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REVIEW ESSAYS

Trump Supporters and the Boundaries of the "I"

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After Donald Trump's victory in the 2016 election, Democrats' handwringing centered first on the woes of the white working class. Displaced from jobs that had offered decent pay and a modicum of self-respect and unheard by mainstream politicians, the argument ran, working-class voters turned to Trump in the vain hope that he would restore their economic fortunes. The diagnosis was compelling, but it soon ran aground on new analyses of Trump's electoral base. The people who voted for Trump were white, yes, but many were middle-class. What they had lost, in this alternative diagnosis, was not their economic security but their unquestioned racial supremacy. That Rory McVeigh and Kevin Estep compare the rise of Trump to that of the Ku Klux Klan might lead one to think that they side with the second view. But in fact, their argument is closer to the first. The point of comparing Trump's supporters to those who joined the KKK is not to liken them to white-hooded racial terrorists. Rather it is to show how susceptible to nativist appeals are white Americans who have been whipsawed by political and economic change.

The Politics of Losing: Trump, the Klan, and the Mainstreaming of Resentment is a fascinating read, combining deep knowledge of the history of the Klan with a careful postmortem of primary votes for Trump. Its analysis is evenhanded and sophisticated. I will take issue with the authors' conclusion about what animated Trump voters, but more important, I want to push further down a path the authors themselves take, asking about the ways in which Americans' self-interest is shaped by the communities in which they live. However, I want to press for a more expansive understanding of communities' influence than the authors allow.

The Politics of Losing: Trump, the Klan, and the Mainstreaming of Resentment, by **Rory McVeigh** and **Kevin Estep.** New York: Columbia University Press, 2019. 310 pp. $32.00 cloth. ISBN: 9780231190060.

The white nationalism we see today is nothing new, McVeigh and Estep make clear. In the early 1920s, the Ku Klux Klan had between two and five million dues-paying members: one in every 23 Americans. In the county surrounding the Lynds' Middletown—Muncie, Indiana—fully a quarter of the adult population were members of the Klan. There were chapters in every state, with especially strong representation in Michigan, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Indiana. This was not your Reconstruction-era Klan. When Methodist preacher William Simmons set out to revive the organization in 1915, he was largely unsuccessful until he paid recruiters $4 of every $10 membership fee they collected and sent them around the country to identify the resentments of white Protestant Americans. Those resentments, it became clear, had everything to do with the emerging industrial economy and the flood of unskilled laborers—women, African Americans who had left the South, and immigrants—who were filling jobs in new factories at the same time as they were gaining new access to politics. Those left behind were small producers and skilled laborers. It was easy for the new Klan to pin these Americans' woes on immigrants, Catholics, Jews, and union organizers, and Klan organizers did just that. The strategy worked, and membership soared. Local Klans marched and rallied, hosted concerts and baseball games, boycotted immigrant

businesses, and roughed up residents for instances of moral laxity. But the organization also weighed in on policy debates at the state and national levels and took credit for the Johnson-Reed Act, which drastically curtailed immigration from Eastern and Southern Europe.

Neither the prior Reconstruction-era Klan nor the Klan of the late 1950s and 1960s had the national reach of the 1920s-era Klan. But those waves of white nationalism similarly originated in the combination of dislocating economic transitions, anxiety about the new political power of competing groups, and organizers able to connect the two in a bid for white supremacy, whether to be achieved by way of legislation or terror.

Donald Trump is not the Ku Klux Klan. Like the Klan, though, Trump in 2016 appealed to the resentments of white Americans in towns bypassed by a new economy—this time, a global one. Mechanization had eliminated well-paying jobs, and globalization moved many of those that remained out of the country. They were replaced by service jobs that offered neither decent pay nor job security. For people who had lost their economic foothold and were keenly aware of their diminishing political power in a country that was in demographic flux, it was easy to see immigrants as the problem, along with the liberal elites who disparaged Christians' faith and the Republican leaders who continued to talk up free trade, seemingly indifferent to its consequences for ordinary Americans. Enter Donald Trump, who promised to bring manufacturing back to America's heartland, to "build a big beautiful wall" (p. 50) to keep immigrants out, and to install Supreme Court justices who would overturn Roe v. Wade. Like the Klan, Trump appealed to nativity, race, and religion as a balm for the loss of economic status.

To demonstrate Trump's appeal to the losers in the post-Recession economy, the authors analyze Republican primary votes by county. In the general election, Republicans voted for the Republican. The more interesting and important question is why Trump beat out Ted Cruz, Jeb Bush, Marco Rubio, and the other Republican candidates in the primaries. Analyzing voting at the county level, the authors continue, captures the effects of the economic restructuring that accompanied globalization as well as the uneven character of the economic recovery that followed the Great Recession. Between 2010 and 2016, 8.4 million jobs requiring at least a bachelor's degree were created but only 80,000 jobs not requiring one. For people living in areas without a college-educated workforce, the much-lauded recovery only widened the chasm between those who benefited from the global economy and those who did not. In line with this account, the authors find that counties in which a low proportion of voters had college degrees were considerably more likely to vote for Trump in the primaries. In these counties, the authors surmise, even those with a college degree would struggle to find a well-paying job. The authors also find that Trump did well in counties in which fewer women worked, especially where there were few college graduates. Embracing traditional ideas about men as breadwinners, these voters may not have been much disturbed by Trump's misogyny, especially when they heard his attacks on the political establishment as evidence that someone, finally, was listening to them.

What does the history of the Klan tell us about what lies ahead? The fact that the organization never lasted more than a few years at a time should be no cause for complacency, since each time, its issues—its opposition to Reconstruction, to immigration, and to civil rights—were taken up by the Democratic or Republican Party. Donald Trump operated within institutional politics rather than outside it. But his candidacy both revealed and deepened fault lines in the Republican Party, notably between the wealthy establishment, which favored free trade and tax cuts, and the working and middle class. Since his election, Trump has been successful mainly in winning reforms that benefit the wealthy, but the continuing battle over the border wall suggests that those who elected him will not be so easily ignored. And even should Trump be defeated in 2020, surges of white nationalism are likely again, the authors argue. As long as segregation makes it easy to see those lower on economic, political, and cultural status hierarchies as "other," Americans may well respond to economic or

political threats with efforts to keep those others out or down. For that reason, the authors end with a call for integration understood in economic, political, and cultural terms.

In its prognosis, like its diagnosis, *Losing Politics* brings together multiple moving parts. This is one of the book's signal strengths. Just as important is the book's insistence that people's political preferences are shaped by cultural factors along with structural ones, and by group identities along with individual interests. These are critical insights and I would have liked the book to pursue them even further. The authors refer repeatedly to four factors behind surges in white nationalism: native-born white Protestant Americans' experience of economic threat, their loss of electoral power, their declining cultural status, and political actors capable of connecting these experiences. But the relationship among the four factors isn't clear. Are all four necessary? Or, alternatively, are only the first two necessary, so that when economic restructuring coincides with the loss of political power, political actors are likely to emerge seeking to connect those developments, in part by invoking the group's threatened cultural status? Or is only the economic loss necessary, since as long as America is characterized by racial and ethnic hierarchies, canny political actors will be able to explain Americans' economic woes in terms of the cultural and political threat posed by outsiders? The authors lean on the last most strongly, although their theory of power devaluation seems to suggest that threats to dominant groups' political or cultural status can also trigger backlashes.

Either way, the authors treat people's personal experience of economic loss as critical to the Klan's success and that of Donald Trump. This meshes with the sociological assumption that people's beliefs reflect their experiences, and that their economic fortunes have a disproportionate effect on their experience. But these assumptions may be wrong. As I noted, postmortems on Trump's victory have challenged the idea that economic hardship was behind support for the candidate. For example, Diana Mutz's (2018) analysis of panel data from 2012 and 2016 suggests that people's assessment of their own economic situation had little bearing on their support for Trump, even in areas dependent on manufacturing. Instead, Mutz found that racial animus and worry about *America's* economic standing—not voters' own—predicted support for Trump (the 2016 survey was conducted after the Republican primaries, but it relied on feeling thermometers to gauge voters' views of the candidates. If Republicans were simply gritting their teeth to vote for the Republican nominee, the survey should have captured that). Mutz found the effects of education that McVeigh and Estep did; but when she controlled for respondents' sense of domestic and global status threat, the education effect disappeared. Findings like Mutz's challenge the primacy McVeigh and Estep give to threats to people's economic security and, more important, to threats experienced *personally* and *directly*. In an alternative, people who turned to Trump did so not because of their personal economic misfortunes or anxieties. They were not personally left behind. They worried not for themselves but for their group and for their nation.

Does this mean that people are unaffected by what they see around them? No. There is real value in McVeigh and Estep's call to analyze Trump voters in the context of the communities in which they live. The authors treat that context as affecting people's personal material conditions, but communities' more important effect may be on what people see and whom they talk to. In that vein, I wonder if McVeigh and Estep found significant county differences in support for Trump because people in counties that had not recovered from the recession saw graphic evidence that the post-recession recovery wasn't benefiting all American communities. They did not worry for themselves personally, but they did see signs that people around them were suffering. And they did know from the news stories they watched and radio commentators they listened to, or from the friends who had listened to those commentators, that the residents of big cities on the coasts were living high on the hog while god-fearing white Americans in the heartland were not.

We still lack a good understanding of how people integrate what they learn from the

media with their own experience, with both—what they learn from media and their own experience—influenced also by their everyday conversations. This is a gap in the larger literature and in *Losing Politics*. Along the same lines, McVeigh and Estep refer to the Census estimate that whites will soon be a numerical minority as a sign of older, rural, non-college-educated whites' loss of political power. But the statistic is not an objective indicator of anything; one could as well point to growing intermarriage to conclude that the category of whites is growing ever larger (Alba 2016). That the figure is cited as evidence of whites' imminent eclipse by ethnic others owes to the narrative to that effect that has been promoted by conservative commentators. This too is the case with cultural threat. How would non-college-educated rural whites know that Hollywood elites and the liberal media looked down on them? Hillary Clinton's ''basket of deplorables'' line was so newsworthy because it is rare for liberals to be overtly dismissive of non-affluent white conservatives. But Fox News commentator Bill O'Reilly, among others, made clear to his viewers just how liberal elites felt: ''Generally speaking, they look down on the folks, they think *you are dumb*'' (Skocpol and Williamson 2016:137).

Imagine a resident in one of the counties that voted for Trump sharing a story with friends he heard on *Hannity* about liberals wanting to open the border to anyone, and one of his listeners in turn offering his own story of a friend of a friend whose boss was hiring undocumented Mexican immigrants while Americans were getting laid off, and another friend adding that a neighbor had been passed over for a job, she was sure, by an unqualified minority applicant, and the first friend then quoting a statistic he had heard on *O'Reilly* about how many whites were losing out on jobs because of affirmative action. I'm making all this up, but my point is that it is difficult to identify the role played by interlocutors' individual experience in this exchange. Community may have mattered in the election less by defining a common set of experiences than by defining a common set of referents.

McVeigh and Estep are surely right that Trump's skill, like that of the 1920s Klan recruiters, was to play to the resentments of a certain swath of white Americans. But the source of those resentments may have been less personal, material, and immediate than the authors suggest. And this is precisely where we need further research. I have argued that the media people consume is important. But rather than assuming that consumers are duped by the media (or are resistant to its blandishments), we should explore how media content figures in people's everyday conversations. Are news stories treated as the source of authoritative information or as offering perspectives worth debating? Is personal experience used to challenge news stories as well as to corroborate them? At the same time, rather than assuming that personal experience is naturally bounded, we should explore how and when the lines between my experience and the experiences of other people in my group blur. These fundamentally sociological questions about what counts as credible information and where people locate the boundaries of the self have never been more important. *Losing Politics* encourages us to try to answer them.

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