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Why Trump Voters Used The Economy As An Excuse To Vote For Him

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9-12 minutes

[Donald Trump](#) will leave office with the economy considerably worse off compared to where it was when he was elected four years ago.

The [unemployment rate](#) hit 6.9% in October, down from record double-digits in April, the Labor Department announced Friday. This is an improvement, but when Trump was inaugurated in 2017, it was [4.8%](#). The jobless rate is now [basically what it was](#) right before Barack Obama took office in the middle of a financial crisis.

Economic output is lower than it was last year. One in 10 Americans said they [aren't getting enough to eat](#), up substantially from last year. An [eviction crisis](#) is on the horizon. With coronavirus infection rates continuing to rise, there are signs that the improvements we've seen in economy [could slow](#) or [even reverse](#). Last week, [1.1 million Americans](#) filed for unemployment. The Black unemployment rate is still in the double digits



And yet, despite all of that, a lot of Trump voters believe the economy is OK, maybe even better than OK.

In fact, 82% of Trump voters said the economy was the issue that mattered most to them, according to preliminary exit poll data from [The New York Times](#). And 8 in 10 Trump supporters cited the economy and jobs as their top motivator in deciding who to vote for, based on a [large AP VoteCast survey](#) of more than 100,000 voters conducted in the days before and on Election Day. More than 4 in 10 survey respondents told the Associated Press that they believed the economy was in good shape, and they overwhelmingly voted for Trump.

What gives?

It turns out explaining this apparent contradiction involves untangling a web that doesn't have much to do with the objective state of something called "the economy," but is more likely intertwined with racial resentment, partisan bias and a tendency to believe that the economic crisis sparked by COVID-19 isn't the president's fault.

Let's Start With Race

The economic picture for white people in this downturn, particularly white men, is a lot better than it is for any other group, said [Olugbenga Ajilore](#), an economist at the Center for American Progress.

This relative superiority of status is likely key to understanding how Trump voters, a majority of whom are white, can think the economy is in decent shape.

The Black unemployment rate in October was 10.8%. For Black men, it was 11.5%, not that far off from the sky-high overall unemployment rate of 14.7% in April. (Meanwhile, the unemployment rate for white men now, 5.8%, is just about half what it is for Black men.) Black and Hispanic women are also facing high unemployment numbers.

This recovery for white men is one reason Congress hasn't enacted another stimulus package, Ajilore said. High rates of Black unemployment simply are not viewed as a crisis in the United States.

"It's a mentality that permeates," he told HuffPost. "We have double-digit unemployment for white people, we need stimulus. Then it drops below 10% and they say, 'Our job is done. The market works.'"

It's not just jobs. By almost every measure — food insecurity, housing worries, economic pain — people of color are doing worse right now and haven't recovered as quickly as white Americans, particularly white men. Hundreds of thousands of women have had to drop out of the workforce, in part because of child care issues that have cropped up during the pandemic and because women-dominated industries have been hit hard in the downturn. Coronavirus mortality rates among Black Americans are two to three times as high as they are for white Americans.

The relative well-being of white men compared to all other groups was likely a factor in support for Trump, said William Darity Jr., a professor of economics, public policy and African American studies at Duke University.

"It may be that the coronavirus crisis suggests to [Trump voters] that things are returning to the proper order in terms of Black people's relative position," he said.



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Darity is a pioneer in the study of stratification economics, which looks at the way racial anxiety and economic anxiety are intertwined. His research and the work of other economists and social scientists have shown that people judge how they're doing financially by not only comparing themselves to their peers, but to other groups. Studies on well-being have turned up similar results.

It's not just a phenomenon between Black and white people in the United States. This plays out across the globe, Darity said. For example, it's present in the anti-immigrant rhetoric adopted by many Trump voters, who believe newcomers to the country are taking away their jobs.

Throughout history, economic and racial anxiety among white Americans has been centered on the comparison with Black Americans. Over the last several years, that [anxiety has only gotten worse](#).

Large numbers of white Americans believe they've lost status relative to Black Americans, Darity said, pointing to research he published last year alongside economists and epidemiologists in the journal [Population Health](#).

(In reality, white people haven't actually lost relative status. If you look at the white-Black wealth gap and other measures, Black Americans are still facing far worse financial and health conditions than white Americans — and this was true even before the pandemic.)

"Whites see Trump as an agent of restoring their status," Darity said. "That's what 'Make America Great Again' is all about."

"I was convinced that you could've explained the 2016 election using stratification economics quite easily," he added. "But it's only [recently] that people are starting to take this frame seriously."

Trump Voters Simply Don't Blame Him For The COVID-19 Economy

The three Trump voters who spoke with HuffPost for this story did not want to talk about race. One accused this reporter of race-baiting when she asked what he made of the relatively high Black unemployment rate. He said he believed in colorblindness. Another said he did not see Trump as racist at all.

All of them emphasized that prior to the pandemic, the economy was doing great and the Black unemployment rate was at a record low (something Trump himself has boasted about). While it's true that the Black unemployment rate reached an all-time low during Trump's administration, it was still [much higher](#) than the white unemployment rate.

"His economic policies have produced tremendous benefit for all of us," said Michael Mulhall, a 56-year-old financial consultant who voted for Trump. Mulhall, who describes himself as upper-middle class and white, just moved from New York to Richmond, Virginia, area to be near family. He cited Trump's tax cuts as one such policy.

Mulhall said he's been lucky during the COVID-19 crisis. Though a lot of his clients pulled back, he was able to find alternative work. And he argued that the downturn wasn't the president's fault.

"There was the economy before COVID-19 and after," he said. "I think most people were pleased with the economy. They weren't concerned about it."

"Generally speaking, I liked the tax cuts," said Anthony Constantini, a white 26-year-old from the Philadelphia suburbs who is now studying in Vienna. "I liked the [executive order](#) where for every new regulation, two had to be cut."

Constantini has been a Republican for several years. He worked for the National Republican Senatorial Committee in 2016, though he's no longer affiliated with it, he said.

When asked, Constantini didn't mention a specific regulation that Trump cut, but emphasized that the principle of cutting regulations was important.

No one is going to tell a pollster they voted for racism or that they would characterize it that way. Angela Hanks, deputy executive director at Groundwork Collaborative

He acknowledged that Trump could be racist and sexist, but it didn't change his vote in the end.

"Those individual things he did were not good, but on a wider scale the policies he put into place would help more people," he said.

Most economists have said that the economy cannot recover fully until the pandemic is contained — that the issues are [intertwined](#).

But Mulhall and other Trump voters said they think the president has done a decent job handling the public health crisis. They all cited Trump's decision to [halt travel from China](#), and Constantini pointed out that other countries, including those in Europe, where he is now, are having similar problems with a third wave.

Trump Voters Just Needed A Reason

Finally, partisanship cannot be overlooked here. Trump voters want to support their candidate.

“If you supported him before and you want to support him again, the economy might be a reason because partisanship plays such a deep role, it's hard to escape that,” said Angela Hanks, the deputy executive director at Groundwork Collaborative, a progressive economic group. “I think Trump support may be shaped by economic reasons, but there are other things people are less likely to say.”

For instance, they're certainly not going to talk about race.

“No one is going to tell a pollster they voted for racism or that they would characterize it that way,” she said.

The GOP also tends to be seen as the party of economic competence, despite the fact that Republican presidents have presided over the last two economic crashes.

“Even though people are doing very poorly across the board, [Republicans have] been able to sell the idea that tax cuts and deregulation are going to be good for the economy, when if you look at what's going on in the world, that hasn't done a whole lot for regular people,” Hanks said.

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