

Trump's disappearing populism was on full display at Thursday's debate

 [vox.com/2020/10/22/21529733/donald-trump-minimum-wage-debate](https://www.vox.com/2020/10/22/21529733/donald-trump-minimum-wage-debate)

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President Donald Trump at the final debate on October 22 in Nashville, Tennessee.
Justin Sullivan/Getty Images

One of the most quietly significant moments in Thursday night's presidential debate was also one of its most banal. The moderator, Kristen Welker, asked the candidates about the idea of raising the minimum wage. Joe Biden, the Democratic presidential nominee, said he's for it, as Democrats generally are. But President Donald Trump was skeptical.

"How are you helping your small businesses when you're forcing wages?" Trump asked. "What's going to happen and what's been proven to happen is when you do that these small businesses fire many of their employees."

The evidence on this is contested, but Trump is probably wrong based on the bulk of recent research. But he's also not lying or wildly trampling on the professional consensus. Well-qualified people simply disagree about this issue. But most of all, Trump's answer was an incredibly conventional answer. The 2016 version of Donald Trump was an ideological innovator. He was a populist, not beholden to the special interests and the donor classes. He was going to shake things up.

Today, that's over. He's an ideologically orthodox Republican. And at least as much as the pandemic or the Democratic nominee, this Trumpian transformation deserves to be understood as an important reason he's losing.

Increasing the minimum wage is very popular

Empirical economics research has grown increasingly optimistic about the possibility of a \$15 per hour wage as some cities have experimented with it.

At the same time, it's become extraordinarily popular with the public, drawing a large amount of support even from rank-and-file Republicans.

Back during the 2016 campaign, Trump repeatedly suggested he would support a minimum wage increase — albeit perhaps to \$10/hour rather than \$15/hour.

As president, he's completely abandoned that idea. And it's part of a larger transformation, through which a guy who was perceived as ideologically moderate in 2016 has become increasingly right-wing and extreme on basic economic issues.

The GOP has changed Trump

As my colleague Jane Coaston has written, the overall moral of the story is that the Republican Party has changed Trump at least as much as Trump has changed the GOP.

It didn't necessarily have to be this way. Very early in his administration, Trump used a combination of a bully pulpit, trade threats, and financial inducements to halt layoffs at a Carrier air conditioner factory in Indiana. It was a big moment for Trump and sent chills down the spines of Democratic strategists who didn't have a great answer to Trumpian populism.

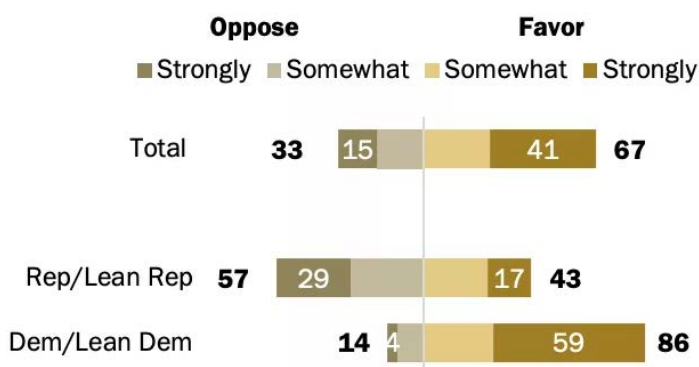
But he pretty quickly forgot about the Carrier plant, which ended up undergoing multiple rounds of layoffs after all. And more to the point, he forgot about the *idea* of trying to forge a more pro-worker version of economics. He has demonstrated zero policy creativity on health care, his daughter Ivanka has totally dropped her early stated interest in child care policy, and his one major legislative accomplishment was a huge tax cut for multinational corporations.

There's nothing unusual about a Republican administration that loves regressive tax cuts, hates business regulations, and warns that a minimum wage hike will hurt business and costs jobs. But that's exactly what's so remarkable about it. If Trump is not going to be any different from standard Republicans, then what's the point of Donald Trump? He has less self-control than the average GOP politician. He has less knowledge and understanding of the issues. He has more scandals and financial conflicts of interest.

Trump is, in some ways, just Mike Pence with a bad Twitter account. And even after a decent Trump performance, any halfway sane conservative needs to recognize that they'd be better off with a Mitt Romney or a Marco Rubio making these exact arguments.

Large majority of Democrats favor increasing the federal minimum wage

% who say they ___ raising the federal minimum wage to \$15 an hour ...



Note: Don't know responses not shown.

Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted April 29-May 13, 2019.