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ESSAY

For JD Vance's Kentucky, Politics Is About Pride and Jobs

In the country's second-poorest congressional district, white working-class voters wonder if either party can solve their problems.

By Arlie Russell Hochschild

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Kentucky's 5th congressional district is the second-poorest in the U.S. and the one with the highest percentage of white residents, at more than 93%. This swath of Appalachian coal-mining country is where Ohio Sen. JD Vance, the Republican vice-presidential nominee, spent summers with his beloved grandparents Mamaw and Papaw, as described in his memoir "Hillbilly Elegy."

Donald Trump didn't need Vance as his running-mate to carry this region, which gave Trump more than 80% of the vote in 2016 and 2020. But the GOP surely hopes that Vance's dazzling rags-to-riches story will appeal to the largest single demographic group in America: whites without college degrees, who make up 48% of all Americans over 25.

Over the last seven years, I have interviewed dozens of residents of KY-5 about their lives, feelings and political views. One of them is David Maynard, a 38-year-old TikTok artist with a long black ponytail who grew up in a trailer park in Martin County, about 90 miles from Vance's grandparents' home in Jackson. Like most people in the area, Maynard's mother and stepfather are Christian Republicans: A Christian flag flies above the U.S. flag on a pole outside their home. "They're good people and to them 'Christian' means 'good person,'" Maynard explained.

As for his own politics, Maynard calls himself an independent but says "I feel like many on both the right and left don't get people like me."

"I'm poor, I'm white and disabled, and I've always lived here, okay?" he said. "But I'm not racist or anti-immigrant, and I feel like Donald Trump probably mistakes me for someone else. In 2016 he came to Appalachia to appeal to people like he thinks I am. In fact he wants the

‘I feel like many on both the right and left don’t get people like me,’ says David Maynard, who grew up in Martin County, Ky. PHOTO: SHEA MAYNARD

whole country to feel like he thinks I feel—make them feel like poor whites. But I don’t feel like he thinks I do.”

Republican vice-presidential nominee Sen. JD Vance, who wrote about his Kentucky forebears in his memoir 'Hillbilly Elegy,' addresses a rally in Reno, Nevada, July 30. PHOTO: ANDRI TAMBUNAN FOR WSJ

Maynard is nearly as disgruntled with the Democrats: "All the talk is about gender identity, racial identity, sexual identity. A person is the first of their type to be this, or the first of their type to do that. They've got clubs, associations. I saw on Facebook where they have a cab service just for Black women," he said.

Since the 1990s, whites without college degrees have been losing ground in income, property and social well-being. The economist Raj Chetty has found that in the last three decades, incomes of white Americans with college degrees and Black Americans without college degrees rose. But at the same time, income of non-college whites dropped, and their lives worsened in other ways, too. White Americans without college degrees are less likely to report being in good health and more likely to say they live alone. Deaths of despair, including

drug overdoses, alcohol-related liver disease and suicide, have risen fastest among non-college whites, especially men.

A street in Pikeville in Kentucky's 5th Congressional District. PHOTO: ARLIE RUSSELL HOCHSCHILD

Over the same period, in presidential elections, these voters have been moving steadily from the Democrats to the Republicans. In 2020, Donald Trump won 47% of the total vote but 65% of this white, blue-collar demographic, compared with 33% for Joe Biden.

Part of Trump's powerful appeal to downwardly mobile blue-collar whites has been to address their feeling of lost or stolen pride. Living in areas where hard work couldn't prevent economic decline, many poor whites feel shame. Trump offers language and rituals that turn shame outward into blame—of immigrants, the press, the federal government and other enemies.

In 2016, Vance described Trump's emotional alchemy as "cultural heroin," saying that "he makes some feel better for a bit. But he cannot fix what ails them, and one day they'll realize it." Vance's old criticisms of his new running-mate can give an impression of political schizophrenia. But both the old and new Vance shy away from public spending to help the poor. Instead he has promoted private initiatives such as "Rise of the Rest," a venture-capital fund he led with Steve Case, co-founder of AOL, to invest in overlooked U.S. towns and cities. To restore the lives of those caught inside the tunnel of addiction, however—like Vance's mother, whom he describes in "Hillbilly Elegy"—requires public dollars, about which Trump and Vance say almost nothing.

Meanwhile, the Biden administration's three signature legislative achievements—the Infrastructure Act, the Inflation Reduction Act and the CHIPS Act—have stimulated public and private spending that disproportionately helps poorer states. About half of the new private investments announced since Biden took office in 2021, a total of $233 billion, are in counties won by Trump in 2020—even though these counties have lower than average populations and cumulatively produce only 28% of the nation's GDP.

Entrepreneur and Trump supporter Roger Ford at a local family cemetery in Brushy Creek, Ky.
PHOTO: ARLIE RUSSELL HOCHSCHILD

In Cumberland, Ky., a memorial honors coal miners who died on the job or of mining-related illnesses.
PHOTO: CHARLES MOSTOLLER/REUTERS

But that doesn't mean white working-class voters like the ones in KY-5 are embracing Democratic presidential nominee Kamala Harris. If Harris was to ask you what you'd like her to do, I asked Maynard, what would you tell her? "She should stick to policy that affects everyone, not get sidetracked on identity, and take seriously what it means to be poor," he replied.

Maynard felt caught between two social narratives. As he explained, the white middle class can say “Hey, I’ve worked hard and done well.” The Black poor can say “I’ve worked hard and not done well and been held back by racism.” But “that leaves me out,” he said. “I have white privilege, okay? But I’m still poor, okay? So I must be less than nothing.”

Maynard feels that neither party offers voters like him a way of thinking about his dignity. Republicans talk about tax cuts and retribution against political enemies, he says, while Democrats focus on gender, race and sexuality.

For others in KY-5, the feeling that Trump understands and respects their identity is powerful enough to overcome his personal and legal problems. Roger Ford, the president of Eureka Energy Corporation, is an entrepreneur who, though pro-coal, hopes to place solar panels on depleted mountaintops and develop biomass into natural gas. He is also a self-declared pro-gun, pro-life Republican who led a 5,500-vehicle pro-Trump caravan in 2020. “I believe God picks those who can best lead us, even if they are often morally flawed,” he says. “God picked Noah to rescue us from the flood even though Noah was a drunk. And He picked Donald Trump to rescue us from this free fall, even though Trump has his problems too.”

Along with lower taxes, coal is a big reason why Andrew H. Scott, mayor of Coal Run Village, says he supports Trump. “A lot of liberals talk about coal as if it’s dirty and bad. But our coal forged the weapons that won World Wars I and II, and kept the nation’s lights on in peace. And we’re proud of our coal miners with blackened faces,” Scott said. “The way we see it, Trump is a bully, but that’s okay because he’s our bully.”

In fact, during Donald Trump’s four years in office, his supporters in KY-5 saw little economic improvement. Coal mines did not reopen, nor did well-paid alternative jobs replace them. While Trump’s tax cuts benefited the rich, they helped few Kentucky workers pay for groceries. Still, many rural and small-town Christians who feel forgotten and invisible believe that Trump recognizes them.

One former coal miner, lodged in an addiction recovery clinic, recounted how he was prescribed Oxycontin after a work injury and became addicted. Slowly he lost piece after piece of his self-worth: His wife left him, he lost custody of his children, and he became homeless. Watching television in the clinic one day, the man said, he saw Donald Trump promising to “bring back coal.” “I knew he was lying,” he recalled, “but I felt like he saw who I was.”

Arlie Russell Hochschild is a professor emerita of sociology at the University of California, Berkeley. Her forthcoming book is "Stolen Pride: Loss, Shame and the Rise of the Right," which will be published on Sept. 10 by The New Press.