Once again on race and the 2016 elections

By Eric London
12 May 2017

The Democratic Party and its official and semi-official "left-wing" supporters are once again claiming that Donald Trump was elected president because white workers are racist.

The *Nation's* Sean McElwee and Jason McDaniel take up the baton this time in an article titled "Economic Anxiety Didn't Make People Vote Trump, Racism Did."

The authors claim that recently released data from the American National Election Survey (ANES) definitively proves that whites were motivated by racism to support Trump.

McElwee and McDaniel pour scorn on the "dubious nature of 2016 analyses that emphasize white economic anxiety." They even claim workers' racism is the cause for their sense of economic insecurity: "among a typical white person, anti-black and anti-immigrant attitudes feed negative perceptions of personal economic hardship."

Such stupid—and yes, racist—conclusions could only be reached through a toxic mixture of bankrupt politics and anti-scientific manipulation of the supposed data.

McElwee and McDaniel know what they want the data to say and they set about to prove it. They test workers' racism through a pseudo-scientific "racial resentment scale" based on several provocative questions whose aim is to solicit a racist response, like: "Agree or disagree: Irish, Italian, Jewish and many other minorities overcame prejudice and worked their way up. Blacks should do the same."

As a preliminary matter, Trump lost the popular vote by nearly 3 million and did not ride a wave of popularity from any section of the population to win the White House.

But even if one accepts the dubious "racial resentment scale" as a legitimate measure of social backwardness, the ANES data shows that white people's average "racial resentment" score has declined for both Republicans and Democrats since 2012. In other words, Trump won *in spite* of declining racist sentiments among white people, not because of them. It is no major analytical breakthrough to point out that more backward elements of the population will support a candidate with a fascistic, racist, anti-immigrant program.

The ANES data, final vote tallies, and new census reports allow a clearer presentation of voter shifts by age, race, and income in 2016.

With vote counting now complete, the following totals emerge: Trump won 62.98 million votes to Clinton's 65.85 million out of a total 230.59 million eligible voters. In 2012, Republican Mitt Romney won 60.93 million votes, while Obama won 65.92 million out of a total 222.47 million eligible voters. This means that as a percentage of total eligible voters, Trump and Clinton (26.32 percent and 28.56 percent, respectively) each won a lower proportion of the vote than Romney and Obama (27.39 percent and 29.63 percent).

What explains the decline in the percentage of eligible voters who supported both candidates? New US Census data shows that turnout declined among racial minorities. Among black voters, the decline was sharper than previously thought: turnout dropped from 66.6 percent in 2012 to 59.6 percent in 2016. The drop-off was sharp among black voters of all ages, including an 8.6 point decline for those 30-44 years old.

Turnout declined among Latinos except those aged 18-29. There, a slight 1.5 percent increase in voters from 2012 was half the 3 percent growth in total voting eligible population. On top of the decline in turnout among black voters, exit polls showed a significant shift away from the Democratic Party in 2016 among those who did vote:

In the key state of Michigan, black turnout fell by 2 points while Latino turnout dropped 34 points. In Wisconsin, black turnout dropped from 68 percent in 2012 to under *half* in 2016. In Florida, black turnout dropped 7 points in Florida. Had black turnout remained at 2012 levels, Clinton would have flipped Wisconsin, Pennsylvania and Michigan, enough to secure 278 electoral votes and win the election.

White voters made up a slightly higher proportion of the vote in 2016, but contrary to the *Nation* 's claims, exit polls show that whites of all ages shifted away from both

parties and toward third party candidates:

In both 2012 and 2016, white men made up 34 percent of the electorate. The four-point decline in the Democratic vote went entirely to third party candidates in 2016 and not to an increase in the Trump vote. This holds true among white voters (both men and women) of all ages:

Regardless, McElwee and McDaniel of the *Nation* conclude their article with the sub-header: "THE POLITICS OF THE FUTURE IS THE POLITICS OF RACE" and urge the Democrats to shift their focus even more toward questions of race and identity.

They conclude with this tidbit: "Another possible outcome [in future elections] would be for economic issues to simply further fall off the political map, with identity becoming the central battleground in American politics. This would involve Democrats reducing their commitments to economic equality, while Republicans embrace a sort of ethnonationalism. … However, so far, nothing like this has materialized."

McElwee and McDaniel are describing a process that has already taken place.

They fail to note a key fact from the very ANES data they analyzed: for the first time since the survey collected data in 1948, the richest 5 percent of white voters by income supported the Democratic candidate while white voters in the poorest two-thirds of the population supported the Republican.

In almost every election between 1948 and 2008, the Republican won the vote of the top 5 percent of white voters by a margin of over 10 percent, while working class voters supported the Democratic candidate. The Democratic Party relied on support from broader sections of the working class of all races as an electoral base and was obliged to present a program based on social reform. Through this dynamic, the Democrats were able to present their pro-capitalist, pro-imperialist party with a "popular" face.

Though the Democrats' rightward shift was well underway in the 1970s and 1980s, a major shift took place under Barack Obama. In 2008, the top 5 percent voted by a roughly 25 percent margin for Republican John McCain, but by 2012 the margin had been cut to roughly 5 percent in favor of the Republicans. The ANES data shows that this significant element of modern American political life changed in 2016, when white voters in the 0-16 income percentiles as well as those in the 17-33 and 34-68 percentiles supported the Republican candidate. In 2016, Clinton won the top 5 percent of white voters by roughly 15 percent.

Under the Obama administration, the Democratic Party proved itself as the preferred handler of the affairs of the financial oligarchy. Elected in the wake of the financial crisis and deep opposition to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, Obama helped oversee the bank bailout and the transfer of trillions of dollars of wealth from the working class to the rich.

The ruling class enjoyed the fact that Obama and the Democrats could cover their reactionary agenda with identity politics, using Obama's status as the country's first African-American president to reduce social opposition and cultivate the upper-middle-class as the Democratic electoral base. Clinton's campaign represented the next phase in this process.

The Democrats' orientation to the top 10 percent on the basis of identity politics has given the Republicans room to capitalize on opposition among the working class to plant closures and deteriorating social conditions. The Republicans attempt to direct workers' genuine hostility to identity politics in a right-wing, nationalist direction, bringing fascists like Steven Bannon and Stephen Miller into the White House.

But the lack of increase in the Republican vote in 2016 shows that white workers oppose identity politics not primarily from a racist standpoint, but because they recognize that it has nothing to do with improving the living standards of the working class of any race. This was proven in spades by the fact that Clinton's strategy alienated not only white workers, but large numbers of voters of all races who abandoned the Democratic Party in 2016, setting the stage for explosive social convulsions in the period to come.