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The New Right: The Blue-Collar Ideological Shift Towards a Conservative Populism

"Make America Great Again" the populist rally cry of the 2016 Election was championed by none other than now President Donald J. Trump. His appeal to the populist blue-collar working class was shocking to some, but historically not unexpected. His promise to bring back manufacturing jobs to the United States by having "fair trade" resonated with the disenfranchised working class who felt once again left out politically, socially, and economically by the government and its seemingly progressive state. This promise however was not original. Ronald Reagan, the Republican "messiah" campaigned on this saying, attempting to restore hope in the minds of the American people. It is important to note not how the saying began, but why. Trump and Reagan, while different regarding ideology, campaigned on the populist ideal that the American people were being exploited by an elite power. The 1960s and early 1970s was a time of progressive legislation that displayed the changing tides of American culture such as the civil, women's, and LGBT rights movement. There was then a decline in these ideals because of the economic recession and threat to traditional values that influenced the blue-collar class personally. While many may argue Nixon's Watergate was the primary factor in the rise of conservative populism, the rise should be credited to the anti-government sentiments of the working class who felt neglected during the socially charged progressive decade.

The 1970s was a troubling time for the working class who felt left out economically, socially, and politically during the progressively charged movements. This, combined with the failed progressive policies of President Carter and governmental distrust from Nixon's Watergate scandal, led to a mass movement of conservative populism, specifically surrounding the working class. One survey question from the National Opinion Research Center observed that the lack of

confidence in the executive branch of the government grew from 19 to 43 percent in 1974.[1] The signs of disillusionment and government distrust left America's political future in much speculation. During this time of confusion and lack of trust many journalists, such as Herbert Levine of *The Nation,* link the decade as a warning sign to a potential fascist ideology. Similarly, another journalist, Lewis Killian predicted there will be a 'white nationalist socialist America no later than 1980."[2] The rhetoric here, is expressing the deep political anger of many blue-collar workers regarding the economic uncertainty and the declining confidence in politicians. James D. Wright, a sociologist at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, strongly argues that the statements above fail to comprehend the true threat of the rising discontent. The highest percentage of discontent came from the blue-collar workers, showing that their base felt alienated by the current policies. This is shown by data from a survey in 1970 measuring trust in government amongst different socioeconomic statuses and education levels. The data highlighted that approximately 40% of individuals with professional management positions had little trust, while among unskilled blue-collar workers the level of distrust was 66%.[3] Clearly, this displays the alienated working class feeling far more disenchanted with governmental institutions.

The rise in conservative populism amongst the blue-collar workers was caused by the specific policy failures from progressive leadership and the government's lack of ability to represent the interests of the American people, specifically the blue-collar class. The populist right allowed a new vision which would take away from the hostile "politics as usual" governing. This movement recognized the level of political apathy and used it to fuel its momentum. This led to a rise in the conservative populist movement amongst the working class based on the realization of the failure of progressive politics and the end of the progressive policies regarding the New Deal and Great Society programs.[4] The socially progressive government controlled era

came to an end when the focus shifted toward the economic recession of the 70s. Fierce criticism of the socially progressive era came with the attempt to pass the Equal Rights Amendment and the backlash from the Roe V. Wade decision. This revealed a conservative shift in the political atmosphere. Many progressive politicians like Jerry Brown, Hubert Humphrey and Michael Dukakis embodied the progressive political elite that much of America despised.[5] The New Right movement helped elect three conservative populist Senators, Gordon Humphrey (NH), Roger Jespen (Iowa), and William Armstrong (Colorado). In addition, it allowed conservatism to have a fighting chance in usually blue states.[6] In Massachusetts, due to raising taxes, Governor Mike Dukakis was not reelected. The Republican's now had an advantage regarding abortion, taxes, and foreign policy. They appealed directly to the white working class evangelical voters.

Many scholars recognize the rise of conservatism that emerged from the insecurities of the working class in respect to the progressive ideology that was championed in the sixties and early seventies. Historically, the Democratic Party has been the labor movement party with progressivist ideologies in regards to the interests of the common workers. However, there was a political shift in the seventies that began to transform the Democratic Party into the party for white-collar workers due to their failure to represent the working class. Organized labor was no longer on their structural platform. The following scholarly texts demonstrate this accurately. The article, "We Must Bring Together a New Coalition" argues that the white working class felt disadvantaged following the Civil Rights Movement and expansion of Affirmative Action in the 1960s and early 1970s.[7] Dennis A. Deslippe, a professor of American Studies at Franklin and Marshall College, explores the white working classes rejection of the progressive elite. This leads to a new conservative populist class. Specifically, he considers the role the blue-collar

workforce contributed to the representation of the 70s as a decade of economic turmoil from Democratic policies, raising inquiry and distrust in government.

Deslippe's narrative demonstrates the discontent of working class individuals who feel they have been ignored and neglected by politicians. Readers understand the anti-elitist rhetoric portrayed by the white working class by the description of a new conservative populism: objects, not subjects of an establishment.[8] Here, he explains the feeling of disenfranchisement the working class felt and poses questions on why this happened. Deslippe argues that the new conservative movement felt disgruntled with the establishment such as politicians, media, and corporations deemed the "elites." Elitists failed to represent the interests of the working class. The working class were poor economically and felt their interests were often ignored.[9] He asserts that the depictions of the working classes frustrations were not only based on the civil rights movement and progressivism of the 1960s, but the identity crisis of the white working class. The emerging affirmative action policies suggested "a complicated story of support for race sensitive programs."[10] This was represented by the white working class arguing that "they and their predecessors worked their way up from prejudices and so should blacks, without special favors."[11] His argument accurately displays the sentiments of the white working class and their rejection of progressive ideologies. From Deslippe's argument, readers conclude that the new color-blind conservatism occurred through white working classes feelings of a lost identity. Similarly, Deslippe displays the white working classes feelings by observing that the ethnic workers are now "understanding their position in capitalism; where they are powerless in the hands of the economic and political elite."[12] This example illustrates the experiences of many white working class individuals and how they shifted towards a conservative populist ideology.

Deslippe's greatest attribute is his ability to recognize that the political ideological shift was primarily caused by the identity crisis of the white working class.[13] He combines specific descriptions of the working classes sentiments and other scholars work to form a detailed perspective of the shift in political ideology. He shares the perspectives of many other scholars in his writing. These arguments offer an insight into the evolved conservative ideology.

While Deslippe's argument discusses the identity crisis of the white working class, Joseph A. McCartin, a professor of history at Georgetown University, looks at labor organization among the working class in his article, "A Wagner Act for Public Employees: Labor's Deferred Dream and the Rise of Conservatism, 1970-1976." His evaluation of the shift in political ideology in relation to the working class, serves to focus the readers' attention on the Wagner Act, which was enacted to protect workers from interference in their involvement with unions. McCartin's perspective on the failure of big government and the elite in terms of organized labor, argues that organized labor failed because the 1970s were a "far less propitious time for progressivism."[14] Essentially, the failure of the organized labor movement coupled with the failure to enforce the Wagner Act, can be used to understand the shift to a conservative populism in the late 70s. One of the most meaningful pieces of McCartin's evaluation is the analysis of political conflict happening between Democrats and their response to stagflation, budget deficits, and the economic crisis in the 1970s. This left Democrats conflicted with maintaining a "union friendly economy amid inflation and minimal economic growth."[15] The failure of the organized labor movement and struggles occurring within the party served to energize a conservative cause.

Dominic Sandbrook offers a similar approach to McCartin in his discussion of the failed progressive policies and the apathetic undertones of the working class leading towards a "new right." Sandbrook, author of *Mad as Hell: The Crisis of the 1970s and the Rise of the Populist*

Right and Visiting Professor of History explores the political shift towards a conservative ideology resulted from the failed progressive policies and establishment politics. Populism reawakened the 70s not only as a response to Vietnam and Watergate, but because of the conflicting views of liberalism and traditionalism. New conservatism allowed for "ordinary citizens to think about issues and bypass the monopoly the left has in the media, and let us go directly to the people."[16] Distrust in government, as Sandbrook explains, originated from the working classes disenfranchisement with the government and political establishment by their actions regarding civil rights and the economic crisis. Americans felt apathetic towards their government, specifically President Carter, during the oil crisis and the economic recession.[17] Deslippe and McCartin would agree, as their arguments suggests. Sandbrook's argument here, strengthens my argument based on the backlash of social progressivism amongst the working class.

The working-class sentiments of disenfranchisement are demonstrated by their feeling of being ignored by the same people who they elected to represent them. His strongest point is the rise of the silent majority. Sandbrook considers the struggles the working class faced as a result of the economic crisis. He mentions the collapse of the steel industry in Youngstown, Ohio and other industrial cities with the same story of "losses, plant closures, unemployment, despair."[18] During the downfall of the steel industry in Youngstown, Ohio and Mahoning Valley, the workers and their families marched and sang an optimistic tune, "back to work in Youngstown. I'm going to own a little piece of the steel mill, so will others in my neighborhood."[19] The federal government ceased to advance the loans needed and the steel companies had no interest in keeping the industry alive. The companies wanted the money. Thus, the working class responded with anger stemming from their now anti-elitist belief. The "industrial heartland fell

into an apparently terminal decay, labor organizers and blue collar workers slipped out of the headlines."[20] There was no hope left for the steel industry and the blue-collar class. Steel worker Len Balluck, who found another job years after the closures, said "this used to be our parking lot, it was always packed…right in front of the main entrance is locked…I've worked here for 23 years and now we call it the gravestone."[21] Sandbrook displays specifics on the sentiments of the working class based on the decline of industrial cities causing distress and disenfranchisement with the government. It was the end of the steel industry. As a reporter put it, "the dead steel mills [stood] as pathetic mausoleums to the decline of the American industrial might that was once the envy of the world."[22]

The arguments presented by Deslippe, McCartin, and Sandbrook offer a diverse look at how the populist right overtook American culture in the mid to late 1970s which collectively strengthens my argument. Deslippe and McCartin specifically observe the working class and their own identity struggle. Collectively they agree that the rise in conservative populism occurred foremost as a working-class response to the economic crisis and inflation. These sources consider the ways the populist right challenged and overtook the progressivism of the 1960s and early 1970s. Together, these works serve explain the conservative populist ideology and shifts in political power regarding the working class.

Sandbrook adds to the previous arguments detailing how the working class evolved throughout the decade in response to the more progressively charged sixties. He observes that the working class felt threatened by the lack of traditional values displayed in the media. The feminist movement, including the attempt to pass the Equal Rights Amendment, faced conservative traditional backlash. Sandbrook's analysis of the 1970s supports my argument thoroughly. Additionally, he stresses the influence of pop culture in his book which represents a

more intimate background for the 1970s. For example, he discusses the television show "All in the Family" and Bruce Springsteen's music to portray a disgruntled working class (even though Springsteen's music is primarily progressively based). Sandbrook's text clearly represents an analysis of the struggling traditionalist working class leading to a shift in political culture.

With the decline of America's industrial cities and the rise of economic recession, 1970s "liberalism lacked [an] economic blueprint to match its social agenda."[23] The sixties and early seventies were decades of a socially progressive left through political legislation that catered specifically to those who had been marginalized. The white working class however, felt left out during this movement because their traditional values were challenged. Jefferson Cowie, the author of "Vigorously Left, Right and Center" argues that the shift in the political ideology of the working class went hand in hand with government distrust. He believes that while some say the seventies was an apolitical decade, the seventies were a time of great confusion among Americans towards who and what to trust. The working class felt left out by progressive politicians due to the social programs of the 1960s, attempting to create equal opportunity for those who have been marginalized in the past. Many were disenfranchised toward government based on their feelings that the elitists and Democrats were not listening to the common man.[24] Towards the end of the 1970s as the labor movement failed, deindustrialization weakened the once industrial heartland, a new ideological movement was formed titled the "Reagan Democrats" who were traditionalists, against free trade and were given the label, "the forgotten worker."[25]

Similarly, Derek Catsam's article, "Beyond Vietnam and Watergate, Rethinking the 1970s," argues that American's lack of faith in government were not necessarily caused by Watergate and Vietnam but they added to the already vulnerable economy and working class. I

agree with his argument that there was a gradual shift politically amongst the working class. The Democratic Party was no longer the party of change and the "common man." Catsam looks at socioeconomic trends and working class ideology to understand the shift in political identity among the working class. Specifically, he mentions the "social tumult of the 1960s coupled with the uncertain economic climate, [caused] the white working class to feel squeezed."[26] This led to a shift towards Reagan conservatism, primarily based on the Reagan platform that allowed the white working class to feel represented and for once, understood. Catsam also uses Sandbrook's "Mad as Hell" to understand the 1970s as a decade of the forgotten worker revealing the distrust and hopeless sentiments from the working class. Specifically, Catsam uses Sandbrook's argument of the rise of the evangelical right arguing that "one of the more visible and noteworthy political trends that commenced in the 1970s and continued into the 1980s was the involvement of Christian evangelicals in American political life."[27] His understanding of the seventies as more than just a decade of distrust from Nixon's Watergate and the Vietnam war allows the reader to gain knowledge and form new perspectives that caused the rise of conservatism among the working class in the 1970s.

The New Right played to the emphasis of the working classes sentiments towards cultural issues. The sixties and early seventies were a decade of significant change through integration, abortion, ERA, and the rise of the LGBT movement. Many challenges were faced in the ability to attack these progressively charged beliefs. The New Right observed these confusions which allowed the evangelical right to identify with a more conservative ideology. James Davison Hunter's book titled *The Culture Wars,* argued the "major cultural cleavage dividing leftists from traditionalists is in the basis of their moral values."[28] Each group contributed to the struggle over the national identity. When television and pop culture during the 1970s beamed of obscenity and

moral corruption the evangelicals were the first to mobilize an effort to diminish these values. Many evangelicals were in stark opposition regarding the advancement of secular humanism relating to the relaxation of obscenity laws and the outlaw of prayer in schools.[29] These progressive decisions ended up strengthening the religious right movement. When the anti-abortion movement failed to overturn Roe V. Wade, it provided a rallying point for traditionalists as well as being a symbol for the collapse of the American family.[30] Reagan, being a brilliant political leader and spokesman, captured the moral majority during his acceptance speech at the Republican Convention in 1980, saying "I'll confess that I have been a bit afraid to suggest what I am going to suggest. I am more afraid not to. Can we begin our crusade joined together in a moment of silent prayer?" After a few moments, his words truthfully and solemnly echoing with emotion in a silent room, "God bless America."[31]

The rise of the gay movement in the media, allowed for more acceptance of the subject. This, however, again had stark opposition from the evangelical working class. There was a struggle between "Christian values and godless secularism."[32] The media and progressive politicians promoted LGBT liberation which made evangelicals feel threatened by the pressure to conform to those values against their comfort zone. Ronald Reagan captured a rhetorical mastery when he delivered to a crowd of evangelicals, "I know that you can't endorse me, but I want you to know that I endorse you, and what you are doing."[33] This statement drew a thunderous applause from the audience realizing that their conservative evangelical values have finally been recognized and will be acted upon.

Perhaps Sandbrook's most prominent strength lies in his ability to observe differing perspectives in the cause for the rise of the populist right. Throughout his book, he gives multiple arguments for the people's lack of confidence in government. For example, he argues that while

the oil crisis, Watergate, and hostage crisis are certainly important to notice, the main factor in the political shift is the working-class sentiments towards economic recession and their resistance to a changing time. "Mad as Hell" is creatively organized to share a variety of cultural aspects. His use of pop culture regarding traditionalism, the working class, and Watergate allow the audience to receive a personal glimpse of the 1970s through Sandbrook's eyes.

In the *New York Times* article titled, "Conservatism: Mood or Trend," Stephen Salmore gives an understanding of the political ideologies during the 1970s. He highlights public polls surveying Americas view of the political landscape. Many politicians and pundits, according to Salmore, have "mistaken the change in mood for ideological reorientation."[34] Polls could not recognize the differences between liberal and conservative views, but they did recognize the detection of the rising suspicion of change, especially into an unknown direction. This made many individuals fearful which led to their resistance of the previous challenging of the status quo in the 1960s. Problems are being seen as unsolvable, and the assumption that "things will work out" is fading.[35]

The sixties were filled with optimism of positive social and political change through the left's Great Society and "progressive" platform. However, there soon would be a rise of discontent relative to the progressive shortcomings involving the economy and foreign policy. Salmore makes a valid point here when he views the government distrust as a result of the decline of willingness to partake in or support change. The progressive platform was lacking support relative to their perceived weakness abroad. This is where I wish Salmore would expand upon. In his article, he discusses the issue of income tax and the economic pressures relative to the political shift. However, his argument would be strengthened if he added the threat of foreign powers in relation to the oil crisis towards the end of the seventies. All the sources above,

effectively give insight to readers regarding the rise of conservative populism and political shift among the working class. While these authors may disagree pertaining to why the shift occurred, all of the articles have a common theme relating to the challenging of the status quo, protection of traditional values, and the effects of the progressively charged decade of the 1960s on the working class.

Many individuals blame the government distrust and shift in political power on the lack of transparency and honesty during the Nixon Administration. While Watergate was an extremely important factor in fueling government distrust, it is not the primary example. The working-classes anti-government response to the progressive sixties fueled government distrust throughout the nation. Progressivism seemed to work socially but it failed economically. Industrialized America was on a decline, trust in the government was at an all-time low, and traditional values were being challenged. America may have been ready for change in the sixties, but too much change in a time of uncertainty was enough to stir up apathy towards the government. Towards the mid to late seventies, Ronald Reagan, Governor of California at the time, knew how the working class was feeling and observed that America was headed in the wrong direction. He wanted to fix it and allow the common man to have a voice in government, and that's what he campaigned on. Reagan's ideals reflected a working class that felt frustrated by a corrupt and secular progressive elite. Similarly, a mere thirty-seven years later, on January 21st, 2017, an outsider who ran on an anti-elitist populist ideal regarding the sentiments of the working class was inaugurated for the office of President of the United States to "Make America Great Again."

[1] James D. Wright. "The Real Danger in Alienation," *The Nation 22.* No. 2 (January 17, 1976): 40-43.
[2] Ibid. 40
[3] Ibid, 41.
[4] "Glimpse of the American Right." *National Review 29.* No. 46 (November 25, 1977): 1346-1347.
[5] Ibid, 1346.
[6] Dominic Sandbrook, "*Mad as Hell: The Crisis of the 1970s and the Rise of the Populist Right.* (New York: Random House, Inc., (2011): 337
[7] Dennis A. Deslippe, "We Must Bring Together a New Coalition": The Challenge of Working-class White Ethnics to Color-Blind Conservatism in the 1970s. *International Labor and Working Class History, 74*, no. 1 (2008): 148-170.
[8] Ibid, 152.
[9] Ibid, 154.
[10] Ibid, 154.
[11] Ibid, 152.
[12] Ibid, 152.
[13] Ibid, 150.
[14] Joseph A. McCartin, jam6@georgetown.edu. "A Wagner Act for Public Employees": Labor's Deferred Dream and the Rise of Conservatism, 1970-1976." *Journal of American History* 95, no. 1 (2008): 123-148.
[15] Ibid, 125.
[16] Dominic Sandbrook, "*Mad as Hell: The Crisis of the 1970s and the Rise of the Populist Right.* (New York: Random House, Inc., (2011): 229
[17] Ibid, 229.
[18] Ibid, 240.
[19] Ibid, 239 from Tom Hunter, "Back to Work in Youngstown," Youngstown Save Steel Jobs Rally.
[20] Ibid, 239-240.
[21] Ibid, 240.
[22] Ibid, 240.
[23] Jefferson Cowie, "Vigorously, Left, Right and Center" in *America in the 70s*, ed. Beth Bailey & David Farber (University Press Kansas, 2004): 75-106.
[24] Ibid, 89.
[25] Ibid, 101.
[26] D. C. Catsam, "Beyond Vietnam and Watergate: Rethinking the 1970s." *Choice, 53*(2), (2015): 191-199.
[27] Ibid, 195.
[28] Dominic Sandbrook, *Mad as Hell: The Crisis of the 1970s and the Rise of the Populist Right.* New York: Random House, Inc., (2011): 229
[29] Ibid, 345.
[30] Ibid, 347.
[31] Ibid, 359.
[32] Ibid, 266.
[33] Ibid, 360.
[34] Stephen A Salmore. "Conservativism: Mood or Trend." *New York Times*, (May 14, 1978): p. 26
[35] Ibid, 26

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