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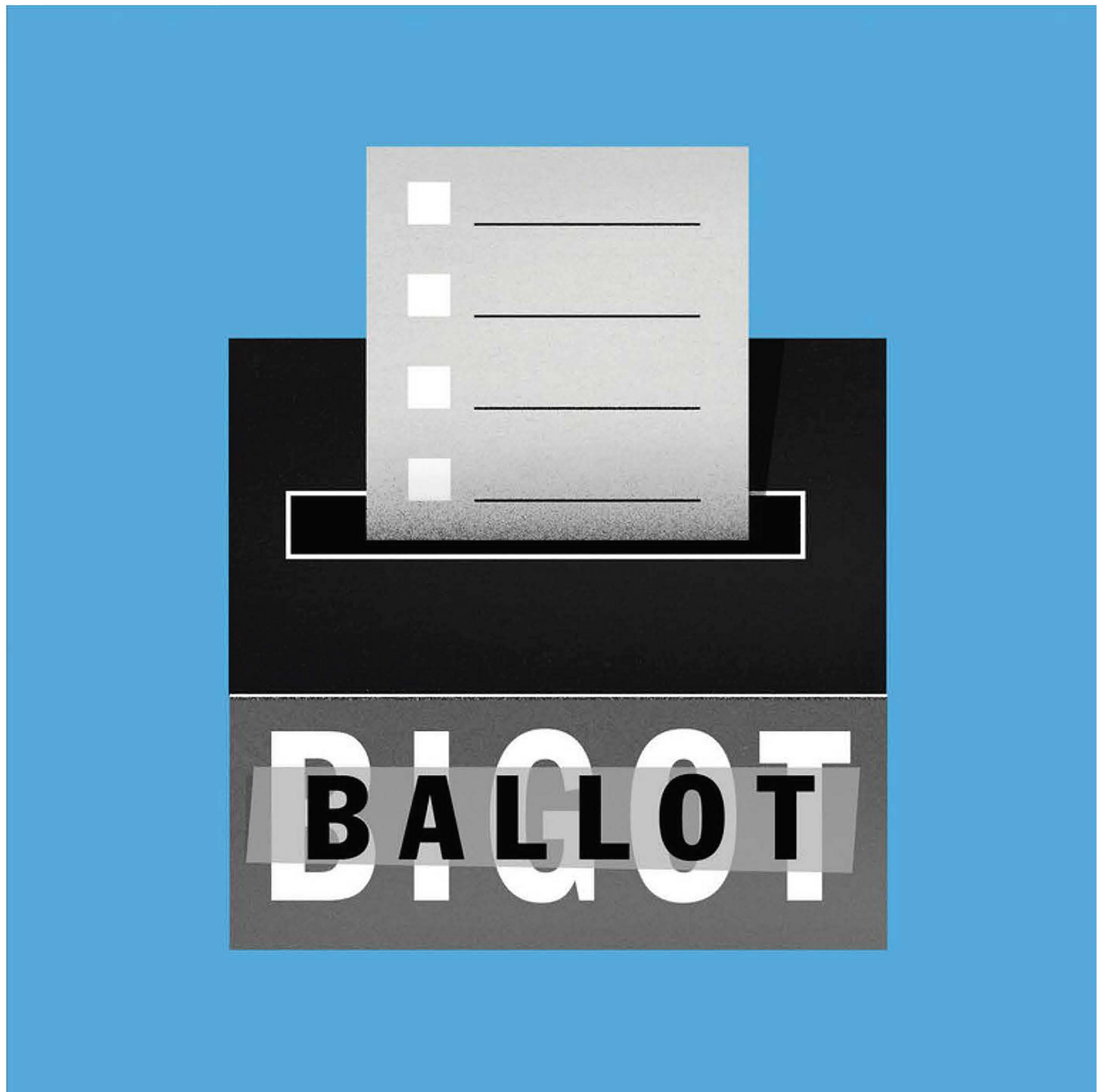


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Sorry, Liberals. Bigotry Didn't Elect Donald Trump.

By DAVID PAUL KUHN DEC. 26, 2016



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Donald J. Trump won the white working-class vote over Hillary Clinton by a larger margin than any major-party nominee since World War II. Instead of this considerable achievement inspiring introspection, figures from the heights of [journalism](#), [entertainment](#), [literature](#) and the [Clinton campaign](#) continue to suggest that Mr. Trump won the presidency by appealing to the bigotry of his supporters. As Bill Clinton recently said, the one thing Mr. Trump knows "is how to get angry white men to vote for him."

This stereotyping of Trump voters is not only illiberal, it falsely presumes Mr. Trump won *because* of his worst comments about women and minorities rather than despite them.

In fact, had those people who agreed that Mr. Trump lacked "a sense of decency" voted for Mrs. Clinton, she would have been elected the next president.

Mrs. Clinton and Mr. Trump equally won over party loyalists. Yet about one in five voters did not have a favorable view of either candidate. These voters overwhelmingly backed Mr. Trump. Exit polls [demonstrated](#) that if voters who disapproved of both candidates had divided evenly between them, Mrs. Clinton would have won.

Several weeks before the election, a Quinnipiac University [poll](#) found that 51 percent of white working-class voters did not believe that Mr. Trump had a "sense of decency" and ranked Mrs. Clinton slightly higher on that quality.

But they were not voting on decency. Indeed, one-fifth of voters - more than 25 million Americans - said they "somewhat" disapproved of Mr. Trump's treatment of women. Mr. Trump won three-quarters of these voters, despite their disapprobation.

Bluntly put, much of the white working class decided that Mr. Trump could be a jerk. Absent any other champion, they supported the jerk they thought was more on their side - that is, on the issues that most concerned them.

And anti-immigrant blowback, for instance, was not what unified them. Mr. Trump proposed expelling illegal immigrants yet more of his voters, by a 50 percent to 45 percent margin, said illegal immigrants working here should be offered a chance to apply for legal status rather than be deported.

In the Obama era, we also saw that race was not a critical driver of white swing votes. Barack Obama won more support among white men in 2008, including the working class, than any Democrat since 1980.

Mr. Obama's support among these whites was at its peak in 2008 [after](#) the stock market crash. At the depths of the Great Recession that followed, blue-collar white men experienced the [most job losses](#).

Their support began [hemorrhaging](#) after Mr. Obama chose early in his presidency - when congressional Democrats could have overcome Republican obstruction - to fight for health care reform instead of a "new New Deal."

By 2016, Mr. Trump personified the vote against the status quo, one still not working out for them. A post-campaign [study](#) comparing the George W. Bush coalition in 2000 to the Trump coalition in 2016 found that Mr. Trump particularly improved in areas hurt most by competition from Chinese imports, from the bygone brick and tile industry of Mason City, Iowa, to the flagging furniture plants of Hickory, N.C. The study concluded that, had the import competition from China been half as large, Mrs. Clinton would have won key swing states and the presidency with them.

This argument does not ignore bigotry. Racism appeared more concentrated among Trump voters. One [poll](#) found that four in 10 Trump supporters said blacks were more "lazy" than whites, compared with one-quarter of Clinton or John Kasich supporters.

But traits are not motives and don't necessarily decide votes. Consider that four in 10 liberal Democrats, the largest share of any group, [said](#) in 2011 that they would hold a Mormon candidate's faith against him or her. It would be silly to argue that, therefore, liberals voted for Mr. Obama because Mitt Romney was Mormon.

Yet the Trump coalition continues to be branded as white backlash. The stereotyping forgets that many Trump supporters held a progressive outlook. Mr. Trump won nearly one in four voters who wanted the next president to follow *more* liberal policies.

Democrats need only recall Mr. Clinton to understand how voters can support someone in spite of his faults. Mr. Clinton won re-election in 1996 despite a majority, including about a third of liberal voters, saying he was *not* honest. His approval rating reached the highest point of his presidency during the Monica Lewinsky scandal. It wasn't that Democrats and independents endorsed Mr. Clinton's behavior. They opposed Republicans more.

Two decades later, we are reminded again that a vote for a presidential candidate is not a vote for every aspect of him. We can look for the worst in our opponents, but that doesn't always explain how they got the best of us.

David Paul Kuhn, a political analyst, is the author of the political novel "What Makes It Worthy" and "The Neglected Voter: White Men and the Democratic Dilemma."

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