



# BEYOND TRUMP: WHAT'S UNRAVELLING AMERICA AND WHAT WE CAN DO ABOUT IT

**SIMON GREER**

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*Labor ideas for a better Australia*

## ***Beyond Trump: what's unravelling America and what we can do about it***

In the more than fourteen months since Donald Trump's election, there has been no shortage of post-mortems on what went right and what went wrong. In many liberal circles there is despair and judgement that the only thing worse than Trump's "manipulative tactics" are the "gullible racists" he manipulated. This point of view is inherently disrespectful of working-class conservatives who vote "against their own self-interest," belong in a "basket of deplorables" and by now must be experiencing "buyer's remorse" about their choice to vote for Trump. Yet, far too little has been done by way of soul searching and even less has been done in terms of an actual change in approach on the progressive side of the aisle. This paper is part of an ongoing investigation to understand the millions of people who don't identify as progressives, who want to make the world a better place and are too quickly misunderstood by pundits, strategists and the political elite. The exploration that led to the paper has focused on a simple approach. The author has sought to learn from individuals, leaders and communities who see the world "differently" and are often viewed as "the other side." In each case the promise for the engagement was to: 1) take seriously the things they hold dear; 2) not try to change them; 3) be curious about why they think the way they do; and, 4) to seek to identify a set of "common good" values, policies and a worldview that we could work on together. Based on the belief that we all want a future where our kids are secure, opportunity is more widespread and the unique American experiment can flourish, Greer examines what is going on in America today and tries to identify what values, attitudes and policies have come to define who is and is not in the progressive movement and then imagine what can be done to build something new.

### ***About the author***

Simon Greer has been involved in social change work for the past twenty five years. Considered to be a pioneer in the non-profit world, he has three times served in a CEO role in "turnaround" undertakings where the organisations' missions were as noble as ever but their impact and approach needed an overhaul. Today, as the founder of Cambridge Heath Ventures, he works with private sector companies, purpose driven organisations, unions and others to help them overcome their most pressing challenges. Simon is a JCRC advisory board member.

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# Preface

The election of the Republican President Donald Trump has produced a raft of analysis, soul-searching and condemnation, both within the United States and in countries such as Australia, the home of the John Curtin Research Centre. As Simon Greer, the author of our centre's first discussion paper, argues, many pundits continue to misunderstand the root causes of Trumpism, the malaise of the Democratic Party and the way forward. In making the case for a renewed politics of the common good which tackles hard questions around America's economic trajectory and debates around religion, race and class, Greer touches on concerns familiar to antipodean activists as well as for British and European social democrats grappling with many of the same challenges. We are not all progressives now and millions of working people, unionists or otherwise, people who rely upon centre-left and Labor parties, have no interest in identifying as progressive. It is so-called progressives who need to listen-up, learn, engage and change their political outlook, not vice versa. Locally, this is the case even if our local would-be Trumpists have been unable or indeed unwilling to grasp the economic appeal of his disruptive politics, instead falling back on a divisive right-wing populism which fails to engage working people's basic needs and aspirations. I trust Simon's excellent paper will provoke robust, considered debate, in the United States, Australia and elsewhere.



Dr Nick Dyrenfurth  
Executive Director,  
John Curtin Research Centre

# Introduction

For three years now, I have been in the field working with politically conservative union members across the United States; corrections officers in Michigan; hundreds of ultra-orthodox, Mizrahi and other peripheral community leaders in Israel; investors; business leaders; and political party reformers from a range of countries. This work is part of an ongoing investigation to understand the millions of people who don't identify as progressives, who want to make the world a better place and are too quickly misunderstood by pundits, strategists and the political elite. My aim in learning from these individuals, leaders and communities is to identify a set of "common good" values, policies and a worldview that would guide our nation toward a future where our kids are secure, opportunity is more widespread and the unique American experiment can flourish. I was at this long before the 2016 election and I am well aware that in the more than fourteen months since Donald Trump's election, there has been no shortage of post-mortems on what went right and what went wrong. It's true that plenty has been said about what the Clinton campaign did wrong (how did she never go to a union hall in Michigan?) and plenty has been said about the ugliness of the Trump campaign (remember when the campaign rolled out a closing campaign ad with anti-Semitic undertones that relied on the use of the term "globalists" to attack Hillary Clinton, George Soros (Jewish financier), Janet Yellen (Jewish Fed Chair) and Lloyd Blankfein (Jewish Goldman Sachs CEO)?). We have heard from many liberals that the only thing worse than Trump's "manipulative tactics" are the "gullible racists" he manipulated. Sadly, this has been a topic of a fair amount of discussion in liberal circles where, once again, there is plenty of judgement about those working-class conservatives who vote "against their own self-interest," belong in a "basket of deplorables" and by now must be experiencing "buyer's remorse" about their choice to vote for Trump. Yet, despite lots of punditry and commentary, far too little has been done by way of soul searching and even less has been done in terms of an actual change in approach. What follows in this paper is an effort to move beyond the numbers on Election Day and ask the question: why did the numbers play out this way? By examining what is going on in America today, we can try to identify what values, attitudes and policies have come to define who is and is not in the progressive movement. Only then can we imagine what can be done to inspire us and bind us together as we build something new.

# Part One

## The 2016 Election and the Trump Voters

There were about 230 million Americans eligible to vote on Election Day in 2016. 170 million either didn't vote or didn't vote for Trump. This means that nearly 75 percent of American voters who could cast a vote for president didn't vote for the man who was elected President. That is a big number, especially in such an extensively covered and polarizing election. Based on internal union polling and my first-hand experiences, we can estimate the following of the 60 million or so Americans who did vote for Trump:

1. No more than (and likely significantly less than) 10 percent of them are white nationalists who were truly excited about some of the most extreme ideas that this candidate allegedly stood for.
2. Separate from that small but vocal group, probably 50 percent of those 60 million voters are die-hard Republicans who would be hard-pressed to vote for a Democrat, regardless of the candidate.
3. This leaves the forty percent of voters who are more independent than they are strictly party-loyal. Some of them are in unions. Some of them voted for Obama in 2008. A significant number were, and are, hungry for a candidate who speaks to their values, takes seriously the things that matter to them and promotes a policy agenda that might really make a difference for them and their families.

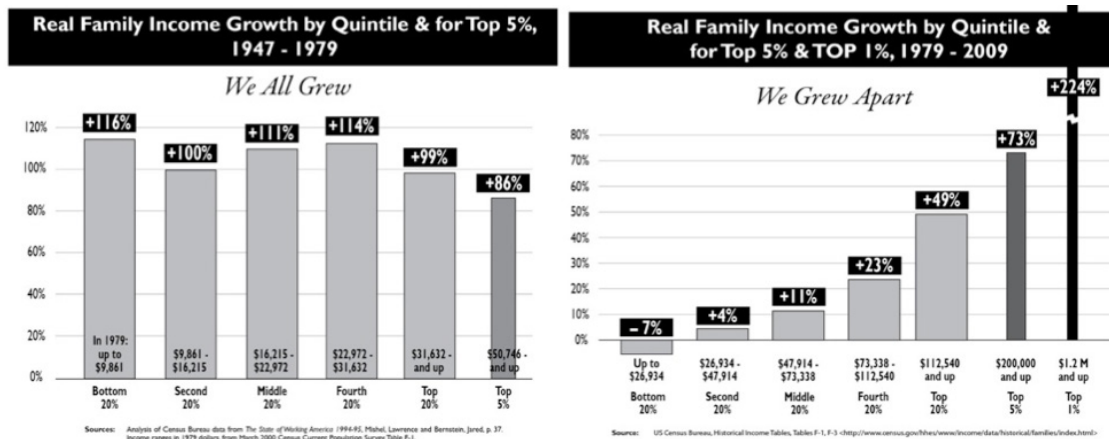
To the surprise of many pundits, pollsters and other experts, these three groups coalesced awkwardly, yet in some instances passionately, around Trump the candidate. Some of the Trump supporters that I met went to the polls holding their nose and felt they were picking the lesser of two evils. A large number of them had wanted the "change" candidate in 2008 and, still feeling unsatisfied, were going for an even more extreme version of "change." Some believed that "draining the swamp", being angry about our trade deals and rebuilding our infrastructure were important to do and wouldn't be done by insiders from either party.

Of course, the dynamics that led to the tornado of support for Trump have been decades in the making, but it is still my hope that we can look at the current picture to try to see more clearly why things are the way they are and what we can do about it. And so, the question is: how can we find a way to galvanize the 182 million super majority of Americans (Clinton voters, non-voters and at least half of the movable Trump voters) around a politics that can move our country forward. Together we must grow our common good values without watering down our social change agenda in a naïve attempt to "appeal to moderates" or "whitewashing racial justice commitments to attract centrist voters". Some will say I'm naïve and hopelessly pursuing a holy grail. Others will say I'm just talking about better messaging and framing, unwilling to confront how badly we need to listen and learn so we might re-assess much deeper things like core values, first principles and worldview. Many elite supporters of the progressive movement will conveniently ignore the class benefits they reap by building a version of the "progressive" coalition that focuses on individual rights and identity issues without a radical populist bent at its core. They will reject many of the arguments made in the following pages so they can avoid building relationships with white working-class families who have different cultural and economic interests. It is easier to simply write those blue-collar workers off as no longer part of the Democratic coalition. Others will point to the "blue wave" (upsurge in energy and local election victories) that is animating many Americans who oppose Trump and seek solace in the hope that it may shift the outcomes of the 2018 elections. This shouldn't distract us from the hard work of digging deep into the ashes of the American journey toward a more perfect union to unearth the answers that might bind us together. I am not recommending that we dilute our agenda or play to some mythical "centre". I am saying go bigger and be bolder. Building a politics along these lines first requires looking at what is happening today – economically, religiously and demographically – and how these dynamics relate to the formation of a diverse coalition of working class Americans.

# Part Two

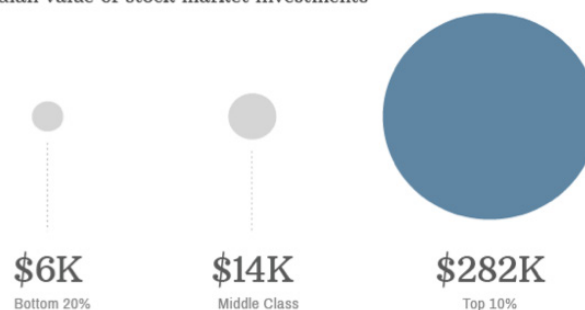
## What's Going on in America Today – Economics

We are deeply split into two Americas. Michael Harrington observed this more than 50 years ago in his ground-breaking book, *The Other America*, and the depth of the divide can now be called a chasm. While it seems that the divide is fundamentally about class, our nation's failure to truly deal with race can't be reduced to an afterthought. Having said that, much of how we talk about issues of race today still seems confined to a 1968 reality that is out of touch with racial realities today – but more about that later. Today's economy is one in which the rich have gotten super rich, and the wealth that they have extracted has come out of the paychecks of hardworking families, including – increasingly – families in which both parents are working hard with higher productivity, but earning less. Over the past two and a half decades, only America's most affluent families have added to their net worth. While their share of the wealth peaked in the late 1920s, just prior to the Great Depression, it had declined by more than half by the end of the 1950's. But then we began to grow apart again. At one end of the American economic spectrum, "the richest of the nation's rich now hold as large a wealth share as they did in the 1920s."<sup>1</sup> Eight men own the same share of wealth as the 3.6 billion people who make up the poorest half of humanity, according to a new report published by Oxfam.<sup>2</sup> Their wealth is born of both their investments and their income.



While we, quite mistakenly, celebrate the strength of the economy based on a growing (though unsteady) stock market, only 49 percent of Americans actually have any money in stocks at all (including pension funds and other investment vehicles), according to 2013 data from the Federal Reserve. Even among the half of America that has money invested in the market, there are huge disparities. Based on findings from 2013, the top 10% of American households have roughly \$282,000 per family invested in the market. Compare that to the middle class, which has a median value of \$14,000 per household invested.<sup>3</sup> It is only the truly wealthy whose economic lives are directly impacted by the ups and downs of the market. Despite this, the market's performance has become synonymous with the health of the economy overall.

Median value of stock market investments



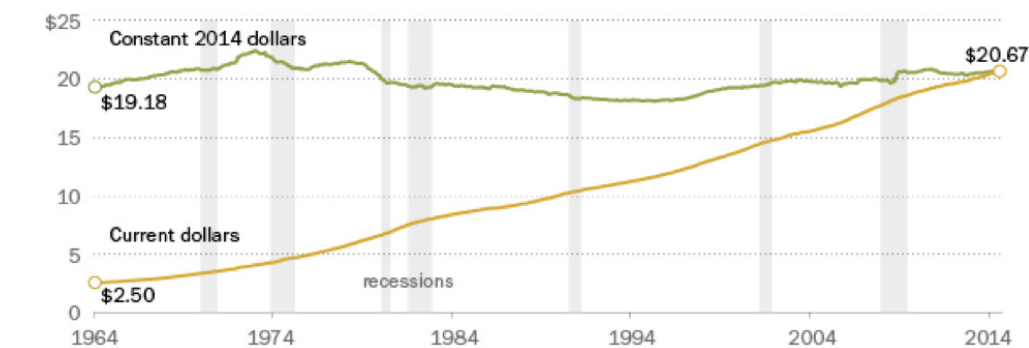
SOURCE: FEDERAL RESERVE 2013 SURVEY OF CONSUMER FINANCES



Wages are also stuck. For most American workers, real wages — that is, after inflation is taken into account — have been flat or falling for decades. This is true also of Australia, notably over the past decade.

### Bigger Paychecks, But Little Change in Purchasing Power

*Average hourly wages, seasonally adjusted*



Note: Data for production and non-supervisory employees on private non-farm payrolls.  
Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics

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The wage crisis is compounded by other devastating workforce issues. Once an anchor of our workforce, tens of millions of non-college-educated men have dropped out of the workforce and millions aren't even looking. And we aren't exactly sure why. Twenty-two percent of American men without college degrees have not worked in the last 12 months; that is approximately 20 million unemployed US men of prime working age (20-65) of which 7 million have stopped looking for work.<sup>4</sup> According to *The Economist*, 'between 2000 and 2015, the employment rate for men in their 20s without a college education dropped ten percentage points, from 82 percent to 72 percent.'<sup>5</sup> At the same time, every month, 14 million people receive a disability check from the government. Over the past 30 years, this number has skyrocketed. There are competing theories as to why this has happened, but we know 'the federal government spends more money each year on cash payments for disabled former workers than it spends on food stamps and welfare combined.'<sup>6</sup> Millions more people rely on disability than ever had access to programs like Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) or Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). The point is most of the people on federal disability do not work, but none of them are counted as unemployed. In other words, people on disability don't show up in any of the places we usually look to see how the economy is doing.<sup>7</sup> When we begin to incorporate these numbers we confront the story of an economy that is creating far less opportunities than those who claim we are at "full employment" would have us believe.

While some economists, market watchers and investors might argue that the fundamentals of the economy are strong, real life America tells a very different story. This economic picture is not news nor is it new. And sadly, neither is the inability of liberals, progressives and the Democratic Party to offer solutions to these problems that are compelling to many Americans. In many ways, America's move away from progressive ideas and positions is longstanding and entrenched, so much so that progressive solutions seem to not go far enough while also sounding outside of what seems "common sense" to large numbers of Americans. While this economic picture has a back-breaking effect on all working-class communities, it also coincides with other dramatic changes in our country to impact white communities in ways that leave them newly and increasingly isolated from the political agendas of the day. This gap is brought into greater focus through the example of Karen Jensen, a conservative union member who works as a nurse in a state corrections system for \$21 per hour. She explained: 'First of all, as a state employee whose wages are set through a state employee bargaining system, I don't buy that the rising tide of higher wages at McDonald's will actually lift my boat. My wages are set separately. And if anything, raising wages for unskilled workers will undermine my buying power and the investment that I made to put myself through nursing school.' She concluded, 'But even if the Fight for \$15 did benefit me indirectly, I'm left asking, who is running the campaigns and promoting the policies that benefit me directly? Not as a side benefit of a campaign for someone else but first and foremost for working class folks like me, who work hard every day but struggle to make ends meet. What is the agenda that makes it easier for me to get by and get ahead?'<sup>8</sup>

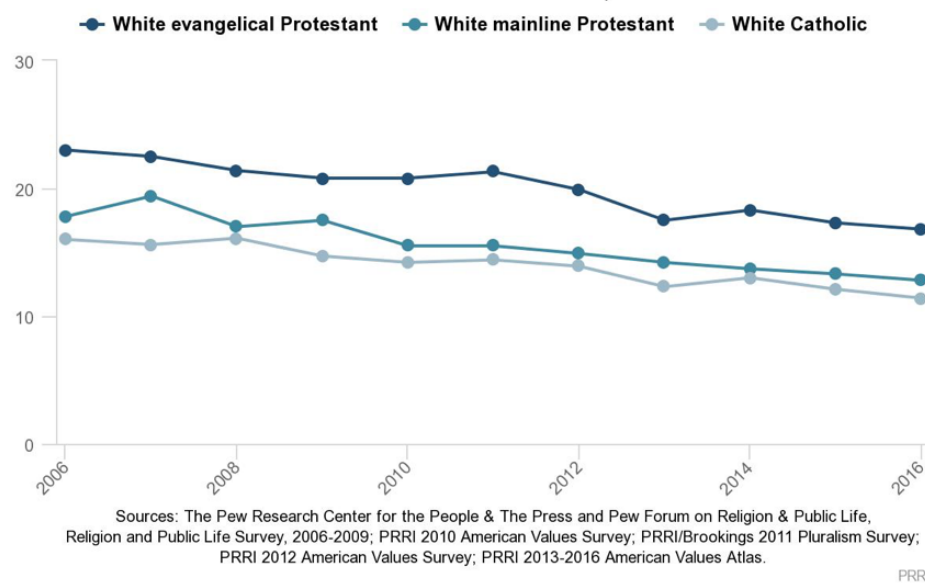


# Part Three

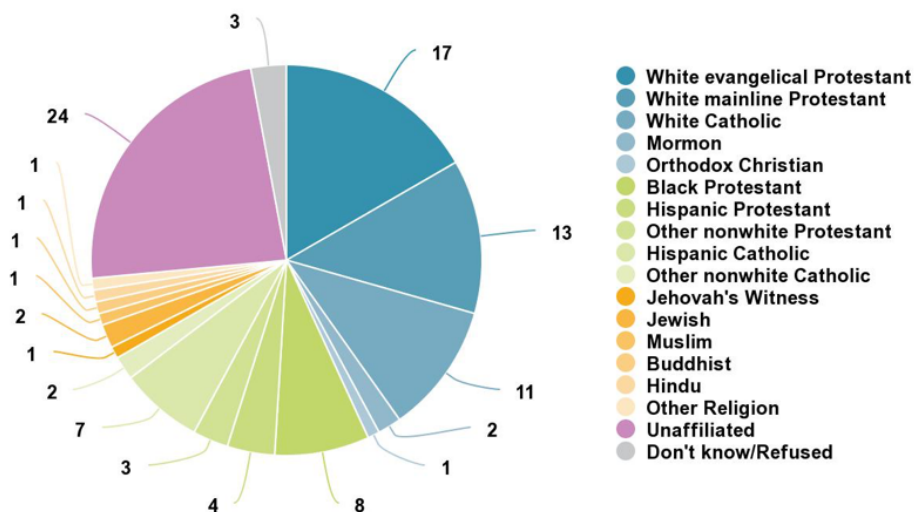
## What's Going on in America Today – Religion

On top of the economic dislocation destabilising many communities, there are other changes afoot in America. Religiously speaking, we are in a freefall. According to PRRI, the percentage of Americans identifying as Evangelical Protestant has dropped six percent (from 23 percent to 17 percent) over the last decade. White mainline Protestants have dropped five percent (18 percent to 13 percent) and Catholics have dropped five percent (16 percent to 11 percent). The decline would be more dramatic if it weren't for increases in Latino Catholics and Evangelicals – the only growth demographic for those denominations. Our religious communities are smaller and more diverse than ever.<sup>9</sup> Perhaps the most dramatic change is that for the first time the unaffiliated, at 24 percent, are our single largest religious grouping.<sup>10</sup>

**The Decline of White Christians, 2006 - 2016**



**The American Religious Landscape in 2016**



At the same time, the United States is still the most religious country in the developed world. While religious affiliation declines, America still remains a deeply religious place. This shows up in many ways: nearly 65

percent of all Americans believe that God rewards athletes of faith with good health and success, and 41 percent of all Americans believe God plays a role in determining which team wins the Super Bowl.<sup>11</sup> On the one hand, American's lasting religiosity is a crucial piece of the puzzle of building a political super-majority because, while you can create a politics that increasingly appeals to religiously unaffiliated Americans, such an approach runs the risk of stepping too far outside a deeply held worldview that animates tens of millions of diverse Americans, thereby losing your ability to engage with them. On the other hand, Americans' decreasing religiosity also shows up in more significant ways for our politics. Places of worship once played an outsized role in creating local community, a sense of belonging, providing for those in need and supporting social as well as civic life. The decline of religious affiliation (along with the decline of unions and other institutions) has left a gaping hole in the communal life of working class America.

We cannot underestimate the profound role that religion has played in creating a binding story and a narrative about the American experiment: Exodus [animated the Pilgrims' journey](#) to a "Promised Land;" a prominent Philadelphia Minister [re-worked the King James Bible](#) to set the context for the Declaration of Independence; and a Pastor from Atlanta [delivered his prophetic Mountain Top speech](#) that moved the nation in Memphis, Tennessee in April 1968, the evening before he was tragically assassinated.

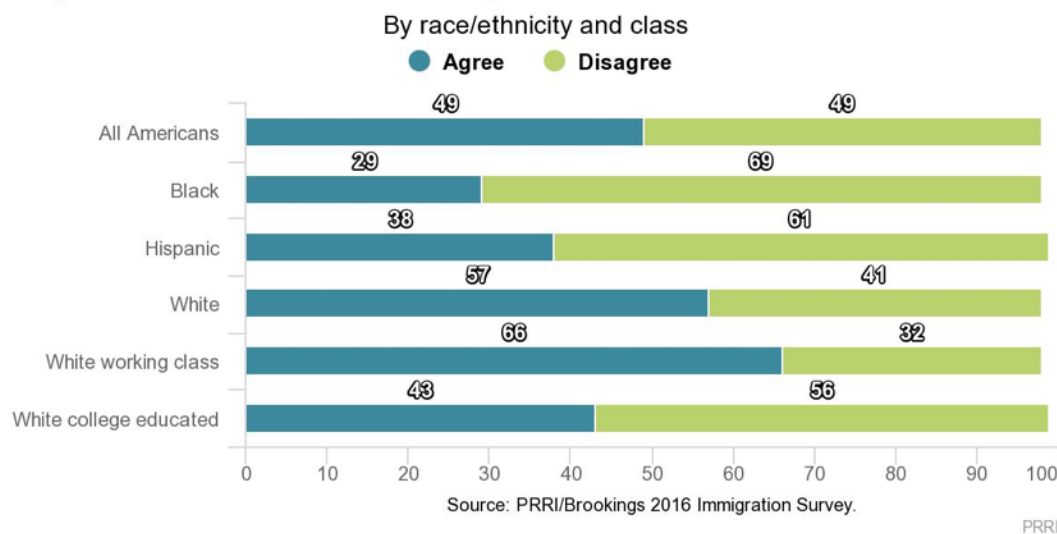
These and other instances demonstrate the extent to which religion has been at the core of defining what America is about and our journey. While there are great arguments to be made about the ways how America was inspired by the Greek and Roman Republican traditions, we should not forget the crucial role and reference that religious traditions provide. Religion has been a source of division and resistance, but it has also been a crucial thread in the American fabric. Its decline puts many Americans on the defensive and denies us one of the tools that for so long served us as a source for a common good politics.

# Part Four

## Part Four: What's Going on in America Today – Race

When we turn to issues of race, matters become polarised, to say the least. America is on a dramatic journey towards a non-white majority. Already, four in ten Americans aren't white, which is up from two in ten in 1965. It is estimated that by 2055, white Americans will make up only 48 percent of the US population.<sup>12</sup> Race continues to divide America in dramatic ways. 66 percent of white working-class Americans believe that 'today discrimination against whites has become as big a problem as discrimination against blacks and other minorities,' according to PRRI. While 43 percent of white college-educated Americans agree with that statement, 29 percent of black Americans did too.<sup>13</sup> Race in its many dimensions (white, black, Latino, Asian) continues to vex us as a nation, and its interplay with class makes it more divisive.

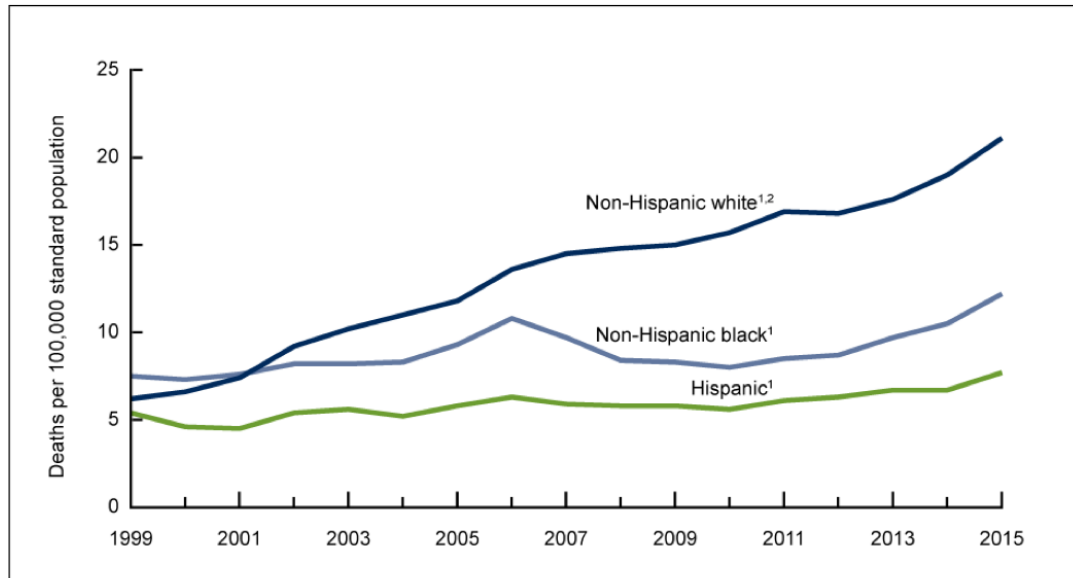
### Today discrimination against whites has become as big a problem as discrimination against blacks and other minorities



When looking at the recent Senate election in Alabama, gender comes into this picture in additionally complex ways. Despite – and some would say because of – the #MeToo movement, 63 percent of white women in Alabama voted for an accused sexual predator for senator.<sup>14</sup> While this constituency might have been expected to vote differently, plausible explanations exist for this seemingly bizarre voting pattern. It is possible that, while sexual misconduct makes them angry, these voters regard it as typical male behaviour and are instead angrier about how their husbands have been “kicked in the teeth” and disrespected by elites. Ultimately, this thinking seems to have led white female Alabamians to cast their votes based on a longing for a time they imagine was more promising for them and their families. At the same time, 93 percent of black men (and 98 percent of black women) voted against Roy Moore.<sup>15</sup> Racial solidarity of blacks and whites in Alabama was far more predictive of voting behaviour than gender.

The issues of gender and race are complicated and can't be quickly understood or disentangled. While every other demographic group in America has seen a growth in its life expectancy over the last 20 to 30 years, white women who didn't attend college are the only ones moving in the wrong direction. They have lost nearly five years in life expectancy over this period and, while their life expectancy is still greater than that of similarly-educated African American women, they are moving in opposite directions.<sup>16</sup> Part of that trend is explained by the story of drug addiction over the last 25 years. Opioid deaths are off the charts for white people, ravaging communities the way that crack cocaine abuse did in the black community decades ago. Since 1999, a year in which about 5,600 white people died due to opioid overdoses, the death rate has steadily increased each year, reaching an alarming 33,450 deaths among whites in 2016.<sup>17</sup>

Figure 3. Age-adjusted drug overdose death rates, by race and ethnicity: United States, 1999–2015



<sup>1</sup>Significant increasing trend,  $p < 0.005$ .

<sup>2</sup>Rate for non-Hispanic white persons was significantly higher than for non-Hispanic black and Hispanic persons,  $p < 0.001$ .

NOTES: Deaths are classified using the *International Classification of Diseases, Tenth Revision*. Drug overdose deaths are identified using underlying cause-of-death codes X40–X44, X60–X64, X85, and Y10–Y14. Deaths for Hispanic persons may be underreported by about 5%. Access data table for Figure 3 at: [https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/databriefs/db273\\_table.pdf#3](https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/databriefs/db273_table.pdf#3).

SOURCE: NCHS, National Vital Statistics System, Mortality.

As President Obama said in a closed door Roosevelt Room meeting in 2014, ‘The pathologies that we once associated with the black community are now seen to have taken root in white America.’ Yet progressives have been ambivalent at best on how to address these real issues plaguing working-class white Americans. Instead, Democrats and other progressives have focused on a brand of identity politics and a rights-based agenda. Take for example this story, shared by Judd Seadust, a self-identified pro-union conservative working for a State Department of Employment Services. Judd has been a union member since his very first day of employment, and his input on this issue is worth quoting at length:

I came from a family of folks who were union members and thought it was the right thing to do. Looking back on my family’s journey into the U.S., I know we experienced discrimination because of our Irish-Italian immigrant status coupled with a low social status. But despite those experiences, I also remember my father continuously espousing that you judge a person only based on one thing and that’s their character. I grew up in a pretty white neighbourhood. I never saw any blacks really. Our schools weren’t integrated. When the busing stuff started in the ‘60s, they took a group of white kids from South Greensburg and bused them over to Southwest Greensburg and sent our exact makeup back down to South Greensburg. So my exposure to persons of colour was almost non-existent. And I remember one night I was a little kid, probably about six or seven, and my dad stopped in the middle of a rainstorm to pick up a young man who was hitchhiking outside of Greensburg. And he told me to slide over and this guy got in the car. And I remember looking up and the first thing I saw was that he had an Army field jacket on but the next thing I realized was that he was black. And it was the first time that I had ever seen somebody of colour in person. And so he and my dad immediately started engaging in a conversation and it became apparent to me that they knew each other and on the way to wherever we were going dad dropped him off at his destination. And when he got out of the car I remember looking at my dad and going, Dad, who was that? He said, ‘Well that was a guy that worked for me.’ I said, ‘But he was black.’ And Dad said, ‘yeah.’ And then I learned that he actually was the first black that was hired onto a construction crew for Bell Telephone here in Southwestern Pennsylvania. My dad had started out as a lineman and he only ever worked for the phone company his entire life, and worked his way up to a construction crew manager, then supervisor. And they came to him and said ‘Charlie, can you--will you take this fellow on?’ And he said ‘sure.’ And they said, ‘You realize he’s black?’ And Dad told me that he said ‘I don’t care. Can he work and what’s his character?’ And that was the message that my parents conveyed to me. And that’s the same message that I’ve tried to raise my children by and live my life by: that you judge somebody only by their character and secondly by their work.<sup>18</sup>

Judd has been a member of the NAACP for over 20 years and voted holding his nose for Donald Trump.

When asked about his thoughts on his union's involvement with the Black Lives Matter movement, he responded (trying to remain balanced), 'if I say all lives matter, somebody is going to get very offended by that, you know. I don't have the perspective firsthand of somebody who is an African American or any person of color. I only have my perspective and I only know what I judge people on. So that's what I try to pass on in my family and in my community of work'.

Judd is proud of his father who aspired to be "color-blind." Yet today, Judd might well be condemned as a racist because he voted for Trump. He is complex in that he opposes racism where he sees it but he rejects some of the claims of the progressive anti-racist movements that he has observed. He must be part of the solution to the extreme elements that have been emboldened and he is important in shaping a common-good politics, if we are to find them. But he often finds himself written out of the racial progress story in which he would imagine his father in a starring role and instead finds himself defined as part of the problem. The economic, religious, and demographic story of America is unfolding in complex ways and impacting our politics profoundly. Against this background, there is a group of pro-union conservatives who defy the narrative coming from either conservatives or progressives. In their values, beliefs and priorities lies a disruptive politics worth paying attention to.

# Part Five

## Canaries in the Coal Mine

On some level, pro-union conservatives are similar to mainstream Republicans today, but there is more to them – and the lessons they can teach us – than meets the eye. In a survey conducted with more than 115 conservative union members, about half of these members agreed with the statement that “things with the Trump administration are generally going better than expected”.<sup>19</sup> Not surprisingly, these conservatives sound a lot like the die-hard Republicans. Building on that, three quarters of those we surveyed agreed that “it is inappropriate and uncalled for to protest during the national anthem, pledge of allegiance or the flag”. This is consistent with a recent study released by PRRI that found that more than eight in ten (86 percent) Republicans say that athletes should be required to stand during the national anthem, as opposed to fewer than one-third (32 percent) of Democrats.<sup>20</sup> In some ways it is easy to once again write off this group as racist and conclude that it is the African-American protesters and their topic of protest – racial injustice – that is at the heart of their opposition. But in the same 115 member survey, only one in five disagreed with the following statement: “I understand the players are not demonstrating against the national anthem or the flag, that they are demonstrating against what they perceive as racism in America. I respect their right to protest, I just wish they would show more respect for the symbols of our great country.”

What is seemingly occurring is that these critics of the protests, many of them having served, have a value set that is primarily concerned with patriotism, loyalty and sacrifice are, to borrow a term, “triggered” by this form of protest. And that value set is meaningful even if it conflicts with other important values. Progressives might benefit from paying attention to and building common ground around those values, rather than dismissing them as wrong or simply in opposition to our core values. Activists do themselves a disservice if they don’t open their hearts and minds and ask if there is sacred value to these national symbols. Consistently, our nation’s greatest figures – and protestors – have revered our founding documents and grandest icons. When we call on the country to live up to its Declaration, to honour the flag and what it stands for, to believe in this grand experiment and to be truly patriotic, we will have leap-frogged forward in our ability to connect with many of our fellow Americans. Our national symbols matter, they should indeed be held sacred, and our commitment to defend and honour them should not be de-valued. This doesn’t mean being uncritical. In fact, it requires us to be critics, but to be critics who are loyal to the nation and humbled by those who have made – and continue to be willing to make – the ultimate sacrifice to defend America.

The opportunities for common-good politics exist even in the aftermath of Charlottesville, though they may be hard for many to see. Sixty percent of the pro-union conservatives surveyed said they agree with Trump that there were “very fine people” on both sides in Charlottesville. (Here is where many readers might be tempted to put this paper aside). But this is not because they are defending white nationalism. Yes, I believe the President should have unequivocally denounced those hate groups in the streets, and it is a true danger for our country that he did not. But that is not because there were no good people out there. And this is what more than half of the conservatives surveyed said as they agreed with the statement that “the presence of Klansmen and Neo-Nazis at the march in Charlottesville was over the top, out of bounds and I would stand up against that kind of hate.” This will seem contradictory to some. But this is a deeply held worldview we need to get inside of. The KKK is out of bounds and must be rejected, but that doesn’t mean that anyone protesting against liberal causes is a Klansmen. You can vote for Trump despite his sexist and racist behaviour, reject that behaviour, and still support him. It is understandably challenging to consider the other side’s position on matters where we fundamentally disagree. But, if we are ever going to forge a path forward, it is important that we remind ourselves that there are worthy values on multiple sides of these arguments, separate from the extremist elements, and that, through those values, we might have more in common than we think. We need to find a way to write a more inclusive shared story that white working class families can see themselves in as well.



And there are issues where that shared story is available. More than three quarters of union members surveyed agreed that “cutting money from Medicaid is not the way to solve the very real problems with the Affordable Care Act” and more than three quarters also agreed that “we need a bi-partisan approach to actually improve the ACA so all Americans can get access to affordable quality health care”.

This is not a call for just a selfish “common interests” argument, or advocating for sacrificing our deeply held values in pursuit of some legislation that we can all agree to support, if it is written right and the message is good. We share more common values than we might recognise, and from there it is possible for us to forge common ground; room to really build something together. When looking at our country’s economy, more than half of the conservative union members agreed with all three of these statements:

“When I hear reports that the GOP tax plan will lower the tax rate by more than 8 percent for the top 1 percent, I think it is business as usual in Washington and it makes me angry.”

“I’m less worried about taxes and more worried that we aren’t making the investment in infrastructure, jobs and securing our country for the future.”

“Politicians in Washington aren’t serious about closing the loopholes that let them and their friends avoid paying their share of taxes.”

Remember, these are Trump voters, many of whom think things are going well after a year of him being in office. And yet, on the hallmarks of his administration – taxes and infrastructure – they actually have significant common ground on key issues with union members who voted for Hillary Clinton. And there lies the big opportunity. The place where they split most fundamentally from other elements of the GOP, but where Democrats have failed to take a true leadership position, is on the issue of their union. Three quarters of conservative union members agree that “it is a sad day for the GOP that they are leading efforts in many states to undermine workers’ rights to have a union.” This is a wedge issue that could splinter Republican politics and be the basis for a new version of progressive populism. But instead, it has splintered Democrats and held us back from a bold, populist, pro-union agenda. Too many political strategists are fixated on how we get the 10,000 more votes in Michigan, play to the middle to “peel off” a few swing voters, or use micro targeting to pile up votes in the urban centres in Florida and Pennsylvania to flip those states. Yes, those electoral tactics matter, but they are not the central issue. Even if you could win presidential elections by making tactical changes and doubling down on the approach that has defined Democrats and progressives in recent decades, this doesn’t give you the Congress nor the States. It also doesn’t give you the majority of the people you need to effectively govern and actually address our most pressing problems.

Is there an agenda that can bind us and propel us forward? For such an agenda to work, it has to speak in deep ways to the anger that has been brewing in diverse communities across the country and that has now been churned up very dramatically by Trump and his strategists. That agenda and those policies need to be directly grounded in the experience and anger of workers. What I’ve heard so consistently as I have travelled the country are these kind of sentiments, encapsulated by four statements:<sup>21</sup>

1. “I’m tired of how they look down at me, don’t respect me, don’t think I know anything, and decide what’s best for me.”
2. “No one listens to me. It’s like I have no voice, no say over the changes happening all around me.”
3. “I work with my hands, and I work hard. What ever happened to that work ethic? We used to honor and reward labor. Now it’s like something that’s out of step with the times.”
4. “I used to believe that my kids would be better off than I was, just like I was better off than my parents, but that has become fantasy land.”

The new agenda must advance a new populism that we don’t simply write off as inherently racist, as some do, nor run away from because it challenges some of the economic conventional wisdom that has been the bedrock for economic growth and the accumulation of wealth at the top over the last 25 years.

# Conclusion

In light of these experiences, here are some policy ideas and a worldview that might serve us well:

1. **Employee Voice:** Pilot a program that requires companies to include front line employee voices on their board if they seek to do business with local or regional government or benefit from public subsidies. (A version of this idea exists in Europe and has been proposed by this centre).
2. **Manufacturing Moonshot:** Help to grow small- and medium-sized companies by committing to secure the supply chain here at home for all our defense and adjacent industries. Invest in the technology, workforce training, export support and financing needs of those companies to bring them out of more than 20 years of flat growth while also shoring up our national security.
3. **Green Schools for All:** Connect environmental concerns with working people's jobs and with educational concerns by developing a national green school infrastructure program that builds and renovates enough schools nationwide so that we can bring class sizes down to a level where children can truly learn. At the same time, feed our students through farm-to-school programs and create quality local employment opportunities for parents through the school procurement process.
4. **World Class Infrastructure:** Invest in rebuilding our decaying infrastructure and hire the best skilled trade workers to do it, alongside a new generation of national service recruits who gain access to our best apprenticeship programs, gain crucial work experience and contribute to reinvigorating our national civic culture and the growth of our economy. Given the military's tremendous track record of identifying aptitude of new recruits and placing them successfully in training programs and career paths, this service initiative would sit within the Department of Defense and pilot a form of civilian service to honour and serve our country.

In addition to this policy agenda, we must also re-imagine the cultural norms of the Democratic Party and progressive politics. The Democrats, at the leadership level, have come to be defined by a framework that rests on being global, universal and secular. That is to say, liberals/progressives have come to be associated with the ideas of being:

1. Global – Enjoy exotic vacations; plane travel is more familiar than bus travel; larger interests than the national interest.
2. Universal – Multiculturalism; all traditions have “shared values;” wide circle of concern that ostensibly includes “all,” regardless of background.
3. Secular – Science and the rational carry the day; relativist values that are context-dependent; spiritual, but not religious; ethical, not moral.

Conservatives, on the other hand, have come to be defined by localism, particularism and religion:<sup>22</sup>

1. Local – My place matters: the pond where I fish, the town where I grew up, etc.
2. Particular – My tradition; my community; my faith; my team.
3. Religious – Believe in God; theology; moral compass.

There is often little tolerance for the liberal side of this typology among conservatives, for sure. What is so surprising is how intolerant the liberals have become of the conservative typology. For example, liberals/

progressives might be heard saying: “Those towns have been left behind and there is nothing we can do about it. Technology, globalization and now automation are the new reality. If people can do well in school and relocate there’s lots of opportunity out there.” “Science tells us that carbon emissions are causing global warming. We know it is man-made and if those backward-looking evangelicals would stop hiding behind their irrational claims about God and the end of days, we could deal with this rationally.” “America was formed from many faith and ethnic traditions and we must give them all space in today’s conversations. In the end, all the great traditions say the same thing about how we treat each other and what is fair.”

To forge a new common-good politics we must find a way that you can love your local place, be particular about your own tradition and believe in God and still be at home in our shared politics. We must do it because it is the right thing to do, but also because most Americans, especially working-class Americans of all races wake up every day caring about God, family and country (and sports). If we can’t get inside that worldview, we will always sound like our ideas are outside of the realm of common sense for too many people. Many have offered superficial counters to this approach, saying that the only road forward is to: focus on identity and rights; tie that brand of liberalism to the economic neo-liberalism of tech and finance mega-donors; and, trust that the liberal typology will be enough of a fit for Millennials and the rising American electorate that it carries the political day for Democrats.

The truth is, we need to build something new, not try to get all those people to “wake up” and join our movement. Granted, the 182 million coalition isn’t easy to knit together. It will require some fundamental rejections of what has defined progressive politics in recent decades. It is not a tweak or a new message, it is a fundamental rebirth. But the big project -- the one that can’t wait -- is how to build a socio-political-economic worldview and agenda that makes room for both the religious and secular; global and local; universal and particular. We need a worldview that stands up for the role of government policy and strong unions, is responsive to what is really happening in America today and really has a shot – maybe just a moonshot – of winning the day. Most importantly, we need a worldview and a politics that has the power to truly transform the lives of the American people.

# Endnotes

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A large, faded, black and white portrait of John Curtin, the 14th Prime Minister of Australia, is positioned in the background of the page. He is shown from the chest up, wearing a suit and tie, and has a slight smile.

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**‘The nation looked to Labor,  
and it did not look in vain.’**

- John Curtin, 26 July 1943