

Trumpism without racism?

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Trump rally

A Trump campaign rally in New Hampshire. [Some rights reserved](#) by [Marc Nozell](#).

Donald Trump finished second in Iowa; [he retains a big lead in New Hampshire](#). Whatever else one can say about his once-unthinkable play for the GOP nomination for president, it has forced people to reassess our politics in startling, far-reaching ways.

In every horse-race campaign moment and every polling fluctuation, we looked for confirmation of what we thought we knew: Trump was a celebrity-powered novelty, a charlatan fated to exposure, a niche candidate for the hardest-right voters, or an enthusiasm of resurgent white nationalism.

None of these theories was entirely wrong, but none was remotely right enough.

It turns out, as Ross Douthat [writes](#), that “blue-collar, Jacksonian, ‘who’s looking out for you?’ populism” has much wider appeal among the GOP primary electorate than “the litmus tests of the official right” do. Sam Trende [suggests](#)—and there is polling evidence to back this up—that Trump is being bolstered by the sort of “secular, blue-collar, often rural voters” who supported Ross Perot in the 90s. Progressive writers, too, are starting to point out that Trump’s popularity owes something, and perhaps a great deal, to the loose political attachments and long-term economic distress of the white working class.

There is, however, the problem of Trump’s truly astonishing xenophobia. “I’ve been waiting for a Republican candidate to say that the trade deals and legal frameworks that drive globalism have been bad deals for America’s workers,” [writes](#) Michael Brendan Dougherty, in a column provocatively titled “For Trumpism, Against Donald Trump”:

I’ve been waiting for a candidate who would question the elite consensus on mass immigration, not tweak it. And I’ve been waiting for a candidate to deliver a shock to the conservative movement and the Republican Party, something that would force them to reconnect to the actual material interests of their voters, to make them realize that the market was made for man, and not man for the market.

Unfortunately, Dougherty notes, the candidate doing these things is Trump, who uses “the crutches of noxious racism and populism” to support them.

There is in these sometimes anxious reassessments of Trump’s campaign the growing sense that it is a Freudian return of the repressed, punishing the American political system for its embrace of trade deals, foreign military adventures, de-unionization, and supposedly wage-lowering mass immigration. Might there not be a better way to answer those failings, these conservative commentators ask—might a “nationalist” or “populist” reorientation of the GOP be possible—without the racist bluster of Trump himself?

That’s a good question.

Something subtle and remarkable has happened in American politics—and, it seems, in democracies across the developed world. The big arguments over what the state owes the people, in terms of services and public welfare, have been somewhat eclipsed. Now the focus is on who counts as people in the first place.

This question is up front and explicit in the rise of European parties that support the welfare state but fight to exclude ethnic and religious “others” from its benefits. Trump, with his stirring endorsement of nationalist trade policies and retirement programs alongside his coruscating attacks on immigrants and Muslims, fits this mold better than any major American politician to date. Trump makes it reasonably clear who the populace addressed by his populism is, the nation addressed by his nationalism. It’s white people.

The problem for Douthat, Dougherty, and everyone else on the right who wants to give Trump’s economic populism its due is that it is not at all clear what’s left when you simply junk the racism. There have been populist and nationalist movements in America before, after all, and they have always ended up deeply entwined with racial, ethnic, or religious exclusions. Try as we might to claim a position that is neither bigoted nor purely cosmopolitan, we can’t avoid the task of deciding just whose “material interests” should be respected.

Should the law protect American children with undocumented parents? Disenfranchised ex-felons? [Somali Muslim factory workers](#)? If you want populism without Trump’s definition of the populace, you need to propose another one.

The Republican Party—and the Democrats too, for that matter—could stand to learn from Trump’s appeal. But what, exactly, they learn is everything.