Trump Supporters' Main Problem Was Never The Economy

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6-8 minutes

Safe to say, the Donald Trump supporters who ransacked the U.S. Capitol last week weren’t short on cash or propelled by severe economic anxiety.

The insurrectionists came to Washington by plane. They stayed in Airbnbs and at the Embassy Suites. They wore costumes and carried weapons and iPhones. Some were cops. There were doctors, lawyers, a Chicago real estate broker, teachers — even a school therapist. A CEO.

Sure, some of them could’ve been impoverished former coal miners, as so many pundits have described a certain sect of Trump voters. But these people weren’t raging over the decline of the carbon-based economy. This was a riot about race and power. If there was economic anxiety, it was spurred by the rioters’ false notion that their place in the world is under threat.

We can stop talking about how white Americans voted for Trump because of economic interest. His appeal was never about money. (And Trump is leaving office with the economy in tatters, by the way. On Thursday, 1.15 million more people filed for unemployment.)

The insurrection was the violent cry of a group of (mostly) white men, afraid of losing power — not just of having their savior leave office but more broadly seeing their place at the top of the American caste system knocked down a peg.

After four years of Trump — and two elections — social scientists and pollsters have produced plenty of research and evidence to debunk the argument that white voters chose Trump out of economic interest.

Overwhelmingly they’ve found that Americans who chose Trump were worried about losing their social status, their place in a country where white folks will soon be in the minority and where many women no longer seem to realize that men should be in charge.

"It’s the same old same old," said Diana Mutz, a political science professor at the University of Pennsylvania. "White males have been the group with the most power in our country for a long, long time." They still do have an enormous amount of power, she pointed out, but that’s been changing. "Change is hard," she said.

Isabel Wilkerson writes about this phenomenon with terrifying force in her 2020 book, “Caste.” She spoke to many researchers about the motivations of white Trump voters.
One described Trump supporters as people “who feel the rug is being pulled out from under them — that the benefits they have enjoyed because of their race, their group’s advantages, and their status atop the racial hierarchy are all in jeopardy.”

Trump supporters want to return to a past “when white men saw themselves as the core of America, and minorities and women ‘knew their place,’” a sociology professor at New York University told New York Times columnist Thomas Edsall last week.

Indeed, sexism is a core Trumpist value: A study released just this week in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences found that the one key view Trump supporters have in common is not economic dislocation but the idea that men should be the ones in charge. (And not just men think this.)

Political uprisings are often about a disenfranchised group seeking greater rights.

That is not what happened on Jan. 6.

The crowd at the Capitol last week felt under threat, Mutz said, by the changing racial composition of the country and by the fact that their leader would soon be displaced by an administration much more amenable to diversity and inclusion.

In 2018, Mutz published a study in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences that found that in 2016 those who voted for Trump did so because of anxiety over race and social standing, not economic distress. Indeed, many of those voters were doing better economically at the time.

The perception that “pocketbook” issues motivated Trump voters likely comes from the fact that Americans with less education did tend to vote for him in 2016 and 2020, she said. But their motivating factor wasn’t about, say, the rising cost of health insurance. Lower education also correlates with what she calls “group animosity,” fear of the other.

The 2020 election offered another forceful debunking of the myth of the impoverished Trump voter. The majority of Americans making less than $50,000 a year voted for Democrat Joe Biden, according to exit poll data from December. Those earning more than $100,000 leaned toward Trump.

A majority of white voters chose Trump.

Perhaps bafflingly, these voters said the economy was their top issue. That’s partly because most Americans won’t tell you that they voted for someone because they’re worried that white people are losing their place in the country.
“No one is going to tell a pollster they voted for racism or that they would characterize it that way,” Angela Hanks, the deputy executive director at Groundwork Collaborative, a progressive economic group, told HuffPost in November for a story exploring how Trump voters claim the economy was their priority – at a time when it was clear that the economy was tanking because of the out-of-control pandemic.

It’s also because economic anxiety is inexorably tied with racial anxiety, said William Darity Jr., an economist at Duke University who studies the interplay between the two.

It’s not that Trump rioters have actually fallen behind economically; it’s that they’re worried about the prospect of Black folks doing better. It’s the same kind of anxiety that fueled the backlash to affirmative action decades ago.

“This is a group of people who perceive their relative status is endangered,” Darity said. He and others have pointed out that this is hardly new: White Americans rioted during Reconstruction, outraged over the idea that Black people were not slaves anymore and actually had some rights. That violence ushered in nearly a century of repression.

“There is a straight line from the violence that took down the Reconstruction era movement to the invasion of the Capitol last week,” Darity said.

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