

A crucial part of his coalition is made up of better-off white people who did not graduate from college.



**By Thomas B. Edsall**

Mr. Edsall contributes a weekly column from Washington, D.C. on politics, demographics and inequality.

Aug. 28, 2019 Updated 11:47 a.m. ET

On Feb. 24, 2016, after winning the Nevada caucuses, Donald Trump told supporters in Las Vegas, “I love the poorly educated.”

Technically, he should have said “I love poorly educated white people,” but his point was well taken.

We have been talking about this since Trump came down that escalator four years ago, but we haven’t quite reckoned with the depth of the changes in the electorate or the way they have reshaped both parties.

## Exodus of College-Educated Whites

In the last national election, 88 percent of Republican voters were white. The proportion with a college degree fell significantly compared to 2010.

	White, no college or less than a college degree	White, college degree
2010	<b>50%</b>	<b>40</b>
2018	<b>59</b>	<b>29</b>

By The New York Times | Public Opinion Strategies; nonwhites of all education levels comprised 10 percent of Republican voters in 2010 and 12 percent in 2018.

In less than a decade, from 2010 to 2018, whites without a college degree grew from 50 to 59 percent of all the Republican Party’s voters, while whites with college degrees fell from 40 to 29 percent of the party’s voters. The biggest shift took place from 2016 to 2018, when

Trump became the dominant figure in American politics.

This movement of white voters has been evolving over the past 60 years. A paper published earlier this month, “Secular Partisan Realignment in the United States: The Socioeconomic Reconfiguration of White Partisan Support since the New Deal Era,” provides fresh insight into that transformation.

The authors, Herbert Kitschelt and Philipp Rehm, political scientists at Duke and Ohio State, make the argument that the transition from an industrial to a knowledge economy has produced “tectonic shifts” leading to an “education-income partisan realignment” — a profound realignment of voting patterns that has effectively turned the political allegiances of the white sector of the New Deal coalition that dominated the middle decades of the last century upside down.

Driven by what the authors call “first dimension” issues of economic redistribution, on the one hand, and by the newer “second dimension issues of citizenship, race and social governance,” the traditional alliances of New Deal era politics — low-income white voters without college degrees on the Democratic Party side, high-income white voters with degrees on the Republican side — have switched places. According to this analysis, these two constituencies are primarily motivated by “second dimension” issues, often configured around racial attitudes, which frequently correlate with level of education.

High-income whites without college degrees were swing voters sixty years ago, pursued by both parties; now, they are rock-ribbed Republicans. Their share of the white electorate has fallen, however, from 42.1 to 22.0 percent.

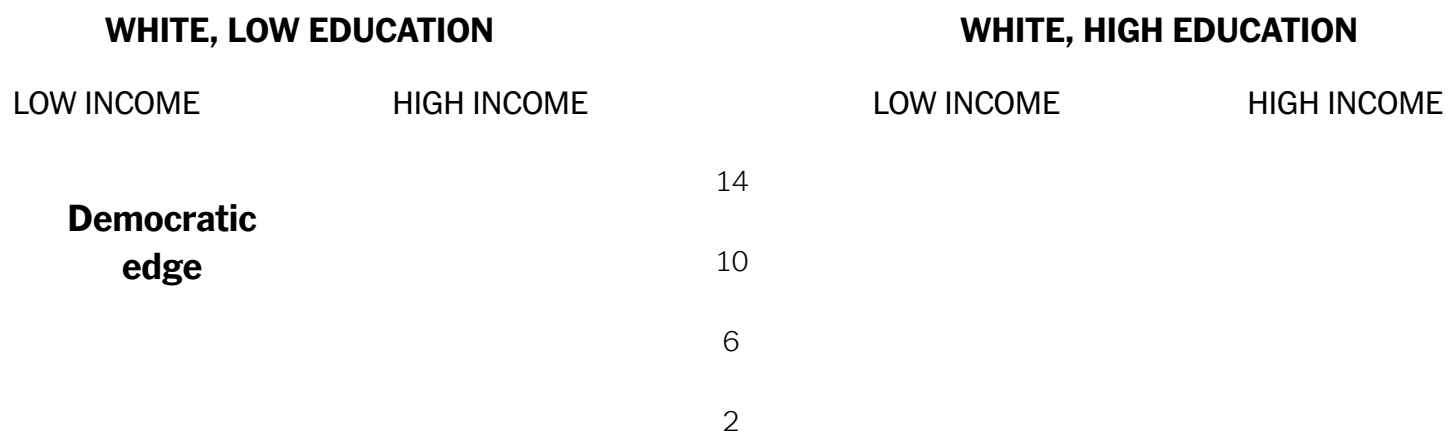
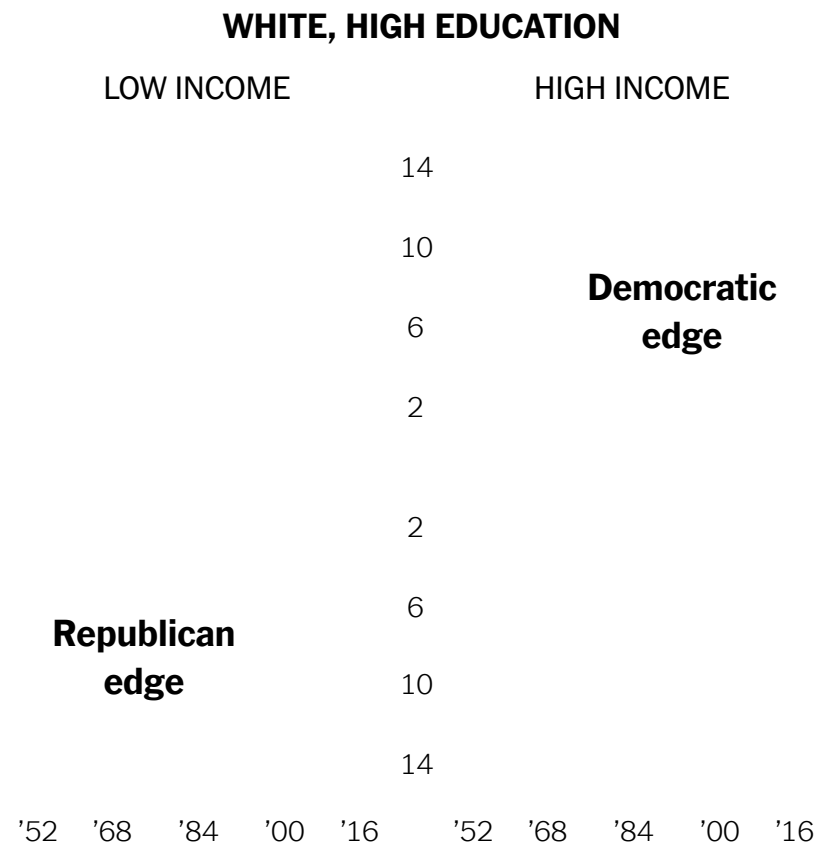
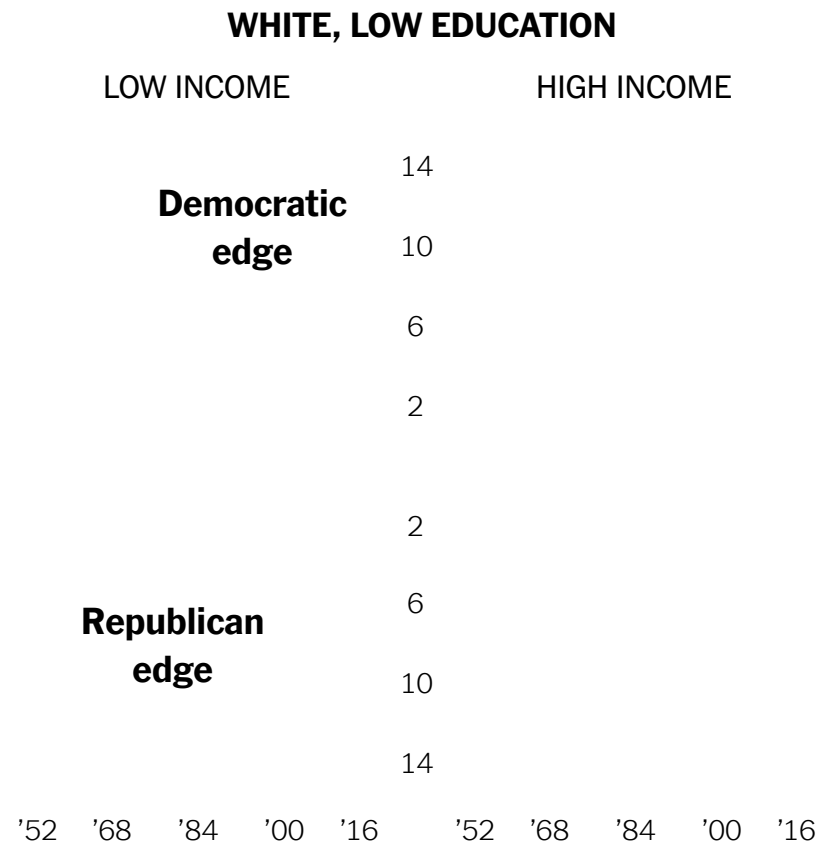
Two generations ago, there were almost no low-income whites with college degrees, a group that made up 1.5 percent of white voters in 1952. These voters were a swing bloc without firm commitment to either party. By 2016, this constituency had grown to form 14.3 percent of all voters. They have, in turn, become the most loyal white Democratic constituency.

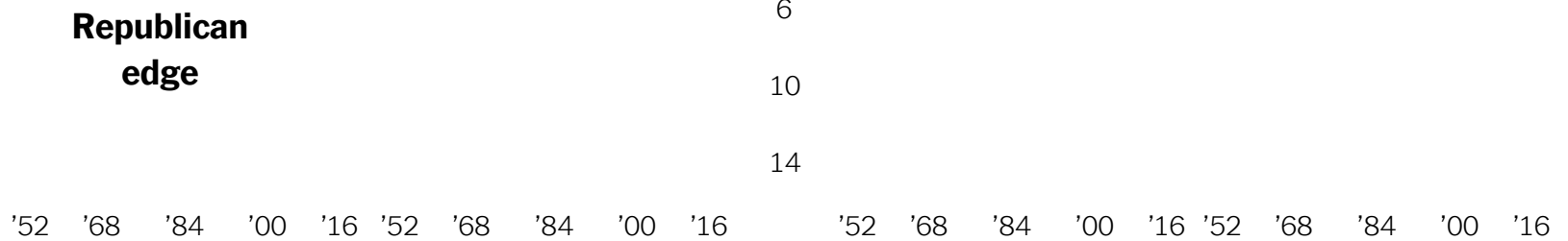
In the 1950s, high-income whites with college degrees were the base of the Republican Party — although in 1952 they made up just 6.7 percent of white voters. By 2016, this cohort had moved decisively toward the Democratic Party, as its share of the white electorate had grown to 26.0 percent.

Kitschelt and Rehm track the shifting voting patterns of whites in the accompanying graphic.

## **Education and Income Predict How Whites Vote**

Estimated deviation, in percentage points, of these income/education groups from the average non-Hispanic white vote for the Democratic presidential candidate, 1952 to 2016.





By The New York Times | Source: analysis of American National Election Studies data by Herbert Kitschelt, Duke University, and Philipp Rehm, Ohio State University. Based on modeling that controls for gender, age, religious services attendance and region. Low education is no college, or some college but no degree; high education is at least one degree. High income is the 68th percentile or above.

The election of Donald Trump has prompted a groundswell of studies of white voters.

The key bloc for both Trump and the Republican Party is made up of white Christian evangelicals. Eight out of ten of these voters cast ballots for Trump, and intensely religious voters make up 40 percent of the Republican electorate.

Emily Ekins, director of polling at the libertarian Cato Institute, argues in her paper “Does Religious Participation Moderate Trump Voters’ Attitudes about Diversity?” that white evangelical Christian Trump voters are substantially more moderate on issues of race and diversity than less religious Trump voters. At the same time, Ekins argues, the partisanship of these religious voters is stronger than their self-described moderate racial views, and their loyalty to Trump remains unshakable.

Ekins documents her assertions with polling from 2016, 2017 and 2018 conducted by the Democracy Fund’s Voter Study Group. These polls show, for example, that 74 percent of Trump voters who attend church weekly or more often report warm feelings toward black Americans, compared with 48 percent of Trump voters who never attend services. Nine percent of churchgoing Trump voters said their white identity was “extremely important to them” compared with 26 percent of those who never go to church. The same patterns emerge on questions concerning diversity, immigration and attitudes toward Muslims and Hispanics.

In a reflection of the complexity of the effort to analyze Trump’s white support, Paul A. Djupe and Ryan P. Burge, political scientists at Denison University and Eastern Illinois University, have challenged Ekins. They argue that the seeming racial moderation of white evangelical voters is superficial, far less important to them than their partisan commitment to Trump and the Republican Party.

“Why are religious Trump voters showing more support for Trump when they hold more liberal attitudes?” Djupe and Burge ask. Because, they argue, “partisanship is their core value and all else is secondary, including their religion.”

In their critique of Ekins study, Djupe and Burge suggest that the racially moderate views of churchgoers

may capture socially desirable representations and do not reflect their true attitudes. While it is possible that they are simply dissembling, religious congregations exert considerable pressure on attenders to conform to a set of beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors.

In a more telling critique, Djupe and Burge examined the small fraction of Trump voters who by 2018 reported that they had “regrets” about voting for him:

If so many Trump-supporting church attenders have liberal outlooks on politics and toward politically salient groups, they should be more likely to express regrets for their vote for Trump.

Instead, the exact opposite happened:

As their warmth toward minorities climbs, the proportion expressing regret drives to zero among frequent church attenders. Only among those who never attend church do we see the expected relationship — warmth toward minorities drives up regret for voting for Trump.

I asked Ekins about the Djupe and Burge analysis, and she replied by email:

The strong support for Trump among religious conservatives at first may seem perplexing. But, it’s not entirely surprising given what we know about religious conservatives’ higher levels of partisan loyalty and the impact of partisanship on opinion.

Trump voters who attend church once a week or more, Ekins noted, “are much more likely than those who do not attend regularly to identify as a ‘strong Republican.’ ” Partisanship, she continued, “can outweigh even core values” and “clearly seems to be playing an important role in explaining evangelicals’ support for Trump.”

The questions ask those surveyed whether they agree or disagree with these statements:

- I am fearful of people of other races.
- White people in the U.S. have certain advantages because of the color of their skin.
- Racial problems in the U.S. are rare, isolated situations.
- I am angry that racism exists.

The authors tested the questions in a sample of more than 40,000 white voters conducted during the 2016 primary elections by the Cooperative Congressional Election Study.

They found that Trump voters, as opposed to voters supporting other Republican candidates, were “less empathetic (angered by racism), they were more likely to deny Whites have an advantage in America and expressed far more fear of other racial groups.” In addition, DeSante and Smith found that the FIRE questions proved especially effective in identifying voters who backed Obama in 2012 and switched to Trump in 2016.

In an email, Candis Smith described the advantages of the FIRE question battery:

We developed FIRE for a number of reasons. First and foremost, because while we (scholars/journalists) tend to conflate ‘racial attitudes’ with ‘racial prejudice.’ But, there’s more to it than that. There’s all sorts of feelings, attitudes, and knowledge surrounding issues of racial groups and racial inequality. FIRE aims to get at this multidimensionality. So, it’s not just that some people are resentful, but some people are fearful, some people are unaware or unwilling to be aware of (structural) racism, some people are actually empathetic about inequality. Taken together, we can say more about how the various dimensions of racial attitudes influence political attitudes/behaviors.

Exploring these dimensions, Smith continued, enables you to identify

people who are fearful of other racial groups (and you might be surprised that people are willing to admit this) were more likely to vote for Trump. So here, it’s not just “resentment” but fear that influenced people. FIRE allows us to pinpoint how both feelings (affect) and knowledge (cognition) influence people’s orientation toward politics.

Much effort has been devoted to understanding the role of race in shaping American politics over the 55 years since passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

It's clear that all the leading Democratic presidential candidates are committed to the idea that improved race relations are crucially important. And it's not too much to say that the future of the nation depends on arriving at a more equitable sharing of resources — tangible and intangible.

The 2020 election will be fought over the current loss of certainty — the absolute lack of consensus — on the issue of “race.” Fear, anger and resentment are rampant. Democrats are convinced of the justness of the liberal, humanistic, enlightenment tradition of expanding rights for racial and ethnic minorities. Republicans, less so. This may well prove to be a base-vs.-base election, but even so the outcome may lie in the hands of the substantial proportion of the electorate that is undecided — 7 percent according to Pew. And if Democrats want to give themselves the best shot of getting Trump out of the White House, it is toward these voters that they must make concerted efforts at pragmatic diplomacy and persuasion — and show a new level of empathy.

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