

Trump's real constituency isn't the white working class at all



By **E.J. Dionne Jr.** Opinion writer November 12 at 7:14 PM

The focus on President Trump's political strength among white working-class voters distracts from a truth that may be more important: His rise depended on support from rich conservatives, and his program serves the interests of those who have accumulated enormous wealth.

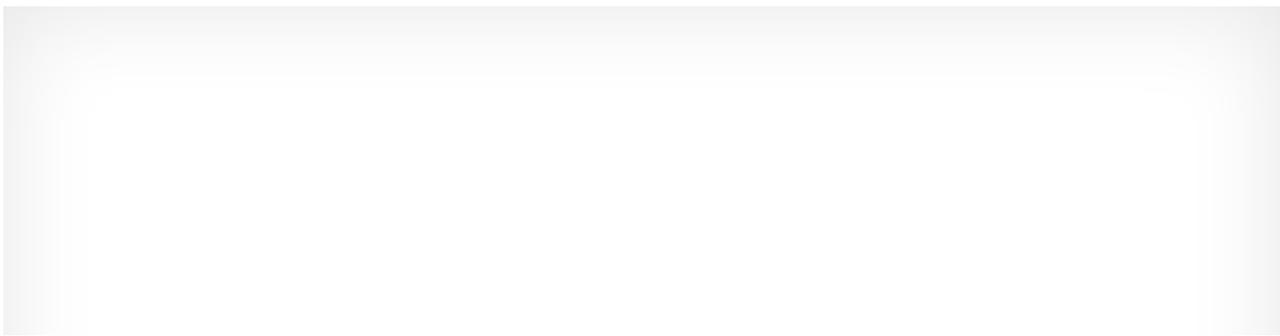
This explains why so few congressional Republicans denounce him, no matter how close he edges toward autocracy, how much bigotry he spreads — or how often he panders to Vladimir Putin and denounces our own intelligence officials, as he did again this weekend.

The GOP leadership knows Trump is tilting our economy toward people just like him, the objective they care about most.

To borrow from the president, he could stand in the middle of Fifth Avenue and shoot somebody and still not lose House Speaker Paul D. Ryan (Wis.) or Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (Ky.) as long as they have a reactionary tax bill to push into law.

Last Tuesday's elections demonstrated how fed up large parts of the nation are with Trump and how mobilized his opponents have become. The returns ratified polls showing the overwhelming majority of Americans rejecting his stewardship.

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Rather than just celebrate the good news, Democrats and anti-Trump Republicans should move next to undermine Trump's key asset. He needs to be exposed as a fraud whenever he says he has the backs of the "forgotten men and women" whose living standards have been shattered in the new economy.

Admittedly, doing this will be harder for conservatives than for progressives. After all, many conservatives have defended trickle-down economics for decades. But there is a wing of conservatism that has criticized the GOP for exploiting the votes of working-class Americans for years, even before Trump, while delivering them a whole lot of nothing.

This was the argument of the 2008 book "Grand New Party" by Ross Douthat, now a New York Times columnist, and Reihan Salam, an independent-minded conservative policy analyst. They proposed that Republicans become "the party of Sam's Club." But the existing party's tax proposals confirm that the GOP is the party of Prada. And Prada may be a trifle downscale to capture the radical redistribution upward that these tax cuts would bring about. It is Exhibit A for how far Trump and his party will go to entrench an economic oligarchy.

Trump's willingness to help Republican leaders pay off their largest contributors is the clearest explanation for why they debase themselves through their complicity with him. If you think this is harsh, consider the words of Rep. Chris Collins (R-N.Y.): "My donors are basically saying, 'Get this done or don't ever call me again.'"

I bet they are.

As Gary Cohn, Trump's top economic adviser, told CNBC's John Harwood: "The most excited group out there are big CEOs, about our tax plan."

They should be. The bills now before the House and Senate don't simply favor the well-off over the middle class and the poor. They advantage certain kinds of extremely rich people over Americans who work for salaries and wages, including some rather affluent people who draw those old-fashioned things called paychecks. Even Karl Marx would be astonished at how far Republicans are willing to go to benefit capital over labor.

All sorts of deductions used by the middle and upper-middle classes are being thrown over the side to pay for a cut in the nominal corporate tax rate from 35 percent to 20 percent, which is especially helpful to the biggest stockholders — and, in the House version, to relieve those struggling millionaire and billionaire heirs and heiresses from the horrible burdens of the estate tax. (The Senate version would reduce but not eliminate the tax.)

Repealing various tax breaks might be justified if these proposals actually simplified the tax code to make it fairer. But in many ways, this concoction makes the code even more complex with all its special provisions for “pass-through” income and the like. That’s another big lie in this deal: The GOP never cared about simplification. It just wants to further the interests of its flushest friends.

Oh, yes, and Republicans, who would demand that Hillary Clinton disclose every penny of her high school earnings from lawn mowing or babysitting, won’t think of asking Trump to release his tax returns so we can know how many benefits he might sign into law for himself.

The Trump regime is not all that innovative. It hides its policies behind divisive rhetoric about kneeling National Football League players — NFL owners would profit from the bill, by the way — and immigrants. This is the sort of thing right-wing authoritarians have done for decades. It never turns out well.

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