

Dangerous idiots: how the liberal media elite failed working-class Americans

Trump supporters are not the caricatures journalists depict – and native Kansan Sarah Smarsh sets out to correct what newsrooms get wrong



One-dimensional stereotypes fester where journalism fails to tread. Illustration: Justin Francavilla

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Last March, my 71-year-old grandmother, Betty, waited in line for three hours to caucus for Bernie Sanders. The wait to be able to cast her first-ever vote in a primary election was punishing, but nothing could have deterred her. Betty – a white woman who left school after ninth grade, had her first child at age 16 and spent much of her life in severe poverty – wanted to vote.

So she waited with busted knees that once stood on factory lines. She waited with smoking-induced emphysema and the false teeth she's had since her late 20s – both markers of our class. She waited with a womb that in the 1960s, before *Roe v Wade*, she paid a stranger to thrust a wire hanger inside after she discovered she was pregnant by a man she'd fled after he broke her jaw.

Betty worked for many years as a probation officer for the state judicial system in Wichita, Kansas, keeping tabs on men who had murdered and raped. As a result, it's hard to faze her, but she has pronounced Republican candidate [Donald Trump](#) a sociopath “whose mouth overloads his ass”.

No one loathes Trump – who suggested women should be [punished](#) for having abortions, who said hateful things about groups of people she has loved and worked alongside since childhood, whose pomp and indecency offends her modest, midwestern sensibility – more than she.

Yet, it is white working-class people like Betty who have become a particular fixation among the chattering class during this election: what is this angry beast, and why does it support Trump?

Not so poor: Trump voters are middle class

Hard numbers complicate, if not roundly dismiss, the oft-regurgitated theory that income or education levels predict Trump support, or that working-class whites support him disproportionately. Last month, [results of 87,000 interviews](#) conducted by Gallup showed that those who liked Trump were under no more economic distress or immigration-related anxiety than those who opposed him.

According to the study, his supporters didn't have lower incomes or higher unemployment levels than other Americans. Income data misses a lot; those with healthy earnings might also have negative wealth or downward mobility. But respondents overall weren't clinging to jobs perceived to be endangered. "Surprisingly", a Gallup researcher wrote, "there appears to be no link whatsoever between exposure to trade competition and support for nationalist policies in America, as embodied by the Trump campaign."

Earlier this year, primary exit polls revealed that Trump voters were, in fact, more affluent than most Americans, with a [median household income of \\$72,000](#) – higher than that of Hillary Clinton or Bernie Sanders supporters. Forty-four percent of them had college degrees, well above the national average of 33% among whites or 29% overall. In January, political scientist Matthew MacWilliams [reported](#) findings that a penchant for authoritarianism – not income, education, gender, age or race – predicted Trump support.

These facts haven't stopped pundits and journalists from pushing story after story about the white working class's giddy embrace of a bloviating demagogue.

In seeking to explain Trump's appeal, proportionate media coverage would require more stories about the racism and misogyny among white Trump supporters in tony suburbs. Or, if we're examining economically driven bitterness among the working class, stories about the Democratic lawmakers who in recent decades ended welfare as we knew it, hopped in the sack with Wall Street and forgot American labor in their global trade agreements.

We don't need their analysis, and we sure don't need their tears. What we need is to have our stories told

But, for national media outlets comprised largely of middle- and upper-class liberals, that would mean looking their own class in the face.

The faces journalists do train the cameras on – hateful ones screaming sexist vitriol next to Confederate flags – must receive coverage but do not speak for the communities I know well. That the media industry ignored my home for so long left a vacuum of understanding in which the first glimpse of an economically downtrodden white is presumed to represent the whole.

Part of the current glimpse is JD Vance, author of the bestselling new memoir [Hillbilly Elegy](#). A successful attorney who had a precariously middle-class upbringing in an Ohio steel town, Vance wrote of the chaos that can haunt a family with generational memory of deep poverty. A

conservative who says he won't vote for Trump, Vance speculates about why working-class whites will: cultural anxiety that arises when opioid overdose kills your friends and the political establishment has proven it will throw you under the bus. While his theories may hold up in some corners, in interviews coastal media members have repeatedly asked Vance to speak for the entire white working class.

His interviewers and reviewers often seem relieved to find someone with ownership on the topic whose ideas in large part confirm their own. The New York Times election podcast [The Run-Up](#) said Vance's memoir "doubles as a cultural anthropology of the white underclass that has flocked to the Republican presidential nominee's candidacy". (The Times teased its review of the book with the tweet: "Want to know more about the people who fueled the rise of Donald Trump?")

While Vance happens to have roots in Kentucky mining country, most downtrodden whites are not conservative male Protestants from Appalachia. That sometimes seems the only concept of them that the American consciousness can contain: tucked away in a remote mountain shanty like a coal-dust-covered ghost, as though white poverty isn't always right in front of us, swiping our credit cards at a Target in Denver or asking for cash on a Los Angeles sidewalk.

One-dimensional stereotypes fester where journalism fails to tread. The last time I saw my native class receive substantial focus, before now, was over 20 years ago – not in the news but on the television show [Roseanne](#), the fictional storylines of which remain more accurate than the musings of comfortable commentators in New York studios.

Countless images of working-class progressives, including women such as Betty, are thus rendered invisible by a ratings-fixated media that covers elections as horse races and seeks sensational b-roll.

This media paradigm created the tale of a divided America – "red" v "blue" – in which the 42% of Kansans who voted for Barack Obama in 2008 are meaningless.

This year, more Kansans [caucused for Bernie Sanders](#) than for Donald Trump – a newsworthy point I never saw noted in national press, who perhaps couldn't fathom that "flyover country" might contain millions of Americans more progressive than their Clinton strongholds.

In lieu of such coverage, media makers cast the white working class as a monolith and imply an old, treacherous story convenient to capitalism: that the poor are dangerous idiots.

Poor whiteness and poor character

The two-fold myth about the white working class – that they are to blame for Trump's rise, and that those among them who support him for the worst reasons exemplify the rest – takes flight on the wings of moral superiority affluent Americans often pin upon themselves.

I have never seen them flap so insistently as in today's election commentary, where notions of poor whiteness and poor character are routinely conflated.

In an election piece last March in the National Review, writer Kevin Williamson's assessment of poor white voters – among whom mortality rates have sharply risen in recent decades – expressed what many conservatives and liberals alike may well believe when he observed that communities ravaged by oxycodone use "[deserve to die](#)".

“The white American underclass is in thrall to a vicious, selfish culture whose main products are misery and used heroin needles,” Williamson wrote. “Donald Trump’s speeches make them feel good. So does OxyContin.”

For confirmation that this point is lost on most reporters, not just conservative provocateurs, look no further than a recent Washington Post [series](#) that explored spiking [death rates](#) among rural white women by fixating on their smoking habits and graphically detailing the “haggard face” and embalming processes of their [corpses](#). Imagine wealthy white woman examined thusly after their deaths. The outrage among family and friends with the education, time, and agency to write letters to the editor would have been deafening.

A sentiment that I care for even less than contempt or degradation is their tender cousin: pity.

In a recent op-ed headlined [Dignity and Sadness in the Working Class](#), David Brooks told of a laid-off Kentucky metal worker he met. On his last day, the man left to rows of cheering coworkers – a moment I read as triumphant, but that Brooks declared pitiable. How hard the man worked for so little, how great his skills and how dwindling their value, Brooks pointed out, for people he said radiate “the residual sadness of the lonely heart”.

I’m hard-pressed to think of a worse slight than the media figures who have disregarded the embattled white working class for decades now beseeching the country to have sympathy for them. We don’t need their analysis, and we sure don’t need their tears. What we need is to have our stories told, preferably by someone who can walk into a factory without his own guilt fogging his glasses.

One such journalist, Alexander Zaitchik, spent several months on the road in six states getting to know white working-class people who do support Trump. His goal for the resulting new book, [The Gilded Rage](#), was to convey the human complexity that daily news misses. Zaitchik wrote that his mission arose from frustration with “‘hot takes’ written by people living several time zones and income brackets away from their subjects”.

Zaitchik wisely described those he met as a “blue-collar middle class”– mostly white people who have worked hard and lost a lot, whether in the market crash of 2008 or the manufacturing layoffs of recent decades. He found that their motivations overwhelmingly “started with economics and ended with economics”. The anger he observed was “pointed up, not down” at those who forgot them when global trade deals were negotiated, not at minority groups.

Meanwhile, the racism and nationalism that surely exist among them also exist among Democrats and higher socioeconomic strata. A poll conducted last spring by Reuters [found](#) that a third of questioned Democrats supported a temporary ban on Muslims entering the United States. In another, by YouGov, [45%](#) of polled Democrats reported holding an unfavorable view of Islam, with almost no fluctuation based on household income. Those who won’t vote for Trump are not necessarily paragons of virtue, while the rest are easily scapegoated as the country’s moral scourge.

When Hillary Clinton recently declared half of Trump supporters a “basket of deplorables”, Zaitchik told another reporter, the language “could be read as another way of saying ‘white-trash bin’.” Clinton quickly apologized for the comment, the context of which contained compassion for many Trump voters. But making such generalizations at a \$6m fundraiser in downtown New York City, at which some attendees paid \$50,000 for a seat, recalled for me scenes from the television

political satire Veep in which powerful Washington figures discuss “normals” with distaste behind closed doors.



The DeBruce Grain elevator. Federal safety inspectors had not visited it for 16 years when an explosion ripped through the half-mile long structure, killing seven workers. Photograph: Cliff Schiappa/AP

When we talked, Zaitchik mentioned HBO talk-show host Bill Maher, who he pointed out “basically makes eugenics-level arguments about anyone who votes for Donald Trump having congenital defects. You would never get away with talking that way about any other group of people and still have a TV show.”

Maher is, perhaps, the pinnacle of classist smugness. In the summer of 1998, when I was 17 and just out of high school, I worked at a grain elevator during the wheat harvest. An elevator 50 miles east in Haysville, Kansas, exploded (grain dust is highly combustible), [killing seven workers](#). The accident rattled my community and reminded us about the physical dangers my family and I often faced as farmers.

I kept going to work like everyone else and, after a long day weighing wheat trucks and hauling heavy sacks of feed in and out of the mill, liked to watch Politically Incorrect, the ABC show Maher hosted then. With the search for one of the killed workers’ bodies still under way, Maher joked, as I recall, that the people should check their loaves of Wonder Bread.

That moment was perhaps my first reckoning with the hard truth that, throughout my life, I would politically identify with the same people who often insult the place I am from.

Such derision is so pervasive that it’s often imperceptible to the economically privileged. Those

who write, discuss, and publish newspapers, books, and magazines with best intentions sometimes offend with obliviousness.

Many people recommended to me the bestselling new history book [White Trash](#), for instance, without registering that its title is a slur that refers to me and the people I love as garbage. My happy relief that someone set out to tell this ignored thread of our shared past was squashed by my wincing every time I saw it on my shelf, so much so that I finally took the book jacket off. Incredibly, promotional copy for the book commits precisely the elitist shaming Isenberg is out to expose: “(the book) takes on our comforting myths about equality, uncovering the crucial legacy of the ever-present, always embarrassing – if occasionally entertaining – poor white trash.”

The book itself is more sensitively wrought and imparts facts that one hopes would dismantle popular use of its titular term. But even Isenberg can’t escape our classist frameworks.

When [On the Media](#) host Brooke Gladstone asked Isenberg, earlier this year, to address long-held perceptions of poor whites as bigots, the author described a conundrum: “They do subscribe to certain views that are undoubtedly racist, and you can’t mask it and pretend that it’s not there. It is very much a part of their thinking.”

Entertain a parallel broad statement about any other disenfranchised group, and you might begin to see how rudimentary class discussion is for this relatively young country that long believed itself to be free of castes. Isenberg has sniffed out the hypocrisy in play, though.

“The other problem is when people want to blame poor whites for being the only racist in the room,” she told Gladstone. “... as if they’re more racist than everyone else.”

That problem is rooted in the notion that higher class means higher integrity. As journalist Lorraine Berry wrote last month, “The story remains that only the ignorant would be racist. Racism disappears with education we’re told.” As the first from my family to hold degrees, I assure you that none of us had to go to college to learn basic human decency.

Berry points out that Ivy-League-minted Republicans shepherded the rise of the alt-right. Indeed, it was not poor whites – not even white Republicans – who passed legislation bent on preserving segregation, or who watched the Confederate flag raised outside state capitols for decades to come.

It wasn’t poor whites who criminalized blackness by way of marijuana laws and the “war on drugs”.

Nor was it poor whites who conjured the specter of the black “welfare queen”.

These points should not minimize the horrors of racism at the lowest economic rungs of society, but remind us that those horrors reside at the top in different forms and with more terrible power.

Among reporters and commentators this election cycle, then, a steady finger ought be pointed at whites with economic leverage: social conservatives who donate to Trump’s campaign while being too civilized to attend a political rally and yell what they really believe.

Mainstream media is set up to fail the ordinary American

Based on Trump’s campaign rhetoric and available data, it appears that most of his voters this November will be people who are getting by well enough but who think of themselves as victims.

One thing the media misses is that a great portion of the white working class would align with any sense before victimhood. Right now they are clocking in and out of work, sorting their grocery coupons, raising their children to respect others, and avoiding political news coverage.

Barack Obama, a black man formed by the black experience, often cites his maternal lineage in the white working class. “A lot of what’s shaped me came from my grandparents who grew up on the prairie in Kansas,” he [wrote](#) this month to mark a White House forum on rural issues.

Last year, talking with author Marilynne Robinson for the New York Review of Books, Obama lamented common misconceptions of small-town middle America, for which he has a sort of reverence. “There’s this huge gap between how folks go about their daily lives and how we talk about our common life and our political life,” he said, naming one cause as “the filters that stand between ordinary people” who are busy getting by and complicated policy debates.

“I’m very encouraged when I meet people in their environments,” Obama told Robinson. “Somehow it gets distilled at the national political level in ways that aren’t always as encouraging.”

To be sure, one discouraging distillation – the caricature of the hate-spewing white male Trump voter with grease on his jeans – is a real person of sorts. There were one or two in my town: the good ol’ boy who menaces those with less power than himself – running people of color out of town with the threat of violence, denigrating women, shooting BB guns at stray cats for fun. They are who Trump would be if he’d been born where I was.

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Media fascination with the hateful white Trump voter fuels the theory, now in fashion, that bigotry is the only explanation for supporting him. Certainly, financial struggle does not predict a soft spot for Trump, as cash-strapped people of color – who face the threat of his racism and xenophobia, and who resoundingly reject him, by all available measures – can attest. However, one imagines that elite white liberals who maintain an air of ethical grandness this election season would have a harder time thinking globally about trade and immigration if it were their factory job that was lost and their community that was decimated.

Affluent analysts who oppose Trump, though, have a way of taking a systemic view when examining social woes but viewing their place on the political continuum as a triumph of individual character. Most of them presumably inherited their political bent, just like most of those in “red” America did. If you were handed liberalism, give yourself no pats on the back for your vote against Trump.

Spare, too, the condescending argument that disaffected Democrats who joined Republican ranks in recent decades are “voting against their own best interests,” undemocratic in its implication that a large swath of America isn’t mentally fit to cast a ballot.

Whoever remains on Trump’s side as stories concerning his treatment of women, racism and other dangers continue to unfurl gets no pass from me for any reason. They are capable of voting, and they own their decisions. Let’s be aware of our class biases, though, as we discern who “they” are.

Journalist? Then the chances are you're not blue collar

A recent print-edition New York Times cutline [described](#) a Kentucky man:

“Mitch Hedges, who farms cattle and welds coal-mining equipment. He expects to lose his job in six months, but does not support Mr Trump, who he says is ‘an idiot.’”

This made me cheer for the rare spotlight on a member of the white working class who doesn't support Trump. It also made me laugh – one can't “farm cattle”. One farms crops, and one raises livestock. It's sometimes hard for a journalist who has done both to take the New York Times seriously.

The main reason that national media outlets have a blind spot in matters of class is the lack of socioeconomic diversity within their ranks. Few people born to deprivation end up working in newsrooms or publishing books. So few, in fact, that this former laborer has found cause to shift her entire writing career to talk specifically about class in a wealth-privileged industry, much as journalists of color find themselves talking about race in a whiteness-privileged one.

This isn't to say that one must reside among a given group or place to do it justice, of course, as good muckrakers and commentators have shown for the past century and beyond. See *On the Media's* fine new series on poverty, the second episode of which includes Gladstone's reflection that “the poor are no more monolithic than the rest of us.”

I know journalists to be hard-working people who want to get the story right, and I'm resistant to rote condemnations of “the media”. The classism of cable-news hosts merely reflects the classism of privileged America in general. It's everywhere, from tweets describing Trump voters as inbred hillbillies to a Democratic campaign platform that didn't bother with a specific anti-poverty platform until a month out from the general election.

The economic trench between reporter and reported on has never been more hazardous than at this moment of historic wealth disparity, though, when stories focus more often on the stock market than on people who own no stocks. American journalism has been willfully obtuse about the grievances on Main Streets for decades – surely a factor in digging the hole of resentment that Trump's venom now fills. That the term “populism” has become a pejorative among prominent liberal commentators should give us great pause. A journalism that embodies the plutocracy it's supposed to critique has failed its watchdog duty and lost the respect of people who call bullshit when they see it.

One such person was my late grandfather, Arnie. Men like Trump sometimes drove expensive vehicles up the gravel driveway of our Kansas farmhouse looking to do some sort of business. Grandpa would recognize them as liars and thieves, treat them kindly, and send them packing. If you shook their hands, after they left Grandpa would laugh and say, “Better count your fingers.”

In a world in which the Bettys and Arnies of the world have little voice, those who enjoy a platform from which to speak might examine their hearts and minds before stepping onto the soap box.

If you would stereotype a group of people by presuming to guess their politics or deeming them inferior to yourself – say, the ones who worked third shift on a Boeing floor while others flew to Mexico during spring break; the ones who mopped a McDonald's bathroom while others argued

about the minimum wage on Twitter; the ones who cleaned out their lockers at a defunct Pabst factory while others drank craft beer at trendy bars; the ones who came back from the Middle East in caskets while others wrote op-eds about foreign policy – then consider that you might have more in common with Trump than you would like to admit.

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