirement Institute, What are the trends in U.S. retirement plans? <https://www.ebri.org/publications/benfaq/index.cfm?fa=retfaq14>. Accessed October 8, 2017.

³⁹ Conor Dougherty, “How Noncompete Clauses Keep Workers Locked In,” *New York Times*, June 9, 2017. https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/13/business/noncompete-clauses.html?_r=0.

⁴⁰ Katherine V.W. Stone and Alexander J.S. Colvin, “The arbitration epidemic: Mandatory arbitration deprives workers and consumers of their rights,” Economic Policy Institute, December 7, 2015. <http://www.epi.org/publication/the-arbitration-epidemic/>.

are allowed to classify any worker making more than \$23,600 as management and thus required to work extra hours but not be eligible for overtime pay.⁴¹ Through these and many other policies conservatives and business have reduced benefits for workers and constrained the flow of revenues to workers.⁴² Their job security has become more volatile and their prospects riskier.⁴³ The result is shown in Figure 2, which tracks productivity rates and the median family income from 1945 through 2015. From 1945 through 1980 the two moved in conjunction. After that productivity continued to rise, but the income going to workers slowed and has increased very little in the decades since 1980.

Figure 2: Productivity and Median Family Income: 1945-2015.



Where has the greater wealth created within the economy gone and why? The crucial matter in recent decades has been the returns to capital and the rate at which returns are taxed. Those changes are exacerbated by a cultural change in corporations that justifies higher rewards

⁴¹ Evan Gibbs, "What Happened To The Obama DOL's New Overtime Rules?," Above the Law, September 20, 2017. <https://abovethelaw.com/2017/09/what-happened-to-the-obama-dols-new-overtime-rules/>.

⁴² Hedrick Smith, *Who Stole the American Dream?* (New York: Random House, 2012).

⁴³ Jacob S. Hacker, *The Great Risk Shift: The New Economic Insecurity and the Decline of the American Dream*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

to those at the top. As Piketty documents, over time those in the top 1 percent have steadily accumulated more capital assets. The returns from capital are taxed at lower rates, allowing even greater and faster accumulations of income among those wealthy.⁴⁴ The tax laws further increase inequality by allowing large income deductions for retirement accounts and second home mortgages. Trust funds can be used to pass wealth onto children. The tax laws allow the wealthy to deduct from taxes contributes to think tanks that promote their agenda.⁴⁵ Hedge fund managers, who manage other people's money, are allowed to treat their fees as capital gains, and pay a much lower rate on the income they earn.⁴⁶ The wealthy can fund lawsuits such as that which resulted in *Citizens United*, which allows the wealthy to spend even more to present their arguments during campaigns.⁴⁷

There has also been a change in norms of appropriate rewards within corporations. While corporations have sought to limit unions, benefits and wage increases, those at the top have awarded greater and greater compensation to themselves. They have also changed their reward structure, awarding themselves more compensation in stock options. Then they use corporate profits to engage in stock buybacks which raise the value of stocks and their own compensation. At the same time, they are not using increased corporate revenues and profits to invest more in research and development.⁴⁸ Two charts summarize these trends. Figure 3 presents the share of GDP going to employee compensation from 1947 through the mid-2010s. Employee

⁴⁴ Piketty, *Capital*

⁴⁵ Mayer, *Dark Money*

⁴⁶ Tax Policy Center, "What is carried interest, and how should it be taxed?"

<http://www.taxpolicycenter.org/briefing-book/what-carried-interest-and-how-should-it-be-taxed>. Accessed October 11, 2017. For a defense of the current practice, see Steven B. Blinsky, "The Carried Interest Loophole? What Loophole?" *New York Times*, By STEVEN B. KLINSKY JULY 15, 2016.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/16/business/dealbook/the-carried-interest-loophole-what-loophole.html>.

⁴⁷ Mayer, *Dark Money*

⁴⁸ Jeff Spross, "The Giant Corporate Money Hose to Nowhere," *The Week*, November 9, 2015.

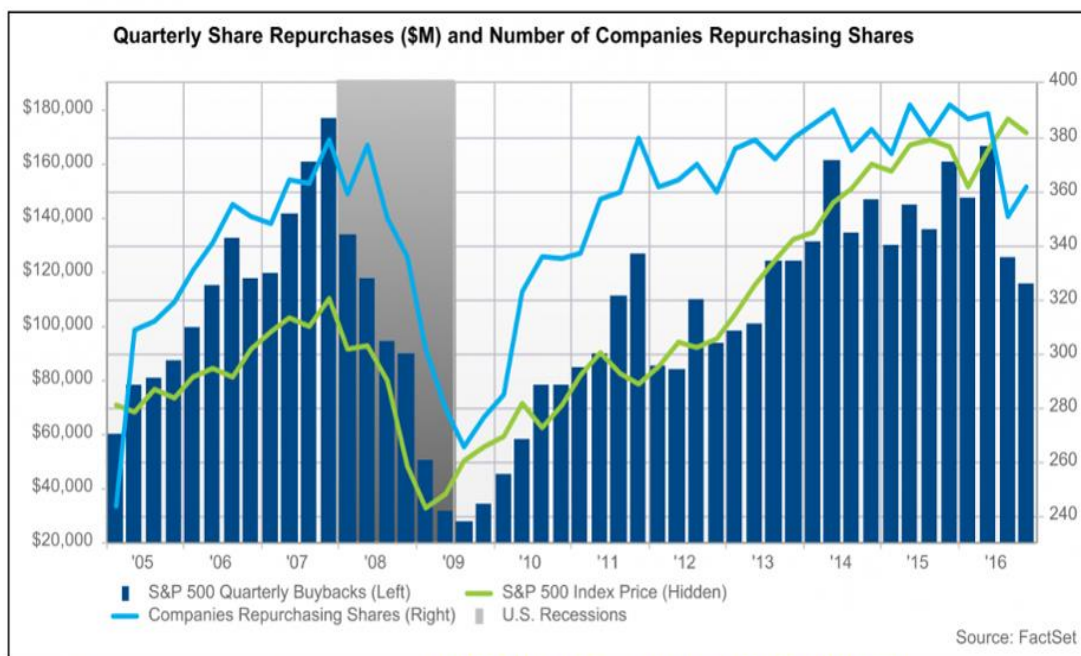
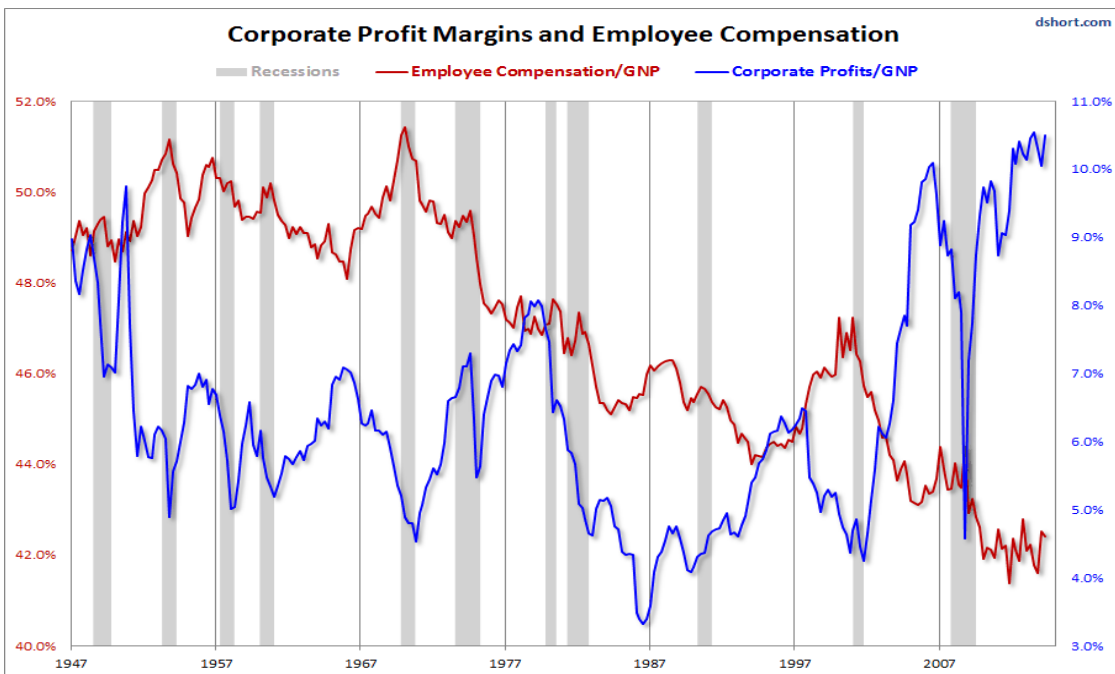
<http://theweek.com/articles/587462/giant-corporate-money-hose-nowhere>; Rana Foroohar, *Makers and Takers: The Rise of Finance and the Fall of American Business*, (New York: Crown Business, 2016).

compensation as a percentage of GDP has steadily declined, even as corporate profits rise.⁴⁹ CEO compensation, compared to average workers' pay, has steadily risen.⁵⁰ The second chart indicates the extent of repurchasing of company stock with corporate profits. In recent years this has become a very common practice, boosting the values of stocks and the compensation that executives receive in stock options.

For the last several decades the median family income has grown very little. Those without a college degree, and particularly men, have experienced gradual declines in their wages. This has consequences for their savings, pensions, and health. These workers are seeking a sense of what might improve their situation. They are presented with two narratives of why this is happening. One is pro-business and blames government policies for limiting growth. The other argues that the crucial matters are the decisions business makes about where to locate activity, the political actions they take to constrain rewards going to workers and enhance rewards to the wealthy, and the rewards they allocate to business leaders. The former says business will expand if unconstrained, following a supply-side logic. The latter stresses the effects of multiple policies on worker incomes and the effect on the demand side in a consumer driven economy. The former is simple and the latter is not.

⁴⁹ Yves Smith, "Corporate Profit Margins vs. Wages in One Disturbing Chart," Naked Capitalism, November 14, 2014 by Yves Smith . <https://www.nakedcapitalism.com/2014/11/corporate-profit-margins-vs-wages-in-one-disturbing-chart.html>.

⁵⁰ Lawrence Mishel and Alyssa Davis, "Top CEOs Make 300 Times More than Typical Workers Pay Growth Surpasses Stock Gains and Wage Growth of Top 0.1 Percent," Economic Policy Institute, June 21, 2015. <http://www.epi.org/publication/top-ceos-make-300-times-more-than-workers-pay-growth-surpasses-market-gains-and-the-rest-of-the-0-1-percent/>.



"Buyback Quarterly" is one part of three reports ("[Dividend Quarterly](#)" and "[Cash & Investments Quarterly](#)") analyzing cash and discretionary spending within the S&P 500.

Embracing a Narrative and Trump

Voters react to narratives based on their predispositions, their information sources, and the logic of arguments presented to them. The combination of these made a substantial proportion of the electorate receptive to Donald Trump. Republicans are inclined to see America as facing declining economic fortunes⁵¹ and eroding cultural values.⁵² They see immigrants as taking jobs and changing the culture.⁵³ There was a strong sense of pessimism about the future among many voters, and particularly conservative Republicans.⁵⁴

Given these reactions, what policies might help change the direction of the nation? Turning to government was not an option for many. Trust in government has declined steadily since the 1970s.⁵⁵ Republicans in particular are not positive about government as a solution to these problems. They see Congress and financial institutions as having a negative effects on the economy.⁵⁶ They have grown steadily distrustful of political leaders in recent years.⁵⁷ A

⁵¹ PEW Research Center, "The Lost Decade of the Middle Class: Fewer, Poorer, Gloomier," August 22, 2012.

<http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2012/08/22/the-lost-decade-of-the-middle-class/>; Michael Tesler, "A newly released poll shows the populist power of Donald Trump," Money Cage, *Washington Post*, January 27, 2016. https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2016/01/27/a-newly-released-poll-shows-the-populist-power-of-donald-trump/?tid=a_inl&utm_term=.a26713c1f5fa.

⁵² Daniel Cox, Rachel Lienesch, Robert P. Jones, "Beyond Economics: Fears of Cultural Displacement Pushed the White Working Class to Trump | PRRI/The Atlantic Report, May 9, 2017. <https://www.prrri.org/research/white-working-class-attitudes-economy-trade-immigration-election-donald-trump/>; Stanley Greenberg, "The Democrats' 'Working-Class Problem,'" *The American Prospect*, June 1, 2017.

<http://prospect.org/article/democrats%E2%80%99%E2%80%98working-class-problem%E2%80%99>.

⁵³ PEW Research Center, "Low Approval of Trump's Transition but Outlook for His Presidency Improves," December 8, 2016. <http://www.people-press.org/2016/12/08/3-political-values-government-regulation-environment-immigration-race-views-of-islam/>; and, PEW Research Center, *The Partisan Divide on Political Values Grows Even Wider*, October 5, 2017. <http://www.people-press.org/2017/10/05/1-partisan-divides-over-political-values-widen/>.

⁵⁴ Elizabeth Drew, "The New Politics of Frustration," *NYR Daily*, January 14, 2016.

http://www.nybooks.com/daily/2016/01/14/iowa-sanders-trump-politics-frustration/?utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=NYR%20Joy%20Williams%20Spotlight%20Trump&utm_content=NYR%20Joy%20Williams%20Spotlight%20Trump+CID_b02f60ed5d1cd7c4ece6e11a7a028957&utm_source=Newsletter&utm_term=The%20New%20Politics%20of%20Frustration

⁵⁵ Joy Wilke and Frank Newport, "Fewer Americans Than Ever Trust Gov't to Handle Problems," Gallup, September 13, 2013, http://www.gallup.com/poll/164393/fewer-americans-ever-trust-gov-handle-problems.aspx?g_source=trust%20in%20government&g_medium=search&g_campaign=titles; PEW Research Center, Public Trust in Government Remains Near Historic Lows as Partisan Attitudes Shift May 3, 2017. <http://www.people-press.org/2017/05/03/public-trust-in-government-remains-near-historic-lows-as-partisan-attitudes-shift/>.

⁵⁶ PEW Research Center, "The Lost Decade of the Middle Class: Fewer, Poorer, Gloomier," August 22, 2012. <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2012/08/22/the-lost-decade-of-the-middle-class/>.

substantial percentage of the electorate says they do not trust government data, such as the unemployment rate.⁵⁸ They don't believe "their side" is getting fair treatment in political debates.⁵⁹

Donald Trump's argument fit well with this Republican electorate. He criticized government elites and focused on economic and cultural decline.⁶⁰ America was once great, no longer was, but could be made great again. He presented himself as representing a movement to unseat a corrupt political establishment that was selling out American workers. He would fix things by "draining the swamp." Some took this to mean he would reduce business influence, but he meant the influence of government elites. He was a populist, but with a twist. Populism often means an attack on corporate elites and wealth, but his attack was upon government elites, saying they were faring well, while harming workers.⁶¹ He was a wealthy businessman and knew how to create economic growth. Trump would cut taxes and regulations and the economy would flourish, providing more good paying jobs.⁶² It is no surprise that there were endless essays about populism. His language suggested that he was.

⁵⁷ Jeffrey M. Jones, "Americans' Trust in Political Leaders, Public at New Lows," Gallup, September 21, 2016, http://www.gallup.com/poll/195716/americans-trust-political-leaders-public-new-lows.aspx?g_source=Politics&g_medium=newsfeed&g_campaign=tiles.

⁵⁸ Catherine Rampell, "When the facts don't matter, how can democracy survive?" *Washington Post*, October 17, 2016. https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/when-the-facts-dont-matter-how-can-democracy-survive/2016/10/17/560ff302-94a5-11e6-9b7c-57290af48a49_story.html?utm_term=.55a6b914bf66&wpisrc=nl_opinions&wpm=1.

⁵⁹ Hannah Fingerhut, "In politics, most Americans feel they're on the losing side," Pew Research Center, November 25, 2015. <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/11/25/winners-and-losers-in-politics/>.

⁶⁰ Norman J. Ornstein and Thomas Mann, "The Republicans waged a 3-decade war on government. They got Trump," *Vox*, July 18, 2016. <http://www.aei.org/publication/the-republicans-waged-a-3-decade-war-on-government-they-got-trump/>.

⁶¹ Guy Molyneux, "A Tale of Two Populisms: The elite the white working class loathes is politicians," *American Prospect*, June 1, 2017. <http://prospect.org/article/tale-two-populisms>; As expressed in one essay: "Our base has grown increasingly exasperated with Washington Republicans who, despite historic victories in the midterm elections of 2010 and 2014, seem incapable of reversing President Obama's legislative agenda or asserting themselves in the country's foreign policy debates." Nicole Wallacejan, "Sarah Palin, Rage Whisperer," *New York Times*, January 25, 2016. <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/26/opinion/sarah-palin-rage-whisperer.html?smprod=nytcore-iphone&smid=nytcore-iphone-share..>

⁶² See the closing ad for the Trump campaign, "Argument for America," <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vST61W4bGm8&app=desktop>, accessed October 20, 2017

He added to these arguments two crucial appeals. He embraced the religious right and reassured the culturally conservative that he would pursue policies to restore traditional mores. At one point he suggested that women having an abortion should be punished somehow. These Republican doubts about government have been relentlessly reinforced by a growing conservative media that presents an image of America in decline⁶³ and sees government as both ineffective and detrimental to economic growth.⁶⁴ Conservatives rely on conservative news outlets such as FOX, which consistently presents the narrative that free-markets work best and that government policies and regulations restrain growth.⁶⁵ Think tanks funded by conservatives present studies that support this narrative.⁶⁶

These conditions make the anti-government narrative appealing to conservatives. It fits with their instinctive reactions. Perhaps just as important, it seems logical and simple. Business is limited because government takes its resources and restricts its ability to grow. Government is corrupt, with politicians taking campaign funds from business and then enacting policies that benefit elites and not workers. The alternative narrative of the need for a mixed economy with government setting guidelines is much more complex and involves multiple policy enactments, somewhat obscure business decisions, and the growing effects of globalization and international trade. The argument that the problem is government fits with conservative dispositions.

⁶³ Rick Perlstein, "The Long Con: Mail-order Conservatism," *The Baffler*, No 21, November, 2012. <https://thebaffler.com/salvos/the-long-con>. As stated by one commentator: "the conservative movement spent decades building up an entire sector of the economy dedicated to scaring and lying to older white men. For millions of members of that demographic, this parallel media dedicated to lying to them has totally supplanted the "mainstream" media." Alex Pareene, "The Long, Lucrative Right-wing Grift Is Blowing Up in the World's Face," *Splinter*, April 5, 2017. http://splinternews.com/the-long-lucrative-right-wing-grift-is-blowing-up-in-t-1793944216?utm_source=fusion_newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=2017-04-05.

⁶⁴ Nicole Hemmer, *Messengers of the Right: Conservative Media and the Transformation of American Politics*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016); Geoffrey Nunberg, *Talking Right*, (New York: Public Affairs, 2016); Bret Stephens, "Roger Ailes: The Man Who Wrecked Conservatism," *New York Times*, MAY 19, 2017. AY 19, 2017. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/19/opinion/roger-ailes-fox-news-wrecked-conservatism.html?r=1>.

⁶⁵ PEW Research Center, "Political Polarization and Media Habits," October 21, 2014. <http://www.journalism.org/2014/10/21/political-polarization-media-habits/>.

⁶⁶ Mayer, *Dark Money*.

Trump's Style

A persistent criticism of Trump involves his style. He projected a blunt and crude (demagogic and bombastic to his critics) style that connected well with alienated voters.

Conservative voters saw elites that were not preserving the economy or values. That perception creates a state of mind about politicians. David Frum expresses it well.

The angriest and most pessimistic people in America are the people we used to call Middle Americans. You can measure their pessimism in polls that ask about their expectations for their lives—and for those of their children. On both counts, whites without a college degree express the bleakest view. You can see the effects of their despair in the new statistics describing horrifying rates of suicide and substance-abuse fatality among this same group, in middle age.

White Middle Americans express heavy mistrust of every institution in American society: not only government, but corporations, unions, even the political party they typically vote for—the Republican Party of Romney, Ryan, and McConnell, which they despise as a sad crew of weaklings and sellouts. They are *pissed off*. And when Donald Trump came along, they were the people who told the pollsters, “That’s my guy.”⁶⁷

As another student of the Republican electorate put it:

Scratch a Trump supporter, and you’re likely to find someone deeply pessimistic about America and its future. Few believe that he will be able to bring back the good times (however they define them) because they’re convinced that the system is rigged: The “deep state” is too entrenched, the demographic tide too advanced and the global elite too powerful to allow real change. Still, they appreciate President Trump for fighting the fight, especially when it involves going against the wishes of his own party and the customary norms of presidential behavior.⁶⁸

⁶⁷ David Frum, “The Great Republican Revolt,” *The Atlantic*, January / February, 2016.

<http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/01/the-great-republican-revolt/419118/>; and, Gary Wills, “The Triumph of the Hard Right,” *NYR Daily*, February 11, 2016. http://www.nybooks.com/articles/2016/02/11/ej-dionne-triumph-of-the-hard-right/?utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=NYR%20Ta-Nehisi%20Coates%20TS%20Eliot%20why%20the%20hard%20right%20wins&utm_content=NYR%20Ta-Nehisi%20Coates%20TS%20Eliot%20why%20the%20hard%20right%20wins+CID_ebc920472fe94c5be79e465a9c6fd225&utm_source=Newsletter&utm_term=Why%20the%20Hard%20Right%20Wins.

⁶⁸ Geoffrey Kabaservice, “The Great Performance of Our Failing President,” *New York Times*, June 9, 2017. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/09/opinion/great-performance-of-donald-trump-our-failing-president.html?action=click&pgtype=Homepage&clickSource=story-heading&module=opinion-c-col-left-region®ion=opinion-c-col-left-region&WT.nav=opinion-c-col-left-region>.

While critics of Trump were appalled at his behavior and language, his supporters found someone, unlikely as it might seem, who expressed their dislike of elites. As David Brooks said, he was “the Abbie Hoffman of the right,” mocking propriety and conventional norms.⁶⁹ His behavior was an asset to some, not a detriment. To ideological conservatives, his behavior was to be tolerated if he would deliver on deregulation, tax cuts, and imposing socially conservative norms. But to those angry about changes in America, his style was a positive.

The Trump Coalition

Donald Trump’s electoral coalition was a mix of economic and social conservatives and those responding to his stances or immediate situations.⁷⁰ Traditional conservatives were willing to accept his flaws as long as he stood for limited government, lower taxes, and deregulation. Their acceptance was made easier by the rising tribalism and dislike of the other party.⁷¹ His appeals to the religious right brought in that constituency, and his attacks on illegal immigrants attracted those seeing immigrants as detrimental to American society.

⁶⁹ Susan Chirajune, “Who Likes Trump’s Tweets and Why,” *New York Times*, June 29, 2017. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/29/opinion/who-likes-trumps-tweets-and-why.html?action=click&pgtype=Homepage&clickSource=story-heading&module=opinion-c-col-left-region®ion=opinion-c-col-left-region&WT.nav=opinion-c-col-left-region>; David Brooks, “The Abbie Hoffman of the Right: Donald Trump,” *New York Times*, September 26, 2017. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/26/opinion/abbie-hoffman-donald-trump.html?action=click&pgtype=Homepage&clickSource=story-heading&module=opinion-c-col-left-region®ion=opinion-c-col-left-region&WT.nav=opinion-c-col-left-region&r=0>.

⁷⁰ Emily Ekins, “The Five Types of Trump Voters: Who They Are and What They Believe,” *Voter Study Group*, June, 2017. Nicholas Carnes and Noam Lupu, “It’s time to bust the myth: Most Trump voters were not working class,” *Washington Post*, June 5, 2016. https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2017/06/05/its-time-to-bust-the-myth-most-trump-voters-were-not-working-class/?utm_term=.3181a9682806&wpisrc=nl_politics&wpm=1.

⁷¹ Alan I. Abramowitz and Steven Webster, “The Rise of Negative Partisanship and the Nationalization of U.S. Elections in the 21st Century,” *Electoral Studies*, Vol. 41, (March, 2016), 12-22.

Despite all the discussion of his white working class base, some caution is important about that. Whites without a college degree have been voting Republican for decades.⁷² Those without a college degree or with a high school or less degree have voted Democratic in only 4 of the last 17 presidential elections (Figure 5). There has been a gradual decline over 50 years in their difference from those with a college degree, and 2016 accentuates this trend, but it is not new that whites are voting Republican. What is different is that in 2012 - 2016 those worse off economically voted against the exiting administration's party more than in prior years (Figure 6).

Trump's coalition is a combination of conservative Republicans, rural residents who feel left behind and think government supports the undeserving,⁷³ those struggling and taking a gamble that he will improve the economy. Many were those who voted for Obama but found no improvement in their lives and decided to give Trump a chance.⁷⁴ Others were alienated from a Democratic Party that they saw as dominated by urban elites out of touch with mainstream

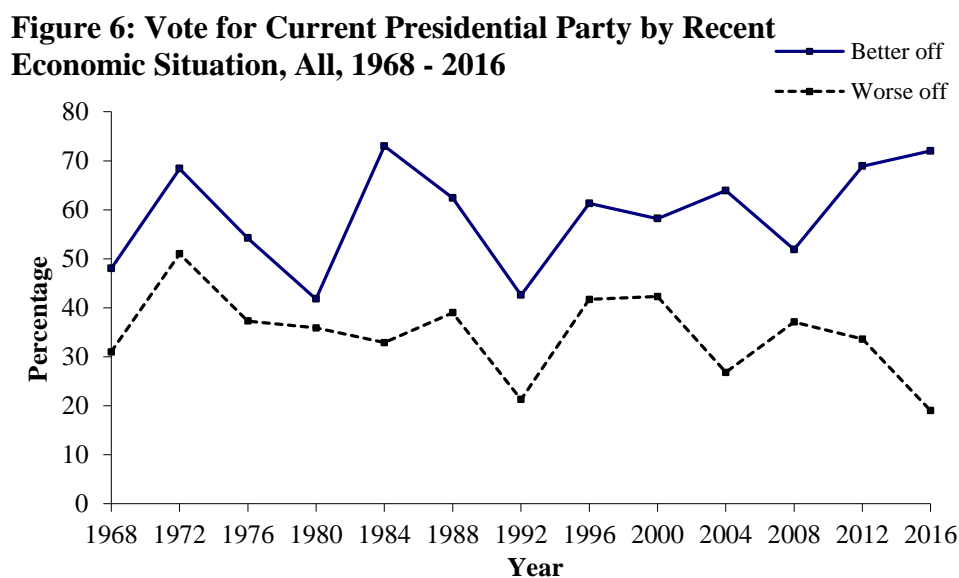
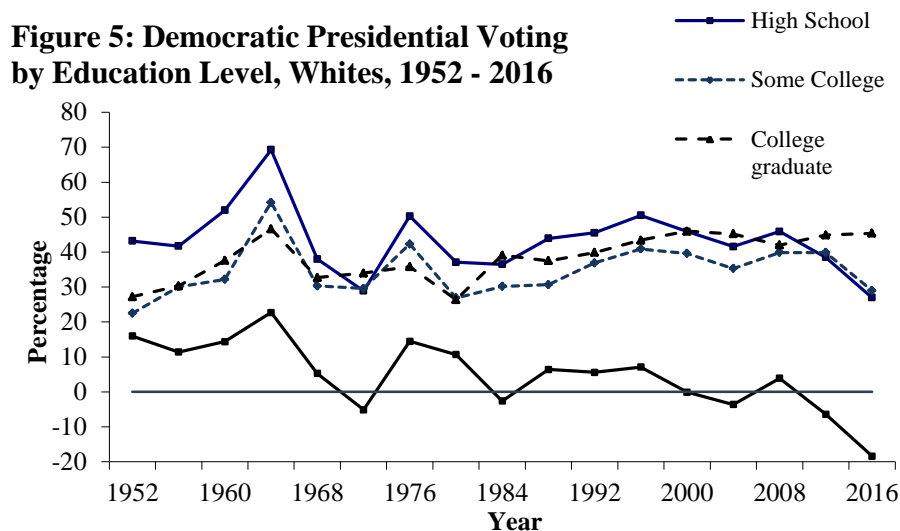
⁷² Jeffrey M. Stonecash, The Puzzle of Class in Presidential Voting," *The Forum*, Vol. 15, No. 1 (April, 2017). 29-49. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1515/for-2017-0003>.

⁷³ Arlie R. Hochschild, *Strangers in Their Own Land*, (New York: The New Press, 2016); Katherine J. Kramer, *The Politics of Resentment*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press 2016); Jose A. DelReal and Scott Clement, Rural Divide, Rural divide *Washington Post*, June 17, 2017.

https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2017/national/rural-america/?utm_term=.e8b06bb60480&wpisrc=nl_evening&wpmm=1.

⁷⁴ John Sides and Michael Tesler, "How political science helps explain the rise of Trump (part 3): It's the economy, stupid," *Washington Post*, Monkey Cage, March 4, 2016. https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2016/03/04/how-political-science-helps-explain-the-rise-of-trump-part-3-its-the-economy-stupid/?utm_term=.12b25cede595; and Nate Cohen, "How the Obama Coalition Crumbled, Leaving an Opening for Trump," *New York Times*, December 23, 2016. <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/23/upshot/how-the-obama-coalition-crumbled-leaving-an-opening-for-trump.html?action=click&contentCollection=The%20Upshot&module=RelatedCoverage®ion=Marginalia&pgtype=article>; Geoffrey Skelley, "Just How Many Obama 2012-Trump 2016 Voters Were There? Sabato's Crystal Ball, June 1, 2017. <http://www.centerforpolitics.org/crystalball/articles/just-how-many-obama-2012-trump-2016-voters-were-there/>; Greg Sargent, "Why did Trump win? New research by Democrats offers a worrisome answer," *Washington Post*, May 1, 2017. https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/plum-line/wp/2017/05/01/why-did-trump-win-new-research-by-democrats-offers-a-worrisome-answer/?utm_term=.3ed939fd1802&wpisrc=nl_p1most-partner-1&wpmm=1The poll results are presented in Priorities USA, *Post-Election Research: Persuadable and Drop-off Voters*. [https://www.washingtonpost.com/r/2010-2019/WashingtonPost/2017/05/01/Editorial-Opinion/Graphics/Post-election Research Deck.pdf?tid=a_inl](https://www.washingtonpost.com/r/2010-2019/WashingtonPost/2017/05/01/Editorial-Opinion/Graphics/Post-election%20Research%20Deck.pdf?tid=a_inl).

values.⁷⁵ It is not an ideologically unified coalition. To label it as comprising a single type misses its complexity.



Confirming the Embrace of the Anti-Government Free-Market Narrative

⁷⁵ Thomas B. Edsall, "Has the Democratic Party Gotten Too Rich for Its Own Good?" *New York Times*, June 1, 2017. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/01/opinion/democratic-party-rich-thomas-edsall.html?action=click&pgtype=Homepage&clickSource=story-heading&module=opinion-c-col-left-region®ion=opinion-c-col-left-region&WT.nav=opinion-c-col-left-region&r=1>.

Donald Trump presented himself as a populist, who would speak for American workers. In reality, he is following the path of a classic trickle-down economic conservative, while catering to the religious rights and those angry about immigrants. The latter two stances are not alien to parts of the Republican Party. His unique position is that he expresses doubts about the specifics of trade rules, which troubles Republican economic elites. Whether that is a stance that will result in any significant clashes with Republicans remains to be seen.

With 10 months of actions to review, it is clear that his policies and those proposed by Republicans in Congress consist of catering to economic elites and corporations, limits on policies that would affect workers, and policies that will appeal to social conservatives. Trump and the Republican Party are pursuing the classic Republican narrative that the problem is government. Hindrances to business must be removed, the rights of workers and consumers must be constrained, and more must be done to respond to religious conservatives. To list just some of the policies proposed, pursued, or enacted as of November 1, 2017.

Tax Policy

- A proposed tax plan that will cut rates on the most affluent, eliminate the Alternative Minimum Tax (AMT), eliminate the estate tax, and allow pass-through income to be taxed at a lowered rate of 25 percent.

*Regulatory Policy*⁷⁶

- Repeal of numerous environmental policies that prevent dangerous chemicals from being used or dumped into streams that flow into water supplies. These are presented as enhancing freedom.⁷⁷
- Proposed postponement of regulation that would not allow companies to classify anyone making more than 28,500 as management and ineligible for overtime. The transition salary would be moved to \$48,000, allowing those making less to receive overtime.

⁷⁶ For a list of regulations repealed or suspended, see: [Juliet Eilperin and Damian Paletta](#), “Trump administration cancels hundreds of Obama-era regulations,” *Washington Post*, July 20, 2017; and, Brookings Institution, “Tracking deregulation in the Trump era,” October 20, 2017. <https://www.brookings.edu/interactives/tracking-deregulation-in-the-trump-era/>. https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/economy/trump-administration-cancels-hundreds-of-obama-era-regulations/2017/07/20/55f501cc-6d68-11e7-96ab-5f38140b38cc_story.html?utm_term=.fe67e8ed312c.

⁷⁷ Scott Pruitt speech at CPAC, February 25, 2017. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QxHk4vM0qLY>.

- Repeal requirement that finance advisors put client interests first
- Passage of legislation to constrain the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau in general and to repeal a rule allows consumers to join class action lawsuits versus banks.⁷⁸
- Repeal of Dodd-Frank which limits the financial practices that Wall Street firms can engage in.
- Appointment of numerous industry lobbyists as policy-makers in federal agencies.⁷⁹

Worker Protections

- Taking the side of employers in court cases about whether employers can force workers to sign contracts, as a condition of employment, that prohibit workers from joining class action suits. Workers must take case to individual arbitration panels.⁸⁰
- Reducing the resources devoted to civil rights enforcement across government agencies.⁸¹

Social Program Policy

- Attempt to repeal the Affordable Care Act and remove approximately 23 million people from health insurance rolls.
- Refusal to pay subsidies to health insurance firms that help keep low income policy costs down.

Social Conservatives Policy

- Remove requirement that health insurance policies must cover contraception.
- Issuance of policy memo by Attorney General Jeff Sessions emphasizing the importance of religious freedom and protection of such views.⁸²

The argument, without using the phrase, is that trickle-down economics will work. In presenting the tax cut proposal, President Trump claims that it will boost average incomes by \$4000-5,000 annually. Although Trump was often characterized as a populist, it is classic

⁷⁸ Jessica Silver-Greenberg, "Consumer Bureau Loses Fight to Allow More Class-Action Suits," *New York Times*, October 24, 2017. https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/24/business/senate-vote-wall-street-regulation.html?emc=edit_na_20171024&nl=breaking-news&nid=3647501&ref=headline.

⁷⁹ Danielle Ivory and Robert Faturechi, "The Deep Industry Ties of Trump's Deregulation Teams," *New York Times*, July 11, 2017. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/11/business/the-deep-industry-ties-of-trumps-deregulation-teams.html?r=0>.

⁸⁰ Craig Becker, "The Trump administration has given up on American workers," *Washington Post*, June 29, 2017. https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/the-trump-administration-has-given-up-on-workers-at-the-supreme-court/2017/06/29/c54ca1c8-5cd4-11e7-9b7d-14576dc0f39d_story.html?hpid=hp_no-name_opinion-card-b%3Ahomepage%2Fstory&utm_term=.1a304db17e25.

⁸¹ Jessica Huseman and Annie Waldman, "Trump Administration Quietly Rolls Back Civil Rights Efforts across Federal Government," *Pro Publica*, June 15, 2017. https://www.propublica.org/article/trump-administration-rolls-back-civil-rights-efforts-federal-government?utm_source=pardot&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=dailynewsletter.

⁸² <https://www.justice.gov/opa/press-release/file/1001891/download>.

Republican orthodoxy. He has embraced the Republican narrative.⁸³ He may seem to be opposed to free trade, but his complaint involves the terms of trade deals, not trade.

A Seeming Puzzle

The contrast of the claim by Trump that he is the voice of the forgotten man and the economic policies pursued during the first year suggests a puzzle. His policies appear to be clearly and simply aimed at helping corporations and the very affluent.⁸⁴ There is skepticism among critics on the left and the right that these tax and deregulation policies will produce the economic growth that Republicans are predicting.⁸⁵ Even George Will has been critical:

Trump's energy, unleavened by intellect and untethered to principle, serves only his sovereign instinct to pander to those who adore him as much as he does. Unshakably smitten, they are impervious to the Everest of evidence that he disdains them as a basket of gullibles. He understands that his unremitting coarseness satisfies their unpolitical agenda of smashing crockery, even though his self-indulgent floundering precludes fulfillment of the promises he flippantly made to assuage their sense of being disdained. He gives his gullibles not governance by tantrum, but tantrum as governance.⁸⁶

⁸³ As expressed by E.J. Dionne: "For all the talk about Trump being something other than a Republican, he always falls back on the party's old ideas because he has none of his own beyond promising to build a big wall, stop NFL players from kneeling during the national anthem and fix bad trade deals while offering few details." E.J. Dionne, What Trump did to Kelly shows how far we have fallen

Washington Post, October 23, 2017. https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/what-trump-did-to-kelly-shows-how-far-we-have-fallen/2017/10/22/f3a6832c-b5d5-11e7-be94-fabb0f1e9ffb_story.html?undefined=&utm_term=.32b8b4b39ea2&wpisrc=nl_headlines&wpmm=1.

⁸⁴ Chuck Marr and Chye-Ching Huang, "Trump Tax Plan Includes Major Tax Break For Wealthiest Taxpayers," Center for Budget and Policy Priorities, August 8, 2016. <https://www.cbpp.org/research/federal-tax/trump-tax-plan-includes-major-tax-break-for-wealthiest-taxpayers>; Tax Policy Center, "T17-0227 - Unified Framework; Distribution of Federal Tax Change by Expanded Cash Income Percentile, 2027," September 29, 2017. <http://www.taxpolicycenter.org/model-estimates/unified-framework-september-2017/t17-0227-unified-framework-distribution-federal-tax>.

⁸⁵ Paul Krugman, "Lies, Lies, Lies, Lies, Lies, Lies, Lies, Lies, Lies, Lies," *New York Times*, October 14, 2017. <https://krugman.blogs.nytimes.com/2017/10/14/lies-lies-lies-lies-lies-lies-lies-lies-lies-lies-lies/?action=click&pgtype=Homepage&clickSource=story-heading&module=opinion-c-col-left-region®ion=opinion-c-col-left-region&WT.nav=opinion-c-col-left-region&r=0>; and, Bruce Bartlett, "I helped create the GOP tax myth. Trump is wrong: Tax cuts don't equal growth. The best growth in recent memory came after President Bill Clinton raised taxes in the '90s," *Washington Post*, September 28, 2017. https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/posteverything/wp/2017/09/28/i-helped-create-the-gop-tax-myth-trump-is-wrong-tax-cuts-dont-equal-growth/?utm_term=.61f0e1f679fe.

⁸⁶ George F. Will, Sinister figures lurk around our careless president," *Washington Post*, October 13, 2017. https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/sinister-figures-lurk-around-our-careless-president/2017/10/13/09c9448c-af6e-11e7-be94-fabb0f1e9ffb_story.html?hpid=hp_no-name_opinion-card-d%3Ahomepage%2Fstory&utm_term=.7528c7ccb77a.

The contrast between the campaign promises of being the “voice for the forgotten Americans” and the policies proposed seems stark.⁸⁷ Trump pursues policies that benefit the rich and corporations but claims he is working for the average American, and his base holds.⁸⁸ The seeming puzzle is that Republicans are using government to pass laws likely to create more inequality while continually telling workers that the reason their wages are not rising is government. Why does such a seemingly large contrast exist and will Trump and Republicans ultimately succeed in holding their grip on the national government? Is this another example of Thomas Frank’s argument that Republicans are succeeding by feeding the masses conservative social policies while catering to the economic interests of elites?⁸⁹ Is Trump a successful demagogue?⁹⁰

The answer involves ideology and partisanship, the party’s self-interest, and the power of the new media environment. While critics see claims and policies as conflicting, that may not be true within the Republican base. First is the issue of ideology. Republicans do not see a discrepancy between the campaign and the policies they are pursuing. They believe in policies that will boost the private sector. They believe that the answer to diminished economic growth is to free business from taxes and regulation. It was a statement of conviction when Paul Ryan broke the world into makers and takers. Conservative elites believe in the free-market

⁸⁷ Michael Gerson “The issue that is — unfortunately — uniting Americans on the left and the right,” *Washington Post*, October 9, 2017. https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/the-issue-that-is--unfortunately--uniting-americans-on-the-left-and-the-right/2017/10/09/b8cd4a66-ad0a-11e7-be94-fabb0f1e9ffb_story.html?utm_term=.33c221c53dbe.

⁸⁸ Thomas B. Edsall, “Republicans Don’t Feel Your Pain,” *New York Times*, May 11, 2017.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/11/opinion/republican-health-care-bill.html?action=click&pgtype=Homepage&clickSource=story-heading&module=opinion-c-col-right-region®ion=opinion-c-col-right-region&WT.nav=opinion-c-col-right-region&r=0>.

⁸⁹ Thomas Frank, *What’s the Matter with Kansas?*

⁹⁰ Thomas B. Edsall, “Democracy Can Plant the Seeds of Its Own Destruction,” *New York Times*, October 19, 2017. https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/19/opinion/democracy-populism-trump.html?rref=collection%2Fcolumn%2Fthomas-b-edsall&action=click&contentCollection=opinion®ion=stream&module=stream_unit&version=latest&contentPlacement=2&pgtype=collection&r=0.

narrative.⁹¹ Their supporters do also, and they see Democrats as supporting policies that will harm America.⁹² When Trump voters were asked if tax cuts will result in a many jobs and major growth, over 60 percent said yes. Among the general public only about 30 percent agree with that.⁹³ These convictions are reinforced by the rise of negative partisanship. Each side dislikes the other side and believes the policies of the other side are highly detrimental to the future of America.⁹⁴ Believing in “your” party’s arguments is a matter of loyalty and identity.⁹⁵ Republican voters are very unlikely to question the anti-government free market narrative.

The self-interest of the party also plays a significant role in these policies. In recent decades the wealthy have mobilized to try to roll back taxes and government regulations.

⁹¹ As an example, watch the speech of Paul Ryan regarding the value of tax cuts before The Heritage Foundation. Paul Ryan, “The Historic Choice on Tax Reform,” Speech at Heritage Foundation, October 12, 2017. http://www.heritage.org/taxes/event/the-historic-choice-tax-reform?utm_source=THF_Email&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=TheAgenda&mkt_tok=eyJpIjoiWIRKaVl6VTBpV0kxWmpjMSIsInQoiOiJDTjFpbTVnS0JDZXN4UFEySTIQWnhxMHF4NCs2aVwvY0hlWnlFUm90VTBoMDNBZ1ROV3c1QmtkZEJQNFY4aVwvRm8yeXdoSmVGYThneW9hVEdVeXlkQStmVUtSdlwvT1M0S0doRE1acklSeWdWNUVmNm9oXC93YWNaN0V1WVFFa3AxcDUifQ%3D%3D.

⁹² Thomas B. Edsall, “The Party of Lincoln Is Now the Party of Trump,” *New York Times*, October 26, 2017. https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/26/opinion/republicans-trump.html?rref=collection%2Fcolumn%2Fthomas-b-edsall&action=click&contentCollection=opinion®ion=stream&module=stream_unit&version=latest&contentPlacement=1&pgtype=collection.

⁹³ As noted in the article, the 30 percent for the general public includes Trump voters, so the percentage is lower among those not voting for Trump. Philip Bump, “Why cutting corporate tax and raising the deficit might not hurt Trump politically,” *Washington Post*, April 24, 2017. https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/politics/wp/2017/04/24/why-cutting-corporate-tax-and-raising-the-deficit-might-not-hurt-trump-politically/?utm_term=.6de7113b22ad&wpisrc=nl_politics&wpmmm=1. These results are from a Harvard poll of January, 2017. Trump voters were also more likely to believe an individual tax cut will promote many jobs and major growth (59 %) than the general public (35 %). T.H. Chan School of Public Health, Americans’ Views on Domestic Priorities for President Trump’s First 100 Days. <http://www.politico.com/f/?id=00000159-a7dc-dfd8-a5f9-f7df4f460001>; and Nelson D. Schwartz, “Boom or Bust: Stark Partisan Divide on How Consumers View Economy,” *New York Times*, April 8, 2017. https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/08/business/economy/the-picture-of-our-economy-looks-a-lot-like-a-rorschach-test.html?_r=0.

⁹⁴ Abramowitz and Webster, “The Rise of Negative Partisanship and the Nationalization of U.S. Elections in the 21st Century.”

⁹⁵ David Brooks, “When Politics Becomes Your Idol,” *New York Times*, October 30, 2017. https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/30/opinion/when-politics-becomes-your-idol.html?action=click&pgtype=Homepage&clickSource=story-heading&module=opinion-c-col-left-region®ion=opinion-c-col-left-region&WT.nav=opinion-c-col-left-region&_r=0; David French, “Mueller’s Investigation Won’t Shake Trump’s Base,” *New York Times*, October 30, 2017. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/30/opinion/mueller-trump-supporters.html?ribbon-ad-idx=6&rref=opinion&module=Ribbon&version=context®ion=Header&action=click&contentCollection=Opinion&pgtype=article>.

Following the *United Citizens* decision this mobilization accelerated.⁹⁶ The wealthy have raised enormous amounts of money to support multiple efforts to shape the agenda in Washington and state houses. Funding from the wealthy supports a range of think tanks that support experts who provide studies substantiating their claims that free markets will work better. By many accounts threats against sitting incumbents have been made if tax cuts for the affluent are not enacted.⁹⁷ With Republicans having unified control of government in 2017 the expectations and pressures upon Republican congressmen to enact a conservative economic agenda are intense.

The Republican electorate believes in the narrative that fluent government, driven by liberals, is harming economic growth. The wealthy, playing a greater role over time, want policies that restrain government. The combination provides electoral votes and campaign finance support for the party. Republican voters are hearing what they like.⁹⁸

Finally, there is the increasingly impact of the growing conservative media. The growth in conservative media outlets has coincided with a general decline in trust in the media, with the greatest drop occurring among Republicans.⁹⁹ In the mid-1980s there was a very limited conservative media. Rush Limbaugh began his radio show in 1988. FOX news began in 1996. Since the early 1990s there has been an explosion of conservative news outlets and internet-based web outlets providing conservative interpretations of events.¹⁰⁰ FOX is the most watched

⁹⁶ Mayer, *Dark Money*.

⁹⁷ Alex Isenstadt and Gabriel Debenedetti, "Angry GOP donors close their wallets," Politico, October 05, 2017. <http://www.politico.com/story/2017/10/05/republican-donors-trump-mcconnell-anger-243449>.

⁹⁸ George Lakoff, "The Answers to Two Big Questions About Trump and the GOP That Keep Befuddling Progressives: To understand Trump, we must understand that voters don't vote their self-interest; they vote their values," *AlterNet*, July 6, 2017. , <https://www.alternet.org/right-wing/answers-two-big-questions-about-trump-and-gop-keep-befuddling-progressives?akid=15835.234904.kDtepA&rd=1&src=newsletter1079332&t=7>; and, Thomas B. Edsall,

⁹⁹ Rebecca Riffkin, "Americans' Trust in Media Remains at Historical Low," Gallup, September 28, 2015. http://www.gallup.com/poll/185927/americans-trust-media-remains-historical-low.aspx?g_source=trust%20in%20government&g_medium=search&g_campaign=tiles.

¹⁰⁰ Nicole Hemmer, *Messengers on the Right*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016).

and trusted news source for Republicans, and particularly older ones.¹⁰¹ These outlets consistently present the argument that government is a threat¹⁰² and that the problem with the American economy and wages is government. FOX in particular hews to the line that lower taxes and less regulation will spur economic growth. Although numerous critics are skeptical of the narrative that tax cuts and deregulation will spur growth, the narrative of the conservative media is consistent that it will. The arguments of the alternative narrative involving distributional issues are virtually ignored.

Donald Trump has exploited this distrust of the media. He speaks and tweets constantly about “fake news,” contributing to the belief of his supporters that NBC, CBS, ABC, *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* are not presenting the facts. He continually blames the media for creating division in American society.¹⁰³ He gives multiple interviews to various FOX television hosts. These interactions reinforce the conservative message that his policies will work. He cultivates a story that only he can be trusted to tell the truth and it appears to be successful.¹⁰⁴ He asserts that his tax cut policies will increase the average workers’ income by \$4,000-\$7,000 and that flows through the conservative media. He consistently presents his interpretation that his policies are working and that the media will not tell people that.

Issue by issue, department by department, we are giving the people their country back. After decades of a shrinking middle class, open borders and the mass offshoring of American jobs and wealth, this government is working for the citizens of our country

101 Quinnipiac University Poll of March 9, 2015, Rasmussen Reports, “Cable News Viewers Still Turn To Fox First,” January 4, 2017.

http://www.rasmussenreports.com/public_content/politics/general_politics/january_2017/cable_news_viewers_still_turn_to_fox_first.

¹⁰² Charles Sykes, *How The Right Lost Its Mind*, (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2017).

¹⁰³ Mark Landler and Maggie Heberman, “At Rally, Trump Blames Media for Country’s Deepening Divisions,” *Washington Post*, August 22, 2017. https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/22/us/politics/trump-rally-arizona.html?_r=0.

¹⁰⁴ From E.J. Dionne, “Trump’s populism has nothing to do with helping the people who voted for him,” *Washington Post*, April 30, 2017. https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/trumps-populism-has-nothing-to-do-with-helping-the-people-who-voted-for-him/2017/04/30/cb637bac-2c57-11e7-be51-b3fc6ff7faee_story.html?utm_term=.cdad483fb733&wpisrc=nl_opinions&wpmm=1.

and no one else. The same establishment media that concealed these problems — and profited from them — is obviously not going to tell this story. That is why we are taking our message directly to America. At the center of our economic agenda, we've undertaken the most far-reaching effort in history to remove job-killing regulations. The White House is once again the People's House.¹⁰⁵

The ability of Donald Trump to shape the news that reaches his voters should not be underestimated. A poll found that 46 percent of the electorate believe the media makes up stories about Trump.¹⁰⁶ He then tweets that information. Of those who trust FOX, when asked who would protect their interests, 50 percent say Trump and only 20 percent say congressional Republicans.¹⁰⁷ He is able to create a focus and perspective on issues that increase support among his base. In September 2017 he criticized NFL players who did not stand for the national anthem. Within a few weeks Trump supporters reported that their view of the NFL changed from 30 percent unfavorable to over 60 percent unfavorable. Clinton supporters reported no change.¹⁰⁸ His tweets can shape what voters focus on and how they see things.

The combination of an electorate with strong anti-government views, hostility towards Democrats, and consumption of conservative media makes it likely that about 35-40 percent of voters will be receptive to Donald Trump's interpretation of what must be done to help the economy and social practices. The growing role of the wealthy in funding efforts to support the logic of the free-market narrative adds further pressure. The limited consideration of the alternative narrative of what is shaping our economy reinforces the power of the anti-

¹⁰⁵ Donald J. Trump, "President Trump: In my first 100 days, I kept my promise to Americans," *Washington Post*, April 29, 2017. https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/president-trump-in-my-first-100-days-i-kept-my-promise-to-americans/2017/04/29/ad1c9574-2cfd-11e7-a616-d7c8a68c1a66_story.html?utm_term=.ca8686e449d8.

¹⁰⁶ Steven Shepard, "Poll: 46 percent think media make up stories about Trump," *Politico*, October 18, 2017. <https://www.politico.com/story/2017/10/18/trump-media-fake-news-poll-243884>.

¹⁰⁷ Philip Bump, "Fox News fans see Trump much differently than the country on the whole," *Washington Post*, June 29, 2017. https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/politics/wp/2017/06/29/fox-news-fans-see-trump-much-differently-than-the-country-on-the-whole/?utm_term=.2b0f878e4bfd.

¹⁰⁸ Kevin Quealy, "The N.F.L. Is Now One of the Most Divisive Brands in the U.S.," *New York Times*, October 11, 2017. <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/10/11/upshot/trump-nfl-polarization.html?hp&action=click&pgtype=Homepage&clickSource=story-heading&module=second-column-region®ion=top-news&WT.nav=top-news>.

government, free-market narrative. The public is presented with many critiques of specific aspects of the free-market logic, but there is little presentation, other than in scholarly books, of a systematic interpretation of the practices and policies creating inequality and limited wage gains.¹⁰⁹

Trump and Republican Prospects

The free-market narrative is deeply embedded in the Republican electorate. It is reiterated daily in the conservative media and by Republican elites. It provides an explanation for stagnant wages and hope for change. It is simple to understand. The Democrats have critiques but have struggled to articulate a plan that will boost economic growth. Donald Trump has made no progress in raising his job approval ratings during the first year.¹¹⁰ He appears to have few specific policy plans and leans heavily on Republicans in Congress for legislative ideas. He struggles to contribute effectively to enacting legislation.¹¹¹ He has, however, mastered the anti-government free-market narrative and repeats it frequently.¹¹² He also inherited an economy growing steadily.

It might be presumed that the credibility of this argument might be undermined if the economy falters and a recession occurs. The difficulty with that hope (for Democrats) is that a faltering economy provides further support for the importance of reducing taxes and easing regulations. There are numerous studies suggesting that tax cuts have a limited effect on

¹⁰⁹ Hacker and Pierson, *American Amnesia*.

¹¹⁰ Gary C. Jacobson, "Donald Trump, the Public and Congress: The First 7 Months," *The Forum*, <https://doi.org/10.1515/for-2017-0034>.

¹¹¹ George C. Edwards III, "No Deal: Donald Trump's Leadership of Congress," *The Forum*, Vol. 15, No. 3, 451-497. <https://doi.org/10.1515/for-2017-0031>.

¹¹² In an October 31, 2017 fund-raising email he states in response to a *Time* magazine story: "TIME Magazine thinks this is an *ATTACK* against me? 'How Trump's cabinet is dismantling government as we know it.' Good! The federal government is a broken, lobbyist-infested cesspool of corruption that abuses its power, cooks deals for crooked politicians, and despises hardworking Americans. America didn't vote for the same old thing. You voted for a wrecking ball to obliterate the status quo and rebuild a new government OF, FOR, and BY the PEOPLE!"

economic growth, but as even Krugman notes, conservatives ignore that evidence and return with the same arguments again and again over time.¹¹³ That is unlikely to change. It may take a very long time to convince voters that there is a legitimate alternative.

¹¹³ Paul Krugman, "Tax Cut Fraudulence: The Usual Suspects," *New York Times*. October 29, 2017. https://krugman.blogs.nytimes.com/2017/10/29/tax-cut-fraudulence-the-usual-suspects/?_r=0.