

Review

# A Review of the Popular and Scholarly Accounts of Donald Trump's White Working-Class Support in the 2016 US Presidential Election

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Received: 10 April 2019; Accepted: 9 May 2019; Published: 13 May 2019



**Abstract:** Popular and scholarly accounts of Trump's ascendancy to the presidency of the United States on the part of the American white working-class use different variables to define the sociodemographic group because there is no "working-class White" variable available in benchmark datasets for researchers to code. To address this need, the Author ran a multinomial regression to assess whether income, education and racial identity predict working-class membership among white Americans, finding that income and education are statistically significant predictors of working-class whiteness, while racial identity is not. Arriving at a robust definition of "white working-class" in light of these findings, the paper next turns to a review of the extant literature. By retrieving studies from searches of computerised databases, hand searches and authoritative texts, the review critically surmises the explanatory accounts of Trump's victory. Discussion of the findings from the review is presented in three principal sections. The first section explains how working-class White communities, crippled by a dearth of social and geographic mobility, have been "left behind" by the political elites. The second section examines how white Americans, whose dominant group position is threatened by demographic change, voted for Trump because of resonance between his populist rhetoric and their latent "racist" attitudes. The third and final section explores the implications of a changing America for native-born whites, and how America's increasing ethnoracial diversity is eroding relations between its dominant and nondominant groups. The Author surmises by arguing that these explanatory accounts must be understood in the context of this new empirical approximation of "working-class White".

**Keywords:** Trump; 2016 Election; White working-class

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## 1. Introduction

The election of Donald Trump to the presidency of the United States in 2016 was a rather unusual case in that he was a candidate beyond the mainstream, widely seen as having little chance of winning power. Trump's election connects with what scholars [1,2] contend is a "populist wave" enveloping our democracies. This wave represents a challenge to traditional centre-left/right mainstream political parties, as well as their political agendas and worldviews. Understanding Trump's victory in this context is crucial as we need to understand what it represents. Trump's success could be a one-off. Alternatively, it could be indicative of a new pattern of political behaviour in which U.S. voters are now reticent to the old offers of the political class.

We need to make sense of the currents that created the conditions for Trump in light of these broader developments to see if his election is part of a broader trend. However, there is little-in-the-way of systematic analysis of who Trump's supporters are that can help us contribute to debates about why he won. For example, oblique references to the "working-class" [3] are used. Authors also use pejoratives

such as “hillbillies” [4] and “white trash” [5] to describe Trump’s base. Also, formulations such as “non-college-educated White” that emphasise the group’s statistical measurability are also commonly employed [6]. However, there is a singular term whose mention is markedly absent in enquires on Trump’s support that captures all of these derivations. This is the White working-class. There is a significant knowledge gap present within the extant body of literature. This is that there is no empirical approximation of the sociodemographic group that authors measure across studies. Without such a definition, we cannot address why White working-class voters coalesced around Trump in the 2016 election. This is important because we need to understand whether these factors relate to broader issues such as the rise of populist parties and increasing levels distrust towards elites in other Western democracies. Therefore, we first need to establish an empirical definition of the White working-class to explain how a billionaire from New York City became the figurehead for so many of them.

After addressing this need in the first empirical section, The Author presents a comprehensive review of the body literature of literature that relates to Trump’s White working-class support. The review reveals three significant explanatory contexts regarding who the White working-class are, and why they supported Trump in the 2016 election. These are (i) the “left behind” narrative, (ii) the cultural decline thesis (iii) and the implications of changing America for native-born Whites. First, we begin with the “left behind” narrative. The review has found that numerous working-class ethnographies [3,4] argue that the White working-class lack upward social mobility. As a consequence, the White working-class have found themselves unable to move up into more affluent class strata and thus unable to realise the American dream. Likewise, rural white Americans are crippled by a lack of geographic mobility and are unable to migrate to find better opportunities elsewhere [7,8]. A dearth of both types of mobility leaves the group angry at the Washington elites for not improving their situations, leading them to vote for Trump as an act of defiance against the political class.

The second significant explanatory context is the cultural decline thesis. Authors of this thesis frame the White working-class through a “dominant majority” ethnoracial paradigm [9]. They contend that America’s demographic and cultural change has eroded white American’s position as the “dominant group” in society. White Americans’ fear of losing the status afforded to them by their dominant position has been mobilised into a political cleavage. This makes the group receptive to political messages that stoke racial resentment and animus towards immigrants [10,11]. Increased support for Trump is thus correlated with resonance between his ethno-nationalist rhetoric and latent “racist” attitudes within the white working-class [12]. The cultural decline thesis implies that white Americans see themselves as an ethnoracial group and that this group identity has become a salient factor in their party politics and policy preferences [13]. However, authors of the cultural decline thesis only explore white Americans’ reactions to diversity, rather than looking at the effects of diversity itself on intra/intergroup relations.

Consequently, the review explores a third significant explanation related to the implications of a changing America for native-born White Americans. Elucidating the history of nativist movements before the passage of landmark immigration legislation in 1965 indicates that Americans have long expressed uneasiness about new immigrants and still do today. Scholarly reactions against nativist thinking led to formulations of sociological theories of cultural assimilation [14]. More contemporary assimilation theories such as acculturation [15] explore the relationship between intergroup relations and increasing diversity in America today. Bringing together Berry’s [15] framework and the social capital/trust literature [16] highlights a troubling relationship between diversity and decreasing levels of intra/intergroup ethnoracial trust. This relationship is significant because it explains why native-born Whites are increasingly voting for right-wing populist actors such as Trump [17].

## 2. Defining the White Working-Class

Before we turn to the findings of the literature review, we must first address a pertinent knowledge gap within the extant body of literature. This is that there is no “White working-class” variable

for researchers to code. We need such a variable so that researchers are able to analyse the White working-class in the context of Trump's victory. Part of the problem stems from the fact that "gold-standard" national benchmark survey's such as the General Social Survey (GSS) and the American National Election Studies (ANES) do not contain a White working-class variable. Instead, the White working-class are defined by multiple independent variables across studies. This would make sense, given that class is a multidimensional construct. As will be apparent, this is reflected in the fact that author of the literature use variables of levels of income, educational attainment, as well as race, to define the sociodemographic group. The following section elucidates the three ways in which working-class whiteness is defined within the academic literature. Afterward, the Author speculates on the relative weight of these individual factors in the formulation of a working-class White variable by using multinomial logistic regression to model the determinates of working-class whiteness.

### 2.1. Context

Trump made a clear play to the white working-class in the 2016 election. Such a move was recognised by Fessenden [18] in the run-up to Election Day. There was room for Trump to improve on Mitt Romney's performance among white Americans in 2012. Some two million who had voted for John McCain in 2008 were 'missing' on Election Day 2012 [19]. Obama's margin over Mitt Romney in the popular vote was ~5 million. However, the number of non-college-educated whites of voting age who did not vote was 24 million [20]. The question that remained was whether enough white-working-class Americans would turn out to elect Trump. Morgan and Lee [21] find that the white working-class did indeed compromise a large wedge of Trump's base in the 2016 Election. Using self-report voter data from the American National Election Study (ANES), they observe that 28 percent of those who voted for Trump in 2016 had either voted for Obama in the 2012 Election or had not voted in 2012 [21] (p. 240). Of these two pools of voters that went for Trump, those who had voted for Obama in 2012 were 'disproportionately' likely to be working-class whites', while non-voters were most likely to be white [21] (p. 240). These findings are significant as they provide empirical weight to popular observations that the white working-class were crucial for Trump's victory.

### 2.2. Theoretical Background

Scholars examining White working-class support for Trump during the 2016 primary reason and in the immediacy of the election result initially used measurements of income in relation to the sociodemographic group. In attempting to dispel the "myth" of Trump's White working-class support, for example, Silver [22] pointed to state-level exit poll data from Republican primary states, which showed that the median household income of Trump voters was \$72,000, 'well above' the national median of \$56,000. There were, however, reasons to be wary of the conclusions drawn from data released in the immediacy of the election. This is because Roediger notes that class is 'not well studied by anyone via instant analysis of election results' [23]. Statisticians such as Silver [24] corrected these conclusions when the exit poll data was released. After the election, Silver [24] reran the numbers and found that 'education levels [were] the critical factor' in determining shifts in the White vote between 2012 and 2016.

Another way that authors of the literature have defined the White working-class is by educational attainment. One's class is 'not just about money', notes Williams [3] (p. 12). Levels of educational attainment also determine one's class status. The social and familial networks of American college graduates are entirely different from those of non-college-educated individuals. These differences are best expressed through what sociologist's call "professional" and "clique" 'networks' [3] (pp. 35–36). College graduates enter professional vocations, forming professional networks. Professional networks are composed of large matrices of acquaintances whom elite professional encounter in their specialised career field. Conversely, the working-class live their lives in tightly-formed and deeply rooted "clique" networks [25,26]. These networks have material benefits in working-class communities—people "have each other's backs", from babysitting their friend's children to assisting with house repairs.

However, educational attainment is not the sole determinant of class. Since class is a multidimensional concept, it is better conceptualised using multiple indicators. Reeves et al. [27] argue that education should be used to supplement rather than substitute other measures of class. We see this consideration in Williams and Boushey's [28] report on the work-family conflict in the United States. Here, they define the 'missing middle' as those households lying between the bottom third and top fifth percentiles of household income, as well as households in the top percentile in which no adult possesses a college degree [28] (p. 32). Williams and Boushey's [28] definition of class is more inclusive than one based solely on measurements of income because it intentionally includes sections of the American populace who, if defined by income alone, would otherwise be excluded from the middle-class.

Definitions of class in the studies discussed thus far have relied on objective and statistically measurable indicators such as income and education. However, they disregard the importance of an intangible, cultural aspect essential to class definitions if we are to understand its complex multidimensionality fully. This is a categorisation that scholars call subjective class identification [29]. Subjective class identity is an essential notion in the literature on social stratification. Despite the central role that the notion plays in the literature, however, issues surrounding the measurement and validity of such subjective phenomena raise methodological concerns. These concerns relate to the observability of subjective class identity when using traditional items of class measurement [29] (p. 610). One's racial identity is a variable that matters in subjective class identification [27].

The full title of Williams' [3] book is *White Working-class: Overcoming Class Cluelessness in America*, but class and race are not explored in a way that elucidates their complex relationship in the American context. We hear plenty of references to "working-class", but discussion of white workers is fleeting. Non-college educated Whites made up 63% of the Trump coalition [6] (p. 14). Consequently, we must look elsewhere if we are to clarify the role of race and class in America. Greater clarity in this respect comes from Reed [30]. Reed notes that the juxtaposition of class and race so 'familiar ... in debates about American inequality' misunderstands both phenomena by 'treating them as ... indistinguishable' [30] (p. 266). Discussing class in a vacuum errs on the side of 'simplistic, economic interpretation' [30] (p. 270). However, this is problematic, for it disregards the importance of the role race plays in class struggles in the United States. Indeed, such thinking was endemic of the 'inability' of large parts of the American left to think of race and class together during the 2016 campaign season [31] (p. 2). Bernie Sanders, for instance, who ran to the left of Hillary Clinton in the Democratic primaries, consistently emphasised that class was more important than race and identity politics [32]. Clinton, who was more embracing of the role that ethnic identity plays in class struggles, resultantly won the nomination.

A way of thinking about race and class that brings the two into one frame comes from Roediger [33]. In *Wages of Whiteness*, Roediger [33] argues that antiracist identity politics are a just response to the "racialisation" of class politics. *Wages of Whiteness* thus sets the foundations for critical whiteness studies to note how the category of "working-class" became intertwined with connotations of race. As Virdee [31] argues, to see oneself as working-class was also to see oneself as white and in 'relational opposition to ... non-White social groups' (p. 2). To authors such as Roediger [33], race is thus not a false construct of ideas and beliefs, but a simulacrum with a basis in reality. Consequently, we now see how race and class are better understood when construed as 'equivalent and overlapping elements' rooted in a 'singular system of social power and stratification' [30] (p. 266).

Race and class have a 'historically specific' meaning in America [30] (p. 272). Their intersection is a 'fact of life' older than the Republic itself [30] (p. 266). Examination of this history is absent in the works of class in America we have discussed thus far. Consequently, we now turn to an authoritative past voice on the subject. An authoritative text on the history of whiteness and labour is *Black Reconstruction* by Du Bois [34]. The "White Worker" that Du Bois posits reaps the monetary benefits ascribed by their class status. While a position predicated on racial disparities had prevailed

since the early time of the Republic, the institution of involuntary servitude had started to weaken by the mid-Nineteenth Century.

In 1857, anti-slavery fervour was catching in the English labour movement. However, such initiative had 'limited influence' across the Atlantic [34] (p. 25). American unions were willed to abolish servitude, but '[presently] self-preservation called for slavery' [34] (p. 25). In other words, unions expressed concern at the prospect of millions of poor White labourers competing for jobs with free slaves. Indeed, poor Whites expressed the 'vivid fear of the Negro as a competitor in labor [sic]' [34] (p. 29). While Wilson [35,36] questions the relevance of race around the economic arrangements of contemporary American society, the election of Trump prompts a re-evaluation. Academics and commentators debating whether economic insecurity or racial animus drove Trump's election have missed whether, in a Du Boisean vein, it is some alchemy between the two [37].

Now that we have considered three factors in the determinants of working-class whiteness—education, income and racial self-identification—we begin to see the multidimensional nature of the sociodemographic group. By extension, we also begin to see the complexities present in the formulation class identities at both the individual psychological level and for the measurement of the group in empirical research. An understanding of these multiple facets is especially vital regarding the later; to arrive at a definition of the White working-class that will serve as a basis for the subsequent measurement of the sociodemographic group, we now see that it is formulated by drawing from a combination of these factors. Notwithstanding, we are at a loss as to the relative weight of these factors in the formulation of a White working-class variable. Consequently, the next subsection provides a multinomial logistic regression analysis to see which factors the determinates of class identity for White Americans are.

### 2.3. *Modelling the Predictors of Working-Class Whiteness*

The last section delineated the three theoretical underpinnings of white Americans' identification with working-class strata. These are income, educational attainment, and a more subjective elucidation of class based on one's racial identity. Based on this theoretical review of the White working-class identity literature, The Author hypothesises that either income, education, white racial identity (or some probable combination of the three) predict working-class whiteness. To test this hypothesis, the Author ran a multinomial logistic regression. Multinomial regression analysis was chosen to model the predictors of working-class whiteness. This method was chosen over binomial logistic regression because the dependent variable—self-identified class status—has four reference categories in the ANES dataset; these are lower class, working-class, middle class and upper-class.

#### 2.3.1. Procedure

A sample population was drawn from the American National Selection Study (ANES) 2016 Time Series dataset. The 2016 Time Series Study was chosen because the dataset has a sufficiently large sample size ( $n = 4271$ ) to conduct the analysis. Additionally because ANES asks questions relating to White racial self-identification that other surveys such as the General Social Survey (GSS) does not. Without the addition of a White racial identification variable in the model, we would not be able to see if the construct is a predictor of working-class whiteness. Cases from the 2016 Time Series Study were selected if they met the criteria for being White and native-born. For race, cases were included if they were coded as non-Hispanic White. Meanwhile, native-born Americans coded as either being born in one of the 50 U.S. states or Washington D.C. were selected for inclusion.

After the population had been selected, the dependent and independent variables were then chosen. For the dependent variable, a question asking respondents to self-identity with one of four classes was selected. Next, three independent variables were selected for income, education and racial self-identification. For household income, respondents were given a range of incomes and asked which bracket their annual pre-tax income fell. For education, respondents were asked their highest level of educational attainment. For racial self-identification, respondents were asked on a 5-point

Likert scale how important being White was to their identity. Certain variables with large amounts of categories, such as income and education, were also recoded to simplify the number of categories. The income variable was reduced from 26 categories to seven categories. The educational attainment variable was reduced from 16 categories to six. The descriptions and ranges for all of these variables can be found in Table A1. In case of the need for control variables in the analysis, three supplementary sociodemographic variables that included sex, age, marital status as well as one socioeconomic variable, home ownership status, were selected for inclusion. Cases were excluded for nonresponse to and refusal to answer to ensure a complete dataset. After case selection and data cleaning, there were  $n = 1335$  valid cases from an initial total sample of  $n = 4271$ .

### 2.3.2. Assumption Testing

Before the multinomial logistic regression was conducted, assumptions had to be met regarding the suitability for the data for the analysis. Tests for multicollinearity were conducted to check that the independent variables were not highly correlated with one another. The Pearson Correlation Coefficient Test indicated that the independent variables were weakly correlated with one another, with the highest correlation being between income and educational attainment at 0.371. The full correlation matrix can be found in Table A2 in Appendix A. A further inspection of the Tolerance and Variance Inflation Factors (VIF) also indicated no multicollinearity present between the independent variables. The lowest score for Tolerance was income at 0.855 (a Tolerance value of less than 0.100 would indicate multicollinearity). Likewise, the highest VIF was also for income at 1.169 (a VIF of 10 or more would indicate multicollinearity). The full collinearity statistics can be found in Table A3 in Appendix A. After checking for no multicollinearity, tests were conducted to detect any outliers in the data. Cooks Distance and a test of Leverage Distance indicated no significant outliers within the dataset.

### 2.3.3. Model Fit

Three tests were conducted to assess overall goodness-of-fit and how well the model fitted the data. The first two tests conducted were Pearson's Goodness-of-Fit Test and the Deviance Test. As the Pearson and Deviance tests are a measure of how poorly the model fits the data, we would expect the tests to not be statistically significant to indicate a good model fit. Both of the tests indicated that the model was a good fit for the data. For the Pearson Test,  $X^2(495) = 411.828, p = 0.997$ . For the Deviance Test,  $X^2(949) = 377.429, p = 1.000$ . For the third test, model fit was assessed using the likelihood-ratio test. The likelihood ratio test works by analysing changes in model fit when comparing the full model to the intercept-only model. The difference between the  $-2$  Log Likelihood of the intercept-only model and the full model has a  $X^2$  distributed with degrees of freedom equal to the difference in the number of parameters. The model fit for the intercept-only model had a  $-2$  Log Likelihood of 1450.141, while the full model had a  $-2$  Log Likelihood of 742.640. The greater the difference between the two values, the better that income, education and White racial self-identification are in explaining class identity. This difference was 707.501, which is Chi-Square distributed with 45 degrees of freedom and is statistically significant  $p = 0.000$ . The final model thus statistically significantly predicted the dependent variable over and above the intercept model,  $X^2(45) = 707.501, p = 0.000$ . Overall, the model successfully predicted 62% of cases.

### 2.3.4. Results

Once all of the assumptions regarding the suitability of the data had been met, a multinomial logistic regression was performed to model the relationship between the independent predictor variables and native-born White American's self-identification with working-class strata. First, a Likelihood Ratio Test was performed on the model to test which of the three predictor variables were statistically significant (See Table A4). The test showed that income and educational attainment had a statistically significant effect ( $p = 0.000$ ). However, White racial self-identification reported a  $p$ -value of 0.282;

meaning that the variable had no discernible statistically-significant effect on predicting working-class self-identification. Next, the accepted 0.005 benchmark for statistical significance was employed for all three predictor categories (See Table A5). As evidenced by Table A5, the first four predictor categories of household income all had a statistically significant effect on predicting self-identification with working-class strata. The last two income categories (total household income of \$100,000 or more) had no statistically significant effect. Across all education categories except the graduate category, there was also a statistically significant effect on predicting the dependent variable ( $p = 0.000$ ). Consistent with the findings of the Likelihood Ratio Test, none of the categories within the white self-identification variable found a statistically significant effect on the dependent variable, with  $p$  values ranging between 0.074 and 0.674.

### 2.3.5. Discussion

These results indicate that education and income have a greater predictive power in accounting for working-class membership among native-born White Americans while racial identity does not. The results from the education variable perform as expected; we would not, for example, expect those with a higher level of educational attainment to identify strongly as working-class white, since graduates have higher average lifetime earnings than those with a lower level of attainment. The model shows this, with the odds of identifying with working-class strata decreasing as White Americans' level of education increases. The income variable is more significant than education in predicting working-class whiteness. White Americans in households making less than \$100,000 annually report a stronger association with working-class group membership. Among those making between \$0–\$74,999, the odds ratios are especially high and likewise increase as household income level decreases, except in the case of the lowest income bracket. (Table A5) In respect to predicting what makes one identify as working-class white, White Americans in households making less than \$100,000 is more important than levels of educational attainment or how important they perceived their whiteness to be. This finding could prove to be especially significant if it can be determined that income plays a factor in how White Americans wish to be perceived. This is to say that there may be credence to the idea that being perceived as working-class gives more credibility as an individual, even if one's income is sufficiently high enough to not make them "working-class". Such a finding would have important sociological implications, but further analysis is beyond the scope of the current paper.

While these findings are somewhat significant, we must exercise caution because the model only accounted for 47% (Nagelkerke 0.470) of the total variance of the dependent variable. This means that there are other predictors of working-class whiteness not accounted for in the analysis. These findings provide us with a more sophisticated and nuanced understanding of the determinants of class status among working-class whites. However, there is still further analysis that can be done if we are to fully understand "working-class white" as a variable. Given that we have partly accounted for working-class whiteness by means of a regression analysis, we can now contextualise the findings of the literature within this new definition.

## 3. Materials and Methods

### 3.1. Sources of Information

To ensure a comprehensive breadth and depth of sources on the topic, and to select relevant articles as well as studies for review, database searches were conducted on Nexis and JSTOR/Google Scholar (See Appendix A). Nexis was used to collect articles pertaining to popular narratives developed in commentary or the media on Trump's White working-class support, either during the campaign or immediately following his election. The JSTOR/Scholar databases were used to search for academic articles and studies related to the key words derived from each Sections 4.1, 4.2, 5.1–5.3 and 6.1–6.3. In addition to the database searches, a supplementary approach was used that works in two ways. First, academic reading lists were manually searched for contemporary and historical "authoritative"

texts which explain the forces behind Trump's win. It is recognised that there are works published just before or during Trump's election campaign, which "explain" or help to "understand" his level of support among working-class whites. Second, the bibliographies of relevant academic articles were manually searched to find additional studies potentially missed in the initial database search.

### 3.2. Search Terms & Delimiting

Specific parameters were set for the literature search. The boundaries were designed to be comprehensive enough so that all the relevant studies available were retrieved but narrow enough to focus discussion. To do this, each broader explanatory context of Trump's white working-class support was taken and narrowed further into constituent subsections, which were then simplified and turned into single words to be used as key search terms in the databases (Appendix B, Table A6)

### 3.3. Selection Criteria

The selection criteria are split into three stages. First, due to the paucity of peer-reviewed academic studies on Trump's White working-class support during the primary and campaign season and the immediacy after the election; the Author used Nexis to see if any narratives pertaining to the rise of Trump on the part of the white working-class emerged in commentary or the media. Articles, newspapers and wires were included if they referred to "White" or "White working-class" voters and mentioned Trump specifically. Contrarily, articles, newspapers and wires were excluded if they (i) were not published in the English language and/or (ii) were not published in the United States. Second, the Author conducted searches through JSTOR and Google Scholar using the key search terms delineated and included academic studies if they (i) were either quantitative or qualitative enquires (due to the newness of the field the Author did not exclude qualitative studies), (ii) were published between 2016 and the present and specifically referred to Trump, (iii) did not mention Trump specifically but contained key words related to key words theories which explain his win and/or (iv) had a high number of citations. Conversely, studies were excluded if they (i) were not published in English and/or (ii) were not subject to peer-review. Third, using a supplementary approach, the key words were typed into Google and searched for any reading lists. Any hits from the first page were then explored. Lists of recommended books cited in any reference lists or reviews were tabulated and those which appeared more than once were deemed to be "authoritative". The only text in this respect was *Black Reconstruction* by W. E. B. Du Bois.

## 4. The "Left Behind"

### 4.1. Social Mobility

We begin our discussion of the "left behind" narrative with an exploration of the concept of social mobility. Examples of upward mobility between classes seem outliers considering the many barriers to success that working-class children face in their early development. Belonging to a higher social class provides middle-class parents with the resources to support their children's learning [38]. Children from middle-class families and children who go middle-class schools enjoy the encouragements their parents and teachers give them to learn, from helping them with homework, to getting highly-structured private tuition [39] (p. 1108). Conversely, working-class children often lack external support from both their parents and teachers. This is because their home and educational environments are not furnished with the same resources that middle-class children have. Such examples include access to the internet at home and attendance at schools with a higher teacher–pupil ratio. As a result, Reay et al. [39] observed that working-class children tend to report higher levels of self-regulation in learning than those who are not of a working-class background (p. 1108).

Working-class students possess a resilience to cope with adversity; an ability with a more significant association among working-class cohorts vis-à-vis 'middle-classness [sic]' [39] (p. 1110). In working-class contexts, one assumes resilience. The quality becomes a valuable resource for



working-class students; when entering the world of higher education (HE), they find themselves in new and unfamiliar contexts. Still, working-class students entering HE experience difficulties in their first year [39] (p. 1112). Often, students describe themselves as feeling like a “fish out of water” [40]. In one study of the English education system, for example, Reay [41] interviewed mature working-class students, many of them entering university for the first time. Reay [41] found that students expressed fears of becoming lost within their new environment while they tried to “hold on” to a ‘cohesive self that retained an anchor in what had gone before’ p. 337). Granfield [42] finds that working-class students experience class stigma from “asymmetrical class interactions”. Many find themselves interacting with middle-class students for the first time [42] (p. 332). Consequently, working-class students experience devaluations of their own identity, reacting in ways typical of stigma management. Students came to see their backgrounds as a barrier to success since they lacked the cultural capital necessary to interact with their middle and upper-class counterparts [42] (p. 332).

Cultural capital refers to a collection of items such as tastes, clothing, mannerisms, personal objects and formal qualifications that are associated with membership of a particular social class. Bourdieu [43] argues that cultural capital comes in three forms. These three forms are embodied, objectified and institutionalised cultural capital. Objectified cultural capital comprises one’s property. The possession of cultural capital is thus symbolically conveyed and facilitated through the ownership of objects that one associates with higher forms of capital. Meanwhile, institutionalised cultural capital refers to the acquisition of formal titles and qualifications such as university degrees that symbolise cultural authority. We know from the postelection data that the majority of Trump’s working-class base lack possession of formal qualifications such as a bachelor’s degree [24]. Therefore, we begin to see a relationship between a lack of institutional forms of cultural capital and higher levels of support for Trump in the 2016 election.

The other form, embodied cultural capital, is best understood when considered about Bourdieu’s [43] notion of habitus. Habitus is the embodiment of cultural capital. It refers to the long-established set of habits and dispositions that individuals acquire through their experiences in a variety of distinct “fields”. Each field thus has its own set of rules and unwritten truths (Doxa), as well as forms of cultural capital. One’s habitus, or taste in cultural objects such as art and clothing, thus differs depending on what field they belong to. In *Distinction*, Bourdieu [43] links individual tastes to one’s ingrained social class position (p. 100). For instance, Bourdieu [43] observes that individuals in French society belonging to upper-class strata had “highbrow” tastes in art (p. 32). Such individuals had been exposed to art at a relatively young age and had learned a longer amount of time to begin to appreciate it. Conversely, working-class individuals had not had the same level of exposure to high art and, by extension, had not accrued the habitus necessary to partake in the “game” of ‘high art’ appreciation [43] (p. 34).

This condition is likewise apparent in the field of elite education. Working-class students entering this field have the distinction of being cultural outsiders. This is because they lack the ‘manners of speech, attire, values and experiences’ associated with those of higher classes [42] (pp. 336–337). Granfield [42] finds that students manage class stigma by adopting such mannerisms but afterwards felt guilty for “selling out” on their class as a result of their adjustment strategies. They managed this ambivalence by maintaining an ‘ideological distance’ between the very classes that they were trying to emulate [42] (p. 344). Successful working-class students also feel guilty about their newfound upward mobility, including, for instance, avoiding those who ‘remind [them] of their social obligations towards helping the less fortunate’ [42] (p. 347). Just the mere association with individuals whose career trajectories involve helping the disadvantaged led to ‘considerable uneasiness’ in working-class law-students who had entered large firms [42] (p. 347).

However, upward mobility is only one example of various types of mobility. Another type of mobility especially relevant in the literature on the American white working-class is the notion of “horizontal” or geographic mobility [5]. Whereas the notion of upward mobility refers to mobility between class strata, geographic mobility, on the other hand, refers to the mobility of labour across

geographically-defined spaces, as well as the migration of people from one community to another. The next subsection thus explores whether geographic mobility provides a robust explanatory context as to how the white working-class are “left behind”.

#### 4.2. Geographic Mobility

A lack of geographic mobility mainly affects rural communities. Areas across America with the highest variation in rates of upward mobility tend to be in rural areas. In a recent county-level analysis, Krause and Reeves [44] conclude that rural areas with higher rates of geographic mobility tend to have higher quality education and lower rates of residential segregation. Most strikingly, however, they find that rural areas with the best rates of upward mobility are the ones with the highest rates of out-migration [44] (p. 19). It is clear from qualitative interviews with rural Americans that they are “angry” at Washington and the political class [7,8,45]. Rural Americans are in no doubt that the federal government is to blame for many of the problems raised in Krause and Reeves [44] Brookings report. Findings from the 2017 Kaiser Family Foundation/Washington Post Partnership Survey reveal that rural Americans express broad scepticism that Washington is fair or effective at improving people’s economic situations [46]. For instance, 64% of rural Americans believe federal assistance is going to “irresponsible people getting government help they do not deserve” is a more common occurrence than “needy people getting by without government help” [46] (p. 14). Elsewhere, the rural–urban schism becomes apparent—another 50% of rural respondents consider that Washington does more to help those living in urban areas. While only 37% think Washington treats rural and urban areas the same [46] (p. 17).

These statistics echo the findings of Wuthnow in *The Left Behind: Decline and Rage in Rural America* [7]. Based on an eight-year study involving interviews with rural Americans, Wuthnow finds that Washington is not only geographically distant from the rural heartland but that its inhabitants bespeak a cultural divide. The federal government is also perceived in ways which are ‘threatening’ to their small-town ways of life [7] (p. 101). Wuthnow heard a common refrain when asking rural-folk what they thought of Washington—a variation of the phrase “leave us alone!” [7] (p. 101). Interviewees also expressed anger at overburdensome government regulations. Not in the way that one might hear Congressional Republicans decry excess “red tape”, but because of the impact that regulations had on their local facilities [7] (pp. 104–105). It is not a simple case of rural Americans disliking regulations. If it were, it becomes difficult to explain why so many ‘think [that] Washington is broken’ and how this relates to the ‘moral fabric’ of their communities [7] (p. 106). The answer, Wuthnow contends, lies in the ‘culture [that rural Americans] think dominates Washington’ [7] (p. 106).

Some argue that rural Americans are not entirely blameless for their predicament. For example, in an interview with Vox, Illing proposes to Wuthnow that rural American’s were not “left behind”, they just ‘chose not to keep up’ [47]. However, this is too simplistic an argument that ignores the barriers to successful horizontal mobility that rural residents face [48,49]. Leaving also entails losing the little semblance of community that rural Americans have left. Once those clique networks have disappeared, that is it. Wuthnow concurs and observes that rural townfolk ‘like knowing their neighbours’ and living in a community which feels ‘small and closed’—they are making the best of a bad situation, and ‘they [nonetheless] choose to stay’ [47].

In summary, the “left behind” section has brought two major contributions to the focus of the review. First, we see that the American white working-class possess a collective dearth of social and geographic mobility, as well as accrued forms of institutional and embodied cultural capital. Second, we are aware that a lack of these items, which collectively form notions of working-class “left-behind-ness”, may explain as to why the group coalesced around Trump. Part of this stems from the observation that “left behind” Americans tend to see the elites in Washington at fault for failing to improve their conditions and make their lives better [7]. Meanwhile, Trump positioned himself as an outsider who claimed that the Washington “swamp” was broken and that he was the one who could fix the problems faced by the white working-class.

Notwithstanding, there are salient forces behind the election Trump that does not fit “left behind” thinking. For instance, how are we to explain the unexpectedly high levels of public acceptance from a sizeable wedge of the American populace of Trump’s controversial statements aimed at minorities and immigrants? Examples of these questions are ones broadly concerning issues of culture. More specifically, however, they are ones that are motivated by a fear of the erosion of a dominant cultural position expressed by white Americans. Such considerations have taken a back seat to more extensive discussions of mobility in the working-class ethnographies we have discussed thus far [4,5]. Consequently, the review next turns to examine a second significant explanatory context. The second major section will address the salient issue of cultural decline, and how such a decline may have led white working-class Americans to coalesce around Trump in the 2016 Election.

## 5. Cultural Decline

In a widely read article published during the 2016 US primary season, Malone [50] observed that something was driving Trump’s support that was considerably more significant than working-class anger at being “left behind”. ‘Looking at the numbers’, said Malone, it seemed that Trump’s voters cared more about ‘cultural conservatism [and] racial resentment’ than they did other issues [50]. Indeed, results of a FiveThirtyEight/SurveyMonkey poll found that ‘one of the most indicative’ variables in determining Trump support was the number of people who agreed with the statement: ‘the number of immigrants who come to the United States each year should decrease’ [50]. Trump’s rhetoric was polarising. It is clear that his words resonated with the sort of “populist” sentiments on issues like immigration. The 2016 Republican field was the largest in the recent history of either major political party until the 2020 Democratic primaries. Voters had a full range of varying forms of conservatism to choose from. From libertarianism (Rand Paul) to social conservatism (Mike Huckabee, Rick Santorum), to neoconservatism (Lindsey Graham), yet Trump prevailed with his nationalist populist brand of conservatism [51]. The following section proceeds to discuss what it was Trump said regarding America’s cultural decline that seemed to resonate with White Americans in particular.

### 5.1. *Animus and Resentment*

As the values of today’s younger, more ethnically-diverse cohorts have become cosmopolitan, the more ‘traditional’ values of older, less educated and more ethnically homogenous generations have not changed [11] (p. 101). Today’s postmaterial society is out of step with the world that older white Americans once knew, leading them to feel displaced and resentful. The faster that these changes have occurred, the more stoked the ‘culture wars’ (i.e., the conflict between older generational values and postmaterialist values) have become [11] (p. 123). Examples of significant sources of resentment include hostility towards immigrants, as well as religious and ethnic minorities, who likewise bring value change to previously homogenous societies [11] (p. 91). Using intergenerational cohort analysis, Norris and Inglehart [11] find that older, less educated generations tend to express such sentiments more so than younger cohorts (p. 98). Most strikingly, they find that support of populist parties and leaders who defend traditional cultural values and make xenophobic and nationalist overtures skew towards the same group [11] (p. 20).

Authors in the American literature observe that Trump stoked resentment towards immigrants and minorities in an attempt to mobilise support among white Americans. Jardina [52], for instance, notes that the only agenda issue on Trump’s campaign website when he first launched his candidacy for President in July 2015 was about immigration restriction (p. 233). This was a sign that resentment towards immigrants was one of his primary strategies in garnering greater support among anxious white voters. In another example, Bobo [10] notes that Trump ‘fuelled and exploited anxiety’ about America’s increasing diversity by ‘demonising [sic] and scapegoating Mexican immigrants [and] Muslims’ (p. 99). Likewise, Schaffner et al. [53] note that Trump’s ‘strategy’ involved ‘using explicitly racist . . . appeals to win over white voters’ (p. 15). However, Schaffner et al. [53] use the premise of racism without exploring the meaning of the term concerning the group (white Americans) studied.

While Schaffner et al. [53] do not raise racism as a moot point; greater conceptual clarity of racism is needed if we are to understand how it drove Trump support.

Bobo's [10] study stands out in this regard. Devoting four pages to a careful elucidation and definition of racism, Bobo [10] contends that 'white supremacist notions' influenced Enlightenment thinking and its subsequent application in the construction of American institutions at the Founding (p. 89). We find that the durability of 'structural racism' was seen from the establishment of Jim Crow laws to the struggles of the civil rights movement [10] (p. 91). Throughout American history to today, racism in America has meant a continual denial of 'full and common humanity for members of a particular group' [10] (p. 99). Bobo goes on to say that Trump's desire to "Make America Great Again" was a 'none-too-subtle dog whistle' to a desire for his supporters to return to a privileged white position [10] (p. 100).

The notion of the "restoration" of American greatness is far from new. Many a politician employed "Make America Great Again" as a slogan in their political campaigns before Trump service-marked the term in 2015. For example, amid stagflation and a worsening economy under President Carter, one of Reagan's folksy campaign slogans in the 1980 presidential election was "Let's Make America Great Again". This earlier example highlights the evolution of the type of restoration promised by its chief orator. While Reagan's message was primarily a promise of the restoration of economic security of the working-classes, Trump's use of the term harks to the restoration of an increasingly fading dominant cultural position held by white Americans. Bobo's [10] theoretical piece does not set out to engage in a detailed empirical explanation of the relationship between levels of anxiety and threat towards increasing ethnoracial diversity and white working-class voter mobilisation in the 2016 election. Nonetheless, tying the "MAGA" message of ideas of white hegemony in this analysis lays the groundwork for further empirical research into the fact that white Americans feel as if their group position is under threat. Consequently, the next subsection turns to examine what authors of the literature call "group-threat", and whether or not the condition has any effect on the coalescing of white Americans around right-wing populist actors such as Trump.

## 5.2. Group Threat

Theoretical analyses on the motivational foundations of conservatism suggest that societal instability, uncertainty and the perception of threat are associated with endorsement of conservative views [54,55]. However, dominant group members do not just react to physical threats of danger, but also abstract concerns such as the future loss of their majority status. Threats to a group's position trigger what authors of the intergroup relations literature call "out-group prejudice" [56,57]. For example, in an experimental study testing if intergroup threat moderated the relationship between group status and group identification, Morrison et al. [58] found that members of 'high status' groups were more likely than those with lower-group membership to respond to threat with a high social dominance orientation. High levels of social dominance orientation are a "strategic" or group-serving response to an external threat. The casual inference being that dominant group members 'feel as though they have more to lose' if a threat becomes realised and thus react strategically to preserve their dominance [58] (p. 209)

Research examining reactions to majority-minority ethnoracial demographic shifts reveal that white Americans imagining a future white minority perceive the shift as a threat to their ethnoracial group's societal status. This perception leads whites to express more negative racial attitudes. In an experimental study using psychological items to gauge how the salience of America's demographic shifts affected white American's party-political preferences and ideologies, Craig and Richeson [59] exposed their participants to information conveying facts about demographic change. After exposure, they found that white Americans endorsement of more conservative candidates and policies increased [59] (p. 1196). The most important implication of the study was that white Americans might become increasingly likely and motivated to support conservative candidates and policies in response to increasing ethnoracial diversity [59] (p. 1196). The study carries further foresight because Craig and Richeson noted that

commentators [60,61] were being too premature about the decline of the Republican Party due to the waning electoral influence of white Americans.

The literature that has been published since Trump's victory attests to Craig and Richeson's [59] prescience. Mutz [9] tracks the same voters between the 2012 and 2016 Presidential Elections to see if issue positions on race reflecting perceived status threat increased the likelihood of voters shifting to Trump in 2016. Perceived status threat, Mutz [9] theorises, makes the status quo and existing hierarchical and political arrangements 'attractive' to dominant group members (p. 4331). Amidst changing times, conservatism then surges as dominant group members long for the stable hierarchies of the past. Perceived threat triggers 'defensive' reactions from the dominant group, who place greater emphasis on the importance of group norms while expressing increased negativity towards out-groups [9] (p. 4331). When confronted with evidence of 'racial progress', Whites perceive threat and experience lower levels of control as a control group [9] (p. 4337). Mutz's findings are consistent with those of Craig & Richeson [59] in that we find that increased levels of threat led to greater levels of Republican support. Overall, changes in time over items related to racial threat, vis-a-vis economic anxiety, were 'far more influential' as predictors in vote change towards greater support for Trump [9] (p. 4338).

The "threat" literature also focuses on the exploitation of dominant group anxieties by right-wing populist political actors such as Trump. For instance, Bonikowski [12] argues that tendencies generally considered hallmarks of populist sentiment in the literature (for example anti-immigrant) from contemporary radical political actors are hallmarks of ethnonationalism. Ethno-nationalism prioritises ascriptive, immutable criteria such as race to dominant group membership, while emphasising exclusionary political behaviours such as nativism, xenophobia and religious intolerance [12] (p. 187). Ethno-nationalist majority fears are expressions of 'collective status threat' [12] (p. 201). The effects of these changes are seen as 'impugning on the life chances, dignity and moral commitments of in-group members' [12] (p. 201). These cultural cleavages are especially salient as they can be mobilised into political cleavages [12] (p. 189). Right-wing political actors use these cleavages to their electoral advantage by fuelling a 'politics of resentment' [12] (p. 184). Resentment is fired towards nondominant group members such as racial and ethnic minorities and immigrants [62].

The fact that these are ethno-nationalist hallmarks rather than populist hallmarks explains why, when Mudde's [63] framework is used, Bonikowski finds that the supply and demand sides of populism have remained relatively stable in an era of tremendous electoral success for radical right political actors [12] (p. 197). Mudde's supply/demand side schema [63], while seminal in the study of populism [64], is nonetheless deficient when attempting to account for Trump's victory, Bonikowski argues, since it misses a statistically independent dimension related to the degree of resonance of various political frames and corresponding popular attitudes [12] (p. 192). In classic framing theory, resonance is a cultural process that shapes a social movement's ability to mobilise its supporters around a core message [65,66]. Framing theory thus tends to see popular beliefs as static and their "activation" dependent on the right message. However, Bonikowski [12] proposes that resonance is a more fluid and dynamic process (p. 193). Citing McDonnell et al. [67], Bonikowski [12] instead posits that resonance involves feedback effects whereby "solutions" encoded in frames serve to generate or reinforce similar popular fears. Seen in this way, Bonikowski [12] contends that Trump's ethno-nationalist discourse led white Americans to connect their fears associated with America's changing demographics with their latent attitudes and support a candidate that offered radical solutions (p. 193).

Importantly, change is threatening to some but not all white Americans; a qualification that Bonikowski [12] and Mutz [9] omit. In a social-psychological study of white American voting behaviour in the 2016 election, Major et al. [68] found that white Americans' responses to increasing racial diversity depended on how strongly they identified with their ethnic group (p. 937). Whites in high ethnic identification with their group shifted towards Trump, whereas Whites in low ethnic identification with their group become less positive towards Trump. Concurring with Craig and

Richeson [59], Major et al. [68] observe that as white Americans' numerical majority keeps shrinking, white identity concerns are becoming increasingly salient in affecting white Americans' voter preferences. While previously disregarded in prior research on white voting behaviour [69,70], America's current political events indicate this is no longer the case [8] (p. 938).

A significant weakness of the "threat" literature is that it uses 'ideas of [w]hite racial identity and mobilisation [sic] without mentioning [whites] specifically' [71] (p. 700). In the contemporary literature on ethnic identity/group consciousness in America, the dominant focus is on the status of minorities such as Asian Americans and Hispanics [72–76]. An 'implicit comparison, control group or counterfactual in many of these studies is White American', note Wong and Cho [61] (p. 700). The omission of white Americans in both strands of literature is problematic for two reasons. First, a comparison point is needed with other races to understand how racial identity applies to 'all racial groups' and when (, and under what) circumstances it behaves differently [71] (p. 701). Second, white Americans' changing numerical majority status affects levels of white racial self-identification [71] (p. 701). As these levels increase, White identity has become politically relevant, and scholars must have the opportunity to study how white racial identity has changed as America has become more diverse [71] (p. 701). Addressing the lack of broader understanding of the role that white ethnoracial identity may play in driving higher levels of perceived threat is thus vital if we are to understand the salient factors behind the mobilisation of white working-class Americans in the 2016 presidential election. Consequently, the following subsection turns to examine the conceptualisation and construction of white ethnoracial identity. The following section also examines if (or indeed how) the formulation of a collective white ethnoracial identity feeds into political mobilisation of white Americans around nationalist right-wing social movements and political parties.

### 5.3. White Identity

Conceptualisations of white identity in the empirical literature hinge on two competing theories. These are colour-blindness and white privilege. Colour-blindness contends that white Americans have little-to-no race consciousness and are unaware of themselves as "whites". Such conceptualisations claim whiteness to be a 'sense of self and subjectivity ... unaware of its social foundations [77]. An aura of "invisibility" is thus implied in works which reference "colour-blind racism" [78,79]. Findings from the psychology literature add weight to the conceptual foundations of colour-blindness through the construction of validation and measurement instruments for individual racial identification and attitudes [80,81]. While the empirical findings of psychological studies also buttress the case for colour-blindness, such studies have small sample sizes [82], limiting their effectiveness in observing larger populations.

The second theory, white privilege, concerns whether whites possess an awareness of the structural advantages that their race affords them. Whiteness in this respect plays an integral role in enabling whites, as the dominant group, to maintain their position atop the ethnoracial hierarchy. The crux in the literature is whether whites are aware of these advantages. The straightforward answer is that whites are unaware and cannot acknowledge their advantaged position [33,83]. The more nuanced answer is that whites are aware of the consequences of racial inequalities generated by unequal hierarchies [84,85], yet cannot place themselves about a system of race relations to see how their structural advantages perpetuate the struggles of nondominant group members. However, as Hartmann et al. [77] point out, quantifying Whites' awareness of white privilege is 'impossible', since the action involves pointing out awareness in the question itself (p. 407).

For reasons noted, nationally representative data are scarce to test the validity of colour-blindness and white-privilege and their relation to formulations of white identity in America today. Some scholars, however, have attempted to fill the gap. For example, Torkelson & Hartmann [86] use survey data from the American Mosaic Project (AMP) to measure the comparative effects of racial/ethnic identity on White Americans (pp. 1316–1317). To assess the strength of white Americans' ethnic identification, survey participants were tallied and categorised as "salient" or "nominally" white ethnic. Torkelson and

Hartmann [86] found that ethnic whites were ‘not aligned with colorblind [sic] ideologies’ (p. 1324). While ethnicity did not have a subsequent influence of the racial ideologies of white Americans, it was correlated with increased levels of Whites’ awareness of their own racial identities [86] (p. 1325). However, the population of whites who identify as being ethnically white was rather small. Only 14% of all whites identified as white ethnic, with only half of those holding a salient identity [86] (p. 1321).

Likewise, Wong and Cho [71] use American National Election Studies (ANES) datasets to analyse individual psychological attachment to one’s in-group to gauge how white and African-American levels of racial self-identification varied between 1972 and 2000. They found that African Americans had consistently high levels of self-identification between 1972 and 2000 (76–87%), with only 11% maximum variance between any given reference point [71] (p. 705). Conversely, White Americans levels of racial self-identification fluxed over time (41%–75%), with a maximum variance of 34% between any given reference point [71] (p. 705). While white identity among white Americans did exist and affected out-group attitudes to other races, they noted that it had not yet become a ‘politicised [sic] identity’ in 2000 [71] (p. 716). Nonetheless, there was a ‘danger’ that white identity, while in an unstable state, could be ‘easily triggered’ by a ‘demagogue’ [71] (p. 716).

Indeed, a paper presented by Sides et al. [87] indicates that there is evidence that Trump “activated” white American group consciousness in the 2016 election. Using longitudinal panel data from the 2004 National Politics Study and the 2012 American National Election Study (ANES), they found a negative relationship between perceptions of discrimination against White Americans and voter choice for the Republican candidate in the 2004 and 2012 presidential elections respectively [87] (pp. 16–17). However in 2016 that all changed. Using similar datasets, they reported a ‘significant relationship’ between perceptions of white discrimination and higher levels of support for Trump [87] (p. 17). This paper is significant because it shows that the activation of white group conscious, previously considered ‘dormant’ in earlier elections [87] (p. 1) is dependent on electoral candidates who highlight the purported “threat” posed to white Americans by non-white ethnoracial groups. While previous right-wing presidential nominees and candidates used similar tactics in previous polls—for example, George Wallace in 1968 and Pat Buchanan in 1996—Trump’s activation of White group consciousness is noteworthy because he won his election whereas Wallace and Buchanan did not. The data thus suggests that the activation of white group consciousness has the potential to be a dominant force in the mass mobilisation of white Americans in future polls if it leads to electoral victory.

Most notoriously in the American context, white ethnoracial identity has been the mobilising force behind white supremacist/nationalist movements. The sociology literature has long explored the relationship of white identity as the basis for collective action. Well-known examples of such formations include the Ku Klux Klan and white militia movements [88] as well as more contemporary white nationalist movements such as the Alt-Right [89,90]. These groups all have salient features. They all construct White racial ideological frameworks which inform their policy preferences [91]. As social movements, they also provide ‘concrete’ organisations and institutions within which collective white identities are formed [91] (p. 255). This is realised through the creation of a space where a collective sense of group belonging can be fostered, allowing members to imagine a ‘larger White community’ [91] (p. 255), as well as through the dissemination of ‘cultural markers’ that signal white supremacist ideas [91] (p. 255). Examples include hooded costumes in the case of the Ku Klux Klan, and Pepe the Frog in the case of the Alt-Right.

Nonetheless, there is a tendency to conflate these fringe groups with more mainstream social and political movements around which white Americans coalesce. This is problematic because, despite their relatively small membership bases, white supremacist/nationalist movements have been afforded a ‘comparatively large role’ in popular definitions of white racial identity [91] (p. 253). This and the ‘ignominious history’ of white supremacy in America have created an ‘underlying normative bias’ tying expressions of white racial identity to ‘pathological . . . Jim-Crow style racism’ [92] (p. 439). Weller and Junn [92] argue that there are other ways of thinking about white identity in light of Trump’s support

among white Americans. They do not see white voters as voting against their material interests by voting for the Republican Party. Instead, by combining a rational choice voting perspective with a social psychological approach, they conceptualise white racial self-identification as a utility-based trait affecting voting and electoral candidate preferences [92] (p. 437). Seen in this way, White Americans perceptions of their own “whiteness” may be distributed across the cohort in ways identifiable and quantifiable in systematic survey data [92] (pp. 439–440).

To summarise the cultural decline section, we have seen that as America has become more diverse, scholars have studied how white Americans have reacted to change - for example through expressions of threat/fear of status loss. However, their analyses go no further, and they have not examined how such reactions are endemic of modifications in intra/intergroup behaviour related to the underlying changes caused by diversity. This is an essential limitation of the data because it ignores a growing body of literature primarily interested in ethnoracial American intergroup relations in an age of increasing diversity; America is becoming more ethnoracially and culturally diverse at an increasingly fast rate due to historically high levels of immigration and low white birth rates. If indeed whites do see themselves as an ethnoracial group and vote as such, then an examination of this literature is especially relevant as it provides a greater contextual awareness of the data presented in studies of the cultural backlash thesis. The inclusion of this body of literature in the review is thus justified if we are to, while remaining consistent with the research question, understand what factors led to white working-class American’s to coalesce around Trump. Consequently, the review now turns to literature which explores the effects of the increasing diversity on the intra/inter-relations of its constituent groups.

## 6. The Implications of a Changing America for Native-Born Whites

Despite Lyndon B. Johnson’s promise to the contrary [92], no historical “wave” of immigration to the United States has changed the country’s demographic makeup more so than the 1965 Immigration Act. Under the 1965 Immigration act, immigrants of nationalities were on an even footing for admittance into the United States whereas they had not been before. In just a short time, this new immigration, predominately from Central and Latin America as well as Asia, has radically altered the racial and demographic composition of America. In 1960, 85% of the population was non-Hispanic white. By 2016, this number was 61%. Meanwhile, Hispanics made up 3% of the population in 1960, and by 2016, this had increased to 18%. Likewise, Asians made up 1% of the population in 1965 and 6% by 2015. A study by the Pew Research Center [93] (p. 9) indicates that without passage of the 1965 Immigration Act, the composition of America would be markedly different today: 75% would be non-Hispanic White, 14% would be African American, 8% would be Hispanic and Asian would make up less than 1%. If these trends continue as projected, non-Hispanic Whites will only constitute a plurality of the population by 2055 [93] (p. 10).

### 6.1. Nativism

The data presented leads us into our first subsection of the “changing America” section. This subsection elucidates the history of nativist movements and nativist literature in the United States. Elucidation of the history of nativist movements and nativist literature before 1965 shows that Americans have long expressed uneasiness toward new immigrants. This uneasiness fed into Congressional legislative agendas and scholarly thinking in the early Twentieth Century. The 1965 Immigration Act superseded the 1924 Johnson-Reed Act. Under Johnson-Reed, national origin quotas excluded specific European groups. Such groups included Italians, Slavs and Polish Jews. The overwhelming majority of immigrants who had come to America under these quotas were from Northern and Western Europe. The passing of the Johnson-Reed Act was primarily a reaction to the influx of immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe at the turn of the 19th Century.

The “second wave” of immigration resulted in a surge of nativist sentiment. Nativists of the time were concerned that “America” was not defined in a meaningful way. A concern that America



lacked a unified national culture or identity was central to the development of nativist thinking. While immigration levels during this period reflected demands for cheap labour by big business [94] (p. 351), it increasingly became seen by nativists as a major threat. For nativists, immigration restriction was seen as a way to preserve “America” [95,96]. However, their conception of America was essentially a cultural monist one—by America, they meant the White, Anglo-Saxon culture of Colonial times. As Kallen [14] puts it, the masses of white English men in the colonies were seen by nativists as being possessed of ‘ethnic and cultural unity’, homogenous with respect to ‘ancestry and ideals’ (p. 191). Such racial overtures were blatant in pseudo-scientific nativist works of the time. In the *Passing of the Great Race*, for instance, Grant considers American culture racially determined as opposed by other indicators such as language or values [97] (p. 156). Grant feared that mixing with “lesser” groups (i.e., non-English white immigrants) would lessen the quality of ‘Nordic’ (Anglo-Saxon) stock, ultimately leading to a diminished America. Slavs were one such group believed to be racially inferior to Anglo Saxons [98] (p. 35).

In *Trans-National America*, an article remarkable for its optimistic internationalist fervour amidst the prevailing nationalist sentiment during the First World War, Bourne was fiercely critical of the nativists’ conceptualisation of “Americanization” for retaining essentially “Teutonic” or Anglo-Saxon conditions of assimilation. Bourne sees America as a ‘cosmopolitan federation of national colonies [and] foreign cultures, from whom the sting of devastating competition has been removed’. The American fold has a cosmopolitan spirit. There are ‘no ... masses of aliens waited to be assimilated ... into the dough of Anglo-Saxonism’, but rather ‘threads of living ... cultures ... striving to weave themselves into a[n] international nation’ [99]. America shall be ‘what the immigrant [has] a hand in making it not what those ‘descendant of ... British stocks ... decide that America shall be made’ [99].

## 6.2. Cultural Assimilation

Competing theories of cultural assimilation began to emerge as a reaction against the ideas of authors of the nativist literature. Israel Zangwill’s 1908 play *The Melting Pot* tells the story of David Quixano, a Jewish immigrant who comes to America from Russia after his entire family is killed in the Kishinev pogrom. Quixano writes a symphony espousing his hope for a world in which ethnic divisions have “melted” away. By all accounts historical reception to Zangwill’s play was enthusiastic. *The Melting Pot* presented an ideal ‘that was attractive to many Americans’ [100] (p. 29) and was operationalised into a sociological theory that accounted for the assimilation and transformation of different ethnic and religious groups into Americans sharing a common culture, developing common attitudes, values and lifestyles.

Scholars began to discredit the melting pot theory as early as the late Forties. Early studies pointed to the fact that assimilation of immigrants along religious lines had not occurred. Analysing longitudinal marriage data over 70 years, Kennedy found that religious endogamy among Protestant, Catholic and Jewish individuals residing in New Haven was rampant [101] (Kennedy, p. 332). Kennedy argued that the single melting pot theory must be ‘abandoned’ and replaced by the ‘triple melting pot theory’ [101] (p. 332). In a similar study a decade later, Herberg [102] concurred that the three great faiths in the United States constituted a triple melting pot. Until the sixties, the majority of scholarly works on American integration were ‘explicitly or implicitly based’ on melting pot theory [103] (p. 955). However, theoretical developments in the sociology literature during the sixties disregarded the theory for describing interethnic relations in the United States [104]. For example; the seminal work of Glazer [105] observed that ethnic assimilation was at best proceeding very slowly. The five respective groups of interest in their enquiry, African Americans, Puerto Ricans, Jews, Italians and Irish, retained their distinctive cultural patterns long after making port in New York.

Another theory that emerged amidst the surge of nativist sentiment at the time of the First World War was Kallen’s [14] theory of cultural pluralism. Instead of assimilating by “melting-down”, the idea was that different ethnic groups instead co-existed in their separate identities much like the ingredients in a salad bowl, bound only by the “dressing” of America’s democratic values and

institutions. Kallen [14] places emphasis on the inherent value of the ethnic and cultural differences of migrants, using Switzerland as an example of being ‘the most successful democracy in the world’ despite their ‘language, literary and spiritual conditions’ being German, Italian and French in equal measure (p. 220). While “Americanization” denotes the adoption of ‘English speech, of American clothes and manners, [and] the American attitude in politics’ by new arrivals, the process does not change the importance of those fundamental cultural and ethnic distinctions [14] (p. 192). For one can change their ‘clothes, politics . . . religions and philosophies’, but not their grandfathers [14] (p. 220).

Berry’s [15] theory of acculturation presents a more theoretically-sophisticated contemporary formulation of how various ethnoracial groups interact with one another in increasingly diverse societies. Berry observes that societies become more culturally plural (diverse) as a result of immigration [15] (p. 8). Cultural groups within society are unequal in terms of the power (numerical, political, economic) they wield [15] (p. 8). These power differences have given rise to the notion of majority/minority and dominant/nondominant groups in the contemporary social science literature [106,107]. In all pluralist societies, both dominant and nondominant groups ‘must deal’ with how to acculturate [15] (p. 9). Acculturation in its simplest definition is, therefore, the process by which one cultural group comes into ‘continuous first-hand contact’ with another [108] (p. 149). As America has become more culturally diverse, the interaction between its constituent groups has become an increasingly important factor in people’s everyday lives.

Dominant/nondominant groups must devise what Berry [15] terms ‘acculturation strategies’ (p. 9). These strategies are devised concerning two major considerations — first, cultural maintenance, or the process of valuing and preserving one’s own cultural identity. Second, contact and participation, or the level of involvement with the host culture or dominant cultural group [15] (p. 9). The four strategies of acculturation are assimilation, separation, integration and marginalisation. How these frameworks are adopted is dependent on membership of either the dominant or nondominant group. When individuals wish to shed their cultural identity, they seek contact with members of the other culture, adopting the assimilation strategy. Conversely, when individuals wish to retain their cultural identity while avoiding contact with members of the other culture, they adopt the separation strategy. When individuals wish to start networking with members of the other culture while maintaining their cultural identity, they integrate. Finally, when individuals are not interested in cultural maintenance (or cannot) and have no interest in interacting with members of the other culture, marginalisation occurs [15] (p. 9).

Assimilation is only successful when people can do so freely. If they are forced to, ‘it becomes like a pressure cooker’, Berry [15] observes (p. 9). Likewise, integration can only be freely chosen and well-pursued by nondominant groups when those in the dominant group are ‘open and inclusive in [their] orientation towards cultural diversity’ [15] (p. 10). The data on these conditions are striking among white Americans. Forty-three percent think those immigrating to the United States are making the country worse in the long run compared to 41% who do not [93] (p. 53). Conversely, African Americans and Hispanics both think immigrants have a positive impact. Many Americans also think today’s immigrants are not assimilating. It is the perception of two-thirds of white Americans that immigrants ‘want to hold on to their home country customs and way of life’, while only 32% think they want to adopt American customs [93] (p. 14). White Americans are also likely to hold more negative views on immigrants who mostly came after the 1965 Immigration Act. For example, over 72% say immigrants of Latin American origin have made a neutral or negative impact on American society [93] (p. 14).

### 6.3. Diversity and Social Trust

It is not just that White Americans hold low levels of trust towards post-1965 immigrants. Across the board, there is evidence that their trustworthiness is decreasing in everyone [109,110]. Trust is the bedrock of what social scientists call social capital. ‘It is hard to think of any form of social capital that could exist without trust’, notes Murray [111] (p. 251). Low levels of social trust

are endemic of lower levels of social capital. Specific dimensions of social capital, such as political and religious participation, are tangible and are statistically measurable using specific indicators. Examples of these indicators include rates of participation in political organisations and church attendance [112] (pp. 43–71). Trust, however, is somewhat intangible and thus harder to quantify. Therefore, the crux of the matter is how we take an abstract concept such as trust and operationalise it into a statistically measurable and observable phenomenon.

Many studies examining levels of social and civic trust in America use data from the General Social Survey (GSS), which has asked variations of the same question on trustworthiness since the survey's inception in 1972 [112–114]. Until recently, however, there has been a paucity of research on the levels of trust between America's racial and ethnic groups and white Americans most especially. One of the few analyses comes from Murray [111]. In *Coming Apart*, Murray [111] pared down into the GSS attitudinal data on social trust going back to the early seventies. Murray [111] found that the estimations of Whites aged 30–49 living in less-affluent, blue-collar communities on the issues of trustworthiness, fairness and the helpfulness of others had crumbled between 1970 and 2010 (pp. 252–254). Murray [111] does not affix chief responsibility to any particular variable to explain the precipitous decline in social trust among white Americans. However, he observes that social trust seems to be declining most precipitously in communities where ethnic heterogeneity is on the rise.

Indeed, a substantial body of evidence in the social capital literature shows that increasing diversity can have adverse effects on the levels of social capital within communities [115–117]. Putnam's [16] *E Pluribus Unum: Diversity and Community in the Twenty-first Century* is the most well-known study on the adverse effects of diversity. The literature before Putnam [16] shows two divergent strands in social capital. These are conflict theory [118] and contract theory [119]. Contact theory contends that diversity erodes the in-group/out-group distinction and enhances out-group solidarity (or bridging social capital), thus lowering ethnocentrism [16] (p. 144). Since Allport [118] formulated contact theory, much research has shown that positive group contact experiences towards groups such as the elderly [120] and those with disabilities [121] resulted in reduced levels of self-reported group prejudice. Conversely, conflict theory contends that diversity enhances the in-group/out-group distinction and strengthens in-group solidarity (or bonding social capital), thus increasing ethnocentrism [16] (p. 144).

Though contact theory and conflict theory have been compared against one another in the academic literature for over four decades, conflict theory is essentially an extension of contact theory under less-than-ideal conditions. Before Putnam's study, virtually none of the hundreds of empirical enquiries had ever attempted to quantify in-group attitudes. Instead, they measured positive or negative out-group attitudes, merely assuming that in-group attitudes vary inversely. Consequently, they presumed that their measurements of out-group attitudes were measures of ethnocentrism. Putnam [16] puts forward a thesis he terms 'constrict theory', contending that diversity, at least in the 'short-to-medium term', reduces both in-group and out-group solidarity (p. 144). His findings demonstrate a 'strong positive relationship between inter-racial trust and ethnic homogeneity' [16] (p. 147).

Ethnically diverse communities thus experience lower levels of social trust than those that are more homogenous. *Prima facie*, this is an admonition of conflict theory, but Putnam's findings are more complex, with Putnam [16] finding that ethnocentric trust is 'completely uncorrelated' with ethnic diversity (p. 148). The effect on diversity on intragroup relations was even starker in his findings. It was not, as Putnam said, that people were only distrusting of those whose race or ethnicity was different from their own; they did not even trust members of their group. Colloquially, people in ethnically-diverse communities tend to 'hunker down' [16] (p. 137). Kaufmann and Goodwin [17] call the phenomena of the withdrawal of whites from community participation under conditions of increasing ethnic heterogeneity an 'exit route' (p. 12). This "exit route" has been the subject of empirical scrutiny [122] since Putnam's [16] analysis. However, the 'voice' root, in which native-born whites express negative attitudes towards increasing diversity, and subsequently vote for right-wing populist actors, has not [17] (p. 120).

Kaufmann and Goodwin [17] address this gap by performing a meta-analysis of 171 articles that explore conditions of increasing ethnic heterogeneity and opposition to immigration, and how the two relate to support for anti-immigrant party platforms. They find that over 70 percent of studies report that diversity within areas increases levels of opposition to immigration and electoral support for the radical right among native whites [17] (p. 130). These findings are significant because the general trend highlighted in the studies is that rising diversity increases anti-immigrant sentiment and support for right-wing populist actors. This is noteworthy because not only are Western democracies becoming more diverse, but they are becoming diverse at an increasingly fast rate. Kaufmann and Goodwin [17] warn that these changes are still occurring. This is despite compelling evidence that local minorities foster inter-ethnic group contact and thus reduce levels of group threat at the meso-level [17] (p. 130). Consequently, as our democracies become more ethnically diverse, support for right-wing populist actors might increase too if the relationship between the two is proved to be linear.

## 7. Conclusions

The main objective of the review was to make sense of the currents that created the conditions for Trump's victory. The review does this by offering an explanatory framework for Trump's levels of white working-class support in the 2016 US election. These are the (i) left behind narrative, (ii) the cultural decline thesis and (iii) the implications of a changing America for native-born whites. The sociodemographic group were essential for Trump's victory and compromised a sizeable wedge of his voter base in 2016 [21]. However, a lack of consistency in determining what variables we should use to define the white working-class in the literature means that we end up with different conceptualisations of the group across studies. As we have seen, White working-class identity is a multidimensional concept [27]. Therefore, it is necessary to use multiple variables (race, education and income) in order to appreciate the varying complexities in the external formulation and construction of white working-class identity. We need to be able to define the group of interest in the enquiry if we are to understand how the explanatory accounts offered in the review relate to their motivations behind voting for Trump. The Author offered this by conducting a regression analysis to arrive at a robust approximation of working-class whiteness. We find that income and education, but income most especially, has predictive power in accounting for working-class whiteness. With this definition, we are now better able to situate the findings of studies on the white working-class in the context of Trump's victory.

Altogether, establishing an empirical definition of the white working-class by means of a regression analysis and offering the explanatory contexts delineated in the review provide the theoretical foundation for future empirical enquiry into understanding the predictors of white working-class support for Trump in the 2016 election. To further address this knowledge gap, the Author is currently in the process of developing an empirical framework based off the findings of the review. The framework will use composite indicators, derived from multiple independent variables. These composite indicators are to be tested in multivariate regression to test for any statistically-significant correlations between the salient factors discussed in the review, and increased levels of white working-class support for Trump in the 2016 election. This is important because to the Author's knowledge, no other empirical piece has aimed to measure the comparative factors that created the conditions for Trump's victory in 2016. If the relationships between higher levels of white working-class support for Trump and these salient factors (for example increasing levels of perceived white group threat) are proved to be linear, it is hoped they can be used as a predictive model looking forward to the 2020 cycle. Once we have established how these factors relate to the election of Trump in 2016, and his potentially upcoming re-election in 2020, we will be able to better situate them within the broader academic literature [2,11] on why right-wing populist actors are enjoying so much electoral success in recent times in the US, and across a range of advanced liberal democracies.

### Limitations

Trump's election is a relatively recent phenomenon. Consequently, the formulations of hypothesis that relate to Trump's white working-class support are under continued refinement in the academic literature. For instance, we have seen the limitations of some studies which analysed primary election data and postelection exit poll data in the immediacy of November 8 2016. The reliability of such data was questioned. Authors' immediate conclusions [22] based on readings and interpretations of these data were later revised [24] as data derived from much larger samples of American voters through ANES and the US Census Bureau became available to researchers. Because of such revisions, some authors' conclusions discussed in the review may be valid now, but those may be subject to revision in the future as more data are analysed.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Acknowledgments:** Thanks to my doctoral supervisory team at Nottingham Trent University, Kevin Love, Director of Studies, and Matt Henn, co supervisor.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

### Appendix A

**Table A1.** Sociodemographic/economic variables.

Variable	Description
Sex	Whether respondent is male or female.
Age	Respondent's age at the time of the survey.
Race	Respondents coded as non-Hispanic White.
Native-Born	Respondents coded as being born in one of the 50 U.S. States or Washington D.C.
Class	Respondents self-identified social class based on the class question in ANES survey. Categories include lower class, working-class, middle class, upper class.
Income Range	Household income recoded from original categories in the income question in ANES survey. New Income ranges include \$0-\$24,999, \$25,000-\$49,999, \$50,000-\$74,999, \$75,000-\$99,999, \$100,000-\$124,999, \$125,000-\$149,999 and \$150,000+.
Educational Attainment	Respondents highest level of education recoded from original categories in the education question in ANES survey. New Categories include no high school diploma, high school, some college no degree, junior college, bachelor, graduate.
How Important is Being White to Identity	Importance of being white to respondent's identity. Categories include extremely important, very important, moderately important, a little important and not important at all.
Home Ownership	Whether respondent rents home, pays mortgage, or owns home outright.
Marital Status	Respondent's marital status. Categories include married, divorced, widowed and never married.

**Table A2.** Correlation matrix.

	Income	Education	White Identity
Income	1	0.371	0.127
Education	0.371	1	0.101
White Identity	0.127	0.101	1 <sup>1</sup>

Note: Values are results from Pearson correlation coefficient test.

**Table A3.** Collinearity statistics.

	Collinearity Statistics	
	Tolerance	VIF
Income	0.858	1.166
Education	0.855	1.169
White Identity	0.979	1.022

**Table A4.** Likelihood Ratio Test.

Effect	Likelihood Ratio Tests		
	Chi-Square	df	p
Income	375.870	18	0.000
Education	145.465	15	0.000
White Identity	14.295	12	0.282

Note: “df” = degrees of freedom”, “p” = “probability value.

**Table A5.** Parameter estimates for working-class group membership among native-born Whites.

Predictor	p	OR	95% Confidence Interval for OR	
			Lower Bound	Upper Bound
\$0–\$24,999	0.000	9.383	4.210	20.911
\$25,000–49,999	0.000	12.092	5.560	26.297
\$50,000–\$74,999	0.000	7.256	3.310	15.906
\$75,000–\$99,999	0.000	4.465	2.015	9.898
\$100,000–\$124,999	0.219	1.746	0.718	4.248
\$125,000–\$149,999	0.583	0.679	0.171	2.701
\$150,000+	.	.	.	.
No high school diploma	0.000	7.489	3.152	17.791
High school	0.000	8.685	4.636	16.271
Some college, no degree	0.000	8.523	4.665	15.569
Junior college	0.000	6.588	3.494	12.423
Bachelor	0.000	3.923	2.152	7.152
Graduate	.	.	.	.
Extremely important	0.319	0.785	0.487	1.264
Very important	0.074	0.671	0.443	1.039
Moderately important	0.674	0.924	0.639	1.335
A little important	0.488	1.160	0.763	1.761
Not at all important	.	.	.	.

Note: OR = odds ratios.

## Appendix B

**Table A6.** Keyword search.

Subsection	Subsection Title	Key Search Terms
4.1	Social Mobility	Working-Class AND Education
4.2	Geographic Mobility	Working-Class AND Rural OR Geographic AND Mobility
5.1	Animus and Resentment	White OR Americans AND Trump AND Racist OR Resent OR Animus
5.2	Group Threat	Trump AND White OR Dominant AND Group Threat
5.3	White Identity	White OR American OR Ethnic OR Racial AND Identity OR Trump
6.1	Nativism	Nativist OR Nativism AND History OR America
6.2	Cultural Assimilation	Cultural OR Culture AND Assimilation OR Acculturation OR Intergroup
6.3	Diversity and Social Trust	Trust OR Social Capital OR Diversity AND White OR Americans

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