

Blue-collar voters and the Right: the US experience shows how political vacuums get filled by a Trump

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*Blue-collar voters remain a significant electoral force. Here, **Andrew Taylor** looks to the US for clues on how the future of a blue-collar electoral strategy might play out for the Right in the UK. He argues that if properly developed it could create a new centrist Conservatism. However, if it fails the people it is supposed to help it could generate a vacuum. This has arguably happened in the US, where Donald Trump has rushed to fill the gap.*



George Osborne has made much of the claim that the Conservative Party is now the party of labour and Robert Halfon, a minister in the Cabinet Office, is [associated](#) closely with the [development](#) of a blue-collar Conservatism strategy. Despite the Chancellor's claim, it is far too soon to assess whether or not this approach is truly embedded in the Conservative Party's electoral strategy and as a core concern of public policy.

The controversies surrounding the [Autumn Statement](#) and its welfare provisions show how a blue-collar strategy can run afoul of a party's competing interests. Such a lack of embeddedness suggests the narrative is [rhetorical](#) and tactical, rather than a serious attempt at electoral realignment, something that would require significant public policy initiatives. To help us get more of a grip on the blue-collar issue we can look to the United States.

Blue-Collar Conservatism in the US – the power of demographics

Although a declining portion of the electorate, the white, blue-collar working class remains strategically important for both parties in the US. The Republican Party however, drawing its support disproportionately from white Americans, is relatively more dependent on this group than are Democrats; if 10 per cent of those who currently vote Republican were to switch parties this would produce a 2 per cent swing to the Democrats, possibly a critical margin in 2016.

Yet in recent years neither party has won over the blue-collar working class. In response, Democrats (in presidential elections at least) have assembled a winning coalition of 'rising' demographic groups (described by Stanley Greenberg in his [recent book](#), *America Ascendant*). Therefore a major issue confronting Republicans is that the US electorate is becoming less white. If the 2016 nominee wins no more of the non-white vote than Romney in 2012, Republicans will need to garner 65 per cent of the white vote, a proportion not achieved since Reagan in 1984. Retaining these voters is, or should be, a central concern of the Republicans and a good start would be a strategy of blue-collar Conservatism. Indeed there has been no shortage of advocates, including Douthat and Salan's [Grand New Party](#) (2008), Henry Olsen's [work](#) at the American Enterprise Institute, Rick Santorum's [Blue Collar Conservatism](#) (2014), Arthur Brooks' [The Conservative Heart](#) (2015), Paul Ryan's (the new Speaker of the House) [The Way Forward](#) (2014), and the Republican National Committee's 2013 post-mortem on 2012, the [Growth and Opportunity Project](#) report.

But who does blue-collar Conservatism target? Under significant long-term economic stress, this group of voters are committed to safe-streets, traditional marriage, to 'doing the right thing', successful communities, a vibrant civil society, patriotism and strong national defence, and to a traditional understanding of the American Dream as getting ahead and making a better life. This constitutes a powerful moral economy. But by confusing being pro-market with pro-business, failing to distinguish between welfare programmes that fostered mobility and security, and failing to address economic insecurity and inequality, Republicans have been talking past these voters.

'Insecurity' is a central theme of the narrative, connecting political, economic and cultural trends. With the dissolution of families and communities, individuals committed to doing 'the right thing' see a disrupted society with greater and greater wealth concentrated in fewer and fewer hands, compounded by economic insecurity and the flow of well-paid jobs abroad, resulting in a society in which they feel themselves 'disrespected' by elites.

Whit Ayres, Marco Rubio's pollster, has analysed the implications of demographic change for the Republican Party in his book, [2016 and Beyond](#). To win The White House the Republican Party must both increase its minority vote and retain its support amongst whites, thus appealing to all voters who are struggling economically and are disadvantaged by economic change. Ayres emphasises that core Republican values — individual liberty, free enterprise, limited government, strong families and communities, strong national defence and patriotism and greater opportunity — know no ethnic or class boundaries. However, Ayres argues the Republicans must be positioned in 'the middle of the right hand side of the road': a political location hard to occupy because of the political dynamics of the nominating and primary process. In the UK, an important consideration for the strategy is the effect which continuing policies of austerity will have on this group of voters.

Blue-Collar Conservatism in the UK – the issue of austerity

The 2008 crisis has not shaken the grip of neoliberal, free-market ideas in the UK. The ideological foundations of Conservatism dating from the 1980s remain largely undisturbed but with weakened legitimacy. This implies continuing 'new hard times': squeezed living standards, more-or-less permanent austerity and a greater selectivity in welfare, with provision targeted on 'deserving' groups. The blue-collar Conservatism narrative is a divisionary policy (the deserving/undeserving, makers/takers, etc.) entailing retrenchment accompanied by the identification of electoral target groups as worthy of state help. It is, therefore, a response to the question: austerity for whom? States must perform critical functions for capitalism and for markets to work, but the state must now simultaneously withdraw *and* intervene in the political economy.

In meta-political terms this is an impasse, testifying to the resilience of the neoliberal order yet posing a serious issue for the strategy of blue-collar Conservatism; at this stage its economic-populist narrative is far too weak to mount anything remotely resembling a challenge, other than as part of a diffuse hostility to elites. If developed seriously, blue-collar Conservatism could become a component of a broader Conservative political strategy addressing the contradictions inherent in the impasse and its political structures. This could then evolve into an attempt to create a new centrist conservatism to underpin attempts to re-establish neoliberalism's political confidence and stability and become part of an effort to build a domestic constituency in favour of stability, contributing to the emergence of a post-crisis growth model.

However, there might be a problem if the narrative in the UK remains underdeveloped and rhetorical only. The political strategic consideration is that these voters will vote to concentrate the costs of adjustment on unpopular and/or powerless groups whilst reinforcing the liberal-capitalist market economy without affecting the distribution of power and wealth. If the blue-collar Conservatism narrative fails or is not embedded properly then the resulting political vacuum will be filled, most probably with what Eugene Robinson called '[pitchfork populism](#)'. And here we can return to the US, which really does provide the clearest lesson of all. Stateside, the vacuum is being filled by a very powerful force indeed: a Trump.

Please note: this article represents the views of the author and not those of the British Politics and Policy blog nor of the LSE. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting. This piece will be followed tomorrow by an analysis of the blue-collar voter and the political Left.

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