



Racism and the “Working Class” in Media Coverage of U.S. Politics

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During the first Democratic presidential debate, a friend of mine posted on Facebook: “Sanders did it! He said working class! Everybody drinks!” The exuberant post captured the glee that the U.S. Left often experiences when the term “working class” makes its way into mainstream political conversations. Use of the phrase seems to acknowledge that working people have independent interests that policymakers must address if workers are to thrive in the United States.

But the term “working class” is not always employed in ways that benefit working people. Indeed, in the current election cycle and for the last half century, the term “working class” has often been used in U.S. political conversations to vilify workers, with the effect of isolating them from progressive political allies and undercutting any hope for policies crafted to meet their particular needs.

In today’s presidential race, apart from the Sanders campaign, for instance, the term “working class” is often used to identify the racist supporters of Donald Trump. See, for

example Salon's "[The Truth About White Working Class](#)" or New Yorker's "[How Donald Trump Appeals to the White Working Class](#)." Many articles and editorials explain the racial resentments of Trump's supporters by reference to the raw deal that white workers have suffered in the era of deindustrialization.

But Trump supporters are apparently [not workers hurt most by deindustrialization](#). Instead, [at least in terms of income, Trump's supporters are in the middling range](#) and could just as easily and accurately be referred to as middle class, especially given the propensity of the mainstream press and politicians in other cases to lump all Americans into an undifferentiated middle class. Why choose in this particular situation to use the term "working class"?

The history of the term "working class" in mainstream media coverage of U.S. politics offers an answer. Taking the *New York Times* as an example of mainstream print media, I have tracked the use of the term "working class" between 1930 and the 2010. The evidence shows that use of the term "working class" increased in the 1960s, skyrocketed in the 1970s, and increased yet again in the 1980s; it continued to increase thereafter. The evidence suggests further that one reason for the increased use of the term was a desire to identify as specifically as possible a group of white Americans in the North who were resisting the civil rights movement.

Given journalistic conventions when this trend began, the particular people identified as "working class" in articles about racist white people could have as legitimately been called "middle class." But the reporters, pundits, and politicians writing or cited in the pieces effectively distanced themselves from racist white Americans by choosing "working class" instead. By identifying, for instance, supporters of George Wallace as "working class," writers selected a label that sharply distinguished racist white people from the majority of presumably middle class Americans. The choice not only disassociated racists from the ostensibly non-racist majority—including the reporters, pundits, and politicians themselves—but also implied that noxious racial politics were somehow *contained* by class boundaries.



Photo Credit: [Capital Research Center newsletter](#), April 29, 2016

Identifying racists as middle class might have left the impression that racism was endemic in American life. How comforting to believe instead that racism was peculiar to a smaller group and a group that, by the 1980s, when “working class” was employed with striking frequency, was going the way of the dinosaur.

By identifying racists as “working class,” mainstream writers and politicians today and in the last several decades locate racism in a group also often represented as beleaguered and declining. That location suggests that racism will disappear without any effort because only this disappearing group of blue-collar types harbors racist ideas.

This use of the term “working class” in no way benefits workers. To the contrary, it stigmatizes them as vicious bigots and tends to alienate wage-earners from those who might otherwise serve as political allies. It also removes responsibility for racism from those outside blue-collar occupations.

The history of the term “working class” in American political conversations behooves us constantly to attend to the particular way the term is used. When “working class” recognizes the independent interests of workers as urgent and legitimate, it is a welcome departure from a tradition of representing all Americans as middle class and sharing identical interests. When the term is used to suggest that racism festers within only a small group of resentful white people who have no future in the body politic, the term needs to be challenged rather than celebrated.

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