

# [***Opinion: A Black man's view on what Biden should do for the White working class***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6BGP-KB61-DY7V-G23B-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Body**

(CNN) &#8212; As a Black American academic with a keen interest in US ***politics***, I'm often asked during this fractious, deeply worrying time in our democracy why a [*small but not insignificant number*](https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/2024-election/wavering-black-voters-biden-flawed-trump-unacceptable-deciders-rcna140786) of Black voters appear to be turning to former President Donald Trump.

I always point out that that is entirely the wrong question.

Yes, [*growing numbers of Black Americans*](https://news.gallup.com/poll/609776/democrats-lose-ground-black-hispanic-adults.aspx) are telling pollsters they're considering voting Republican, perhaps for the first time in their lives. And yes, this is a source of real anxiety for Democrats, who are mobilizing even as I write this in [*an effort to keep*](https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2024-02-05/biden-and-democrats-need-a-new-strategy-to-win-black-voters?embedded-checkout=true) those voters in the fold.

But as I see it, the far more pressing question is why so few working-class White people say they intend to vote Democrat for president. In fact, Republicans have won the White vote in every election for [*nearly the last 50 years.*](https://www.americanprogress.org/article/what-about-white-voters/)

Could President Biden, who claims to have [*labor-friendly policies,*](https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/09/01/fact-sheet-ahead-of-labor-day-biden-harris-administration-announces-new-actions-to-empower-workers-building-on-the-presidents-historic-support-for-workers-and-unions/) be the one to turn the tide by appealing to the White working class and giving his party a much-needed electoral boost in the process? After all, issues affecting poor White voters, such as health care, higher education and increased access to childcare have long been traditional [*Democratic priorities*](https://democrats.org/where-we-stand/). So, what is going wrong?

If you are White, even if a high school degree is the most education you have attained, you have won the "[*racial lottery*](https://www.cnn.com/2020/06/11/opinions/white-people-know-about-racism-already-row/index.html)" in America: As a result of our shocking racial wealth gap and systemic racism, you are still more likely than your Black or brown peers to have [*savings to fall back on*](https://www.investopedia.com/retirement-savings-by-race-5086962), and your family may well have up to [*eight times more wealth*](https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-black-white-wealth-gap-left-black-households-more-vulnerable/). And [*you are still less likely*](https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/09/18/upshot/black-white-wealth-gap-perceptions.html) than your Black or brown fellow citizens to live in a low-income household, be [*killed by police violence*](https://www.nbcnews.com/news/nbcblk/report-black-people-are-still-killed-police-higher-rate-groups-rcna17169), [*die in pregnancy or childbirth*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/02/06/us/making-pregnancy-safer-for-black-women/index.html).

And yet, [*White working-class resentment*](https://theconversation.com/why-trumps-stoking-of-white-racial-resentment-is-effective-but-makes-all-working-class-americans-worse-off-120068) continues to simmer.

In his 1935 book "[*Black Reconstruction in America*](https://global.oup.com/academic/product/black-reconstruction-in-america-the-oxford-w-e-b-du-bois-9780199385652?cc=us&lang=en&)," W.E.B. Du Bois described the "[*public and psychological wage*](https://academic.oup.com/book/44630/chapter-abstract/378642698?redirectedFrom=fulltext)" that racism served up to White workers in the post-Civil War South. Any White person, he argued, whatever class they were, was treated with more deference and possessed more power than any Black person.

But the privilege of White skin might be perceived as being far less of an advantage in 21st century America if you are hard-working but poor. And it might be of little comfort if - rightly or wrongly - you feel undervalued and ignored. One group that springs to mind are [*Rust Belt*](https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2016/11/trumps-road-to-victory/507203/) workers, many of whom l[*ost jobs while others saw their earning power*](https://money.cnn.com/2017/02/16/news/economy/donald-trump-nafta/) erode in the 1990s and blame then-Democratic President Bill Clinton and concessions he made under the [*NAFTA trade accords*](https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2016/11/democrats-rust-belt/508544/).

Democratic presidential contenders ever since - including his wife, 2016 presidential candidate Hillary Clinton - have been paying dearly for the trade deal. They've garnered diminishing support from blue-collar White voters who have been convinced - rightly or wrongly - that the trade deal was responsible for the outsourcing of US jobs.

Many poor Whites, around the time of Trump's ascent, told pollsters about [*lost prosperity and social standing*](https://www.cnn.com/2016/09/23/opinions/shell-shocked-white-working-class-opinion-coontz/index.html), and described [*their future as bleak*](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2016/06/07/the-incredible-crushing-despair-of-the-white-working-class/). Amid the hyped-up culture wars and battles over identity ***politics*** that have raged ever since, many MAGA supporters clearly feel seen by Trump.

Some non-college educated White voters likely think Democrats are out to belittle them - Hillary Clinton's horrendously misjudged [*"basket of deplorables" comment*](https://www.cnn.com/2016/09/10/politics/hillary-clinton-basket-of-deplorables-donald-trump/index.html) no doubt still rankles for more than a few. That gaffe echoed Obama's off-the-cuff remark in 2008 that "bitter" low-income voters "cling to guns or religion" - comments that didn't endear him to the White working class, either.

That feeling of grievance is an area where White and Black voters differ dramatically: As Dr. Caroline Graham of the Brookings Institution has [*pointed out*](https://www.brookings.edu/articles/why-are-black-poor-americans-more-optimistic-than-white-ones/), poor Black Americans tend to be remarkably optimistic about their prospects, possibly due to higher levels of resilience, but also in recognition of their admittedly very gradual gains in economic status and life expectancy.

Some White voters of modest means perceive Democrats as being determined to secure equality for minority groups at their expense. Others fear they are in danger of losing the huge advantage that being White once automatically conferred on them - and are sadly blind to the extent to which they continue to [*benefit from this privilege*](https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/the-origins-of-privilege).

When I worked on President Barack [*Obama's first presidential campaign*](https://tedxlondon.com/bb2022/professor-keith-magee/), I heard many working-class White men expressing the hope that a Black leader would understand the plight of the underdog and would therefore want to lift them up too. Once Obama was in office, however, this group just didn't feel they were profiting from economic change.

The [*gradual recovery from the 2008 financial*](https://www.brookings.edu/articles/u-s-concentrated-poverty-in-the-wake-of-the-great-recession/) crisis largely failed to improve the lot of poorer White households (even as Black and Latino households were harder hit). And working-class White Americans tended for some reason not to perceive Obamacare - the president's signature social policy achievement - as immediately benefiting them. One could argue that there is an analogue to the [*current political moment*](https://newrepublic.com/article/179513/state-union-biden-working-class), with some Americans [*failing to give Biden credit*](https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2024/01/13/biden-economy-voters-unhappy/) for an improving economic picture.

Anger and resentment seem to make some working-class White people more receptive to [*dog-whistles from politicians like Trump*](https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2020/08/21/racist-roots-dog-whistle/), whose message to them is that what matters most is preserving White privilege and [*stoking White grievance*](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/23326492211020780).

For all that, White and Black voters want the same things: financial security, recognition of their hard work and the prospect of a better life for themselves and their families. I have to believe there are enough such White voters to swing November's election definitively in the Democrats' favor - if only Biden can convince them he's on their side.

It's time for the Democrats to admit publicly that America's White working class has been left behind - and to devise concrete plans to urgently address this, so everyone is raised up together. Governed by his own "Bidenomics" approach, the president already has made admirable efforts to enact legislation to directly benefit the working class, including the [*Inflation Reduction Act*](https://www.cnn.com/2022/08/16/politics/biden-inflation-reduction-act-signing/index.html) and the [*Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act*](https://www.cnn.com/2021/08/10/politics/bipartisan-plan-infrastructure-vote-congress/index.html).

If the party is to woo potential MAGA enthusiasts away from Trump, it is going to have to show struggling White communities that the President not only is like them, but that he is here for them - that he is, in fact, one of them. Biden already has done some of that. During a speech to United Auto Workers in Michigan last month, he evoked his own parents' financial difficulties, saying, "There used to be a theory called trickle-down economics - not a lot ever trickled down to my dad's kitchen table."

Still, Democrats need to do more to communicate a robust social and economic message that makes it clear that Biden grasps these two simple but essential truths: There is great dignity to be found in every kind of work, and every kind of work deserves to be rewarded.

Then there is the thorny issue of inflation, which is proving to [*be one of the top concerns for American voters*](https://www.npr.org/2023/03/29/1166486046/poll-economy-inflation-transgender-rights-republicans-democrats-biden), particularly for those of limited means. Even as the Consumer Price Index ticks steadily downward, the price of food and other essentials remain stubbornly high. Biden's [*war on "shrinkflation*](https://www.foodandwine.com/president-biden-calls-out-shrinkflation-8576289)" obliquely addresses the issue, but not nearly aggressively enough to provide real relief at the grocery store to low wage earners.

I hope the president will use Thursday's State of the Union address to show White working-class voters he stands shoulder to shoulder with them. I hope he'll promise he will push Congress harder to pass the [*$15 per hour federal minimum wage*](https://www.cnn.com/2021/02/22/politics/minimum-wage-15-dollar-debate-explainer/index.html) (or even the [*$17 minimum wage*](https://www.sanders.senate.gov/press-releases/news-sanders-scott-29-democratic-senators-introduce-legislation-to-raise-the-minimum-wage-to-17-by-2028-benefitting-nearly-28-million-workers-across-america/) that some Democratic lawmakers are calling for), double down on addressing the [*crisis in affordable housing*](https://www.newsweek.com/bipartisan-opportunity-address-affordable-housing-crisis-opinion-1874827), and build on the support his administration has [*already offered*](https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/11/21/fact-sheet-ahead-of-small-business-saturday-biden-harris-administration-announces-latest-steps-to-support-small-businesses/) small businesses.

A recent poll found only [*27% of US adults*](https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/american-dream-reality-people-poll/story?id=106339566) think the American Dream - defined as "if you work hard, you'll get ahead" - still holds true. The figure was even lower for people with a high school degree or less education (22%) and those who earn less than $50,000 a year (18%). Still, respondents want to believe that the hope for a better future can be within their reach again one day.

If Democrats can tap into such an aspiration, they'll have a chance to unite the working poor of every ethnicity in a common cause. Martin Luther King, Jr. himself was on the cusp of doing just that with his [*Poor People's Campaign*](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Poor-Peoples-March) when he was assassinated. In the name of equality and inclusion, it's high time that particular dream was realized.

Will Biden manage to persuade working-class Americans, whatever the color of their skin, that he can deliver true recognition, higher wages, and more affordable housing? If he doesn't, he might miss the opportunity to make inroads with an underappreciated group that too often is overlooked by his party - one that could help provide the winning votes he'll need in a closely-fought presidential contest later this year.

Opinion by Keith Magee

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