Many progressives believe that economic anxiety had little to do with President Trump’s 2016 victory. You can read any number of articles making this case and instead asserting that racism was the reason that a lot of white, working-class voters switched to the Republican side.

I’m skeptical that the story is so simple. I understand why it’s alluring to progressives: Trump is a terrible president, and a race-based explanation for his victory makes his supporters seem less sympathetic than an economics-based explanation. But I don’t think the facts are consistent with the idea that economics were largely irrelevant.

For one thing, the same white working-class voters — the ones who are supposed to be irredeemably bigoted — voted in substantial numbers for Barack Obama in both 2008 and 2012. And even though Trump again stoked racism in the 2018 midterms, many voters flipped back to the Democratic column.

Andrew Cherlin, a sociologist at Johns Hopkins University, has just released a paper laying out an explanation I find more sensible: Racial resentment and economic anxiety both played key roles, and they fed off each other.

For the paper, Cherlin studied Dundalk, Maryland, a largely white community in Baltimore County that’s fairly typical of the places that
helped elect Trump. In recent decades, Dundalk has lost the blue-collar jobs — many at Bethlehem Steel — that once provided a path to the middle class. Wages have fallen, and out-of-wedlock births have risen.

Obama won 42 percent of the vote in Dundalk in 2008. Four years later, while running a populist campaign that cast his opponent, Mitt Romney, as a heartless corporate executive, Obama won 47 percent of the community. In 2016, however, Hillary Clinton cratered in Dundalk, winning 34 percent to Trump’s 66 percent. (She still won Maryland, but her performance in places like Dundalk doomed her in Pennsylvania, Ohio, Michigan, Wisconsin and Iowa, all of which Obama won twice.)

Cherlin’s interviews highlight the problem with imagining that racism and economics are separate subjects. In truth, they’re intertwined. “When you struggle financially,” as one Dundalk resident said, “you look for someone to blame.”

Another resident, who spent 20 years as a blue-collar worker before becoming an editor at the community newspaper, said:

I do not deny that there is very real, longstanding racism. [But] if you want to know why communities like Dundalk voted for Trump, it’s not really bigotry in itself; it’s fear, it’s the sense of alienation, it’s the sense of desperation, it’s the sense of a lack of answers. ...

If you feel like you’ve got a place in the society around you and your own situation is not tottering on the brink, you’re secure enough to open the door to other people, literally and figuratively. On the other hand, if you’re fearful, desperate, alienated, you start looking for ways to be suspicious of other people.

Trump’s success depended on combining populist economic rhetoric (especially about the damage done by foreign trade, which feels acute in old factory towns) with bigotry (especially about immigrants). Cherlin writes:
His masterstroke was to recognize the desperation of the white working class over the deteriorating industrial economy and to encourage their tendency to racialize that desperation. Neither economics nor identity politics can be said to be the more important factor. Perhaps one without the other — economics in a setting where no one racialized it, or racial prejudice at a time of economic prosperity — would not have brought about the same result. Together, they were tinder for the bonfire that resulted. And Trump was the match.

This debate isn’t just a matter of history. If you believe the voters who swung to Trump are irredeemable racists, then you probably think the Democratic Party can’t win many of them back in 2020 and should campaign accordingly. Then again, if you believe that, it’s pretty hard to make sense of the election results from 2008, 2012 and 2018.

For more ...

- [Cherlin’s paper](#) — published by the Russell Sage Foundation — also examines Turner Station, a predominantly black working-class community near Dundalk that has continued to vote Democrat. And he goes into detail about why he believes earlier social science papers have mistakenly concluded that economics was irrelevant: “They have largely focused on short-term measures such as current income and employment rather than the long-term decline of the kind of labor that provided people with a sense of pride and dignity.”

- I’ve written about this topic in previous [newsletters](#) and [columns](#), and [Cherlin](#) wrote a Times Op-Ed last year.

- On last year’s midterms, my colleague [Ross Douthat](#) has written, “Some of the biggest swings against the G.O.P. were among middle and lower-income Americans, not just among affluent suburbanites.