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Understanding America's White Working Class: Their Politics, Voting Habits, and Policy Priorities

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



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In the final days of the 2012 presidential campaign, myriad news reports have turned their attention to the white working class, a group of diminishing size but considerable political clout. Indeed, as a prominent story focused on the white working class in the *New York Times* declared last week, the “Ohio working class may offer [the] key to Obama’s re-election.”¹ Whites without a college degree make up a substantial share of the population in several key swing states – for example, 43 percent in Ohio, and 40 percent in Florida, both well above the national average of 35 percent. Ohio is of particular interest, given that Republicans have never won a presidential contest without it. Current polls suggest a neck-and-neck race, although Obama has maintained a small but consistent edge in the state polls for months; the most recent simple average of likely voter polls in Ohio shows Obama up by 2.4 points over between October 22 and November 1.²

Given the perceived importance of white working class voters in key swing states, especially must-win Ohio, it comes as no surprise that the 2012 political debate over the partisan preferences of the working class has been heated. Indeed, white working class politics have been the source of controversy for years, with pundits, journalists, and political scientists all weighing in with a version of the story. Perhaps the most dominant narrative over the last several election cycles is the idea that Democrats “lost” the white working class, who focus on cultural issues (e.g. “God, guns, and gays”) at the expense of their economic self-interest.³ Indeed, President Obama’s 2008 off-the record remarks that economically-distressed are Americans “bitter” and “cling to guns or religion” dogged him throughout the last campaign. The Romney campaign has tried hard to re-ignite the issue in 2012 as a response to the devastating recordings of Governor Romney’s dismissal of 47 percent of Americans as free-loading dependents.⁴ With the dominance of the economy in the 2012 campaigns, the “God, guns, and gays” narrative has receded, but the broader question remains: Are Democrats losing ground with the white working class? And, in general, do white working class voters prioritize cultural issues over economic self-interest when making electoral

¹ Zeleny, Jeff and Dalia Sussman. “Ohio Working Class May Offer Key to Obama’s Re-election.” October 31, 2012. *New York Times*. <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/31/us/politics/ohio-working-class-may-be-key-to-obama-re-election.html?pagewanted=all>.

² See Silver, Nate. “Nov. 1: The Simple Case for Saying Obama is the Favorite.” November 2, 2012. *New York Times*. <http://fivethirtyeight.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/11/02/nov-1-the-simple-case-for-saying-obama-is-the-favorite/>.

³ Frank, Thomas. *What’s the Matter with Kansas? How Conservatives Won the Heart of America*. Henry Holt.

⁴ See Rainey, James. “Are ‘Bittergate’ and ‘Redistribution’ Audios Obama’s Own 47%?” *Los Angeles Times*. September 18, 2012. <http://www.latimes.com/news/politics/la-pn-obama-bittergate-redistribution-20120918.0.6469759.story>.

decisions?⁵

Scholars have weighed in on the political behavior of the white working class. And, unlike many academic disputes, the friction amongst political analysts focused on white working class politics occasionally creates sparks that fly out of the academy and onto the pages of national newspapers. Most recently, political psychologist Jonathan Haidt's "Why Working Class People Vote Conservative" sparked a vigorous debate well-summarized by Thomas Edsall in an online *New York Times* article.⁶ Haidt argues that most working class people in the United States vote Republican. In response, political scientist Andrew Gelman counters that, in fact, working class Americans overwhelmingly vote Democratic.⁷ Haidt responded by more clearly defining the population of interest: he meant the white working class, defined as white employed Americans without a college degree. Defined this way, he argues, white working class Americans have indeed defected from the Democratic Party. Political scientist Larry Bartels provides yet another counter-argument, suggesting that the defection from the Democratic Party represents a regional story about Southern white working class voters, rather than a national trend.⁸

Much of the debate is one of definitions; the political behavior of the "white working class" look somewhat different depending on how white working class is defined. This piece aims to contribute to that debate by examining white working class politics over time, based on both a review of the extant academic literature and new analyses. In keeping with several major past academic contributions, it concludes that while the white working class is somewhat less supportive of Democratic presidential candidates than it has been in past decades, the story is largely a regional one. In other words, many Southern white working class voters may have lost their appetite for the Democratic Party in the wake of the Civil Rights movement, but Democratic presidential candidates have performed at about the same rate in the rest of the country in recent contests as they have in the past. Moreover, while white working class voters may be more culturally conservative than their non-working-class identified white peers, they are more economically liberal – and they typically prioritize economics over cultural ideology when making a presidential vote choice.

⁵ For a reflection on the potential receding importance of "guns, God, and gays" in the 2012 election, see Timothy Egan. "Opinionator: Goodbye to 'Gays, Guns, and God.'" *New York Times*. December 6, 2011. <http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/12/08/goodbye-to-gays-guns-god/>.

⁶ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/society/2012/jun/05/why-working-class-people-vote-conservative>; <http://campaignstops.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/06/25/white-working-chaos/>.

⁷ <http://andrewgelman.com/2012/06/stop-me-before-i-aa/> (n.b.: As of November 2012, Gelman's site has apparently been infected with a virus thus this post is not currently accessible.)

⁸ <http://themonkeycage.org/blog/2012/06/18/the-party-of-the-american-working-man-and-woman/>.

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What Do We Know About White Working-Class Politics?

Thomas Frank's *What's the Matter with Kansas?* captured the imagination of the political punditry with its timely release in the run-up to George W. Bush's re-election. By Frank's account, the Republican Party secured political dominance by marrying "business and blue collar."⁹ The problem with Kansas, and, by extrapolation, with the rest of the country, is that Republicans have successfully hoodwinked voters of modest means into voting against their economic interests in order to defend traditional cultural values against the attack of effete coastal Democratic Party elites.¹⁰ Political pundits leapt on the bandwagon to explain John Kerry's loss to George W. Bush, suggesting that Kerry's "Massachusetts values" trumped Bush's weak economic performance on behalf of everyday working Americans.¹¹

On the one hand, Frank's basic argument is not new. Beginning with Nixon strategist Kevin Phillips' seminal *The Emerging Republican Majority* in 1969, analysts have long noted that American politics have been transformed by the defection of white working-class conservatives from the Democratic Party.¹² In the late 1980s and early 1990s, much of the analysis focused on the impact of the "rights revolutions" on the Democratic Party. The so-called "cultural" issues of civil rights, feminism, and gay rights drove down support for the Democrats amongst Southerners, and working-class voters' cultural conservatism meant that these voters were the most likely to have defected for the Republican Party.¹³

On the other hand, Frank's assertion that "millions of farmers, factory workers, and waitresses" across the country have been drawn to the Republican Party's "new" political coalition on the basis of cultural conservatism has drawn serious fire from academics wielding large-scale, nationally-representative datasets allowing for the careful tracing of political trajectories across time. Perhaps most

⁹ Frank, Thomas. *What's the Matter with Kansas? How Conservatives Won the Heart of America*. Henry Holt.

¹⁰ Note that *What's the Matter with Kansas?* was published as *What's the Matter with America?* in Great Britain and Australia.

¹¹ See, for instance: Magnusson, Paul. "The Deepest Divide: God, Guns, and Gays." *Business Week*. May 16, 2004. <http://www.businessweek.com/stories/2004-05-16/the-deepest-divide-god-guns-and-gays>; Kristof, Nicholas. "Living Poor, Voting Rich." *New York Times*. November 3, 2004. <http://www.nytimes.com/2004/11/03/opinion/03kris.html>;

¹² For an excellent concise history of the literature on the evolution of American political party allegiances and class, see Larry Bartels' *What's the Matter with What's the Matter with Kansas?* Bartels, Larry M. 2006. "What's the Matter with *What's the Matter with Kansas?*" *Quarterly Journal of Politics* 1:201-226. See also Phillips, Kevin P. 1986. *The Emerging Republican Majority*. Arlington House.

¹³ For instance, see: Ladd, Everett Carl and Charles D. Hadley. 1975. *Transformations of the American Party System: Political Coalitions from the New Deal to the 1970s*. Norton; Robert Huckfeldt and Carol Weitzel Kohfeldt. 1989. *Race and the Decline of Class in American Politics*. University of Illinois Press; Edward G. Carmines and James A. Stimson. 1989. *Issue Evolution: Race and the Transformation of American Politics*. Princeton University Press; Mary Edsall and Thomas Byrne Edsall. 1991. *Chain Reaction: The Impact of Race, Rights, and Taxes on American Politics*. W.W. Norton.

significantly, political scientist Larry Bartels' 2006 "What's the Matter with *What's the Matter with Kansas?*" poured ice-cold water on Frank's central premise.¹⁴ It is worth summarizing Bartels' findings in some detail, because of the persistence of the *What's the Matter with Kansas* meme.

Using data from the American National Election Studies (ANES), Bartels carefully charts the relationship between the white working class and Democratic presidential party vote choice over the last several decades. Like Frank, Bartels identifies "white working class" primarily in terms of educational level: white working class is defined as all whites without a college degree. Consistent with Frank's argument, the long-term downward trend in the share of non-college whites voting Democratic in presidential elections between 1952 and 2004 amounts to a nearly six percentage point cumulative decline.¹⁵

However, three key points are worth highlighting. First, Frank's argument implies that class (as defined by educational background) has become a more salient dividing factor in party vote choice. Yet Bartels' data illustrate that precisely the opposite is the case. Over time, non-college whites have become somewhat less likely to vote for Democratic presidential candidates, while college-educated whites have become somewhat more likely to vote for Democrats in those contests. These results suggest that, for white voters, class as defined by education has become a *less salient* indicator of political preferences than it was half a century ago.

Second, income has become far more salient in recent decades. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, non-college whites showed virtually no difference in presidential vote choice based on income – high-income and low-income whites without college were about equally like to vote for Democratic presidential candidates. Beginning in the 1970s, however, the salience of income has increased for white non-college voters. High-income whites without college are substantially less likely to vote for Democratic presidential candidates than are low- and middle-income whites without college. This finding echoes the basic conclusion of other political scientists studying the impact of income polarization on American politics: income has become an increasingly salient predictor of American political behavior.¹⁶

Indeed, President Obama carried lower-income whites handily in Ohio in 2008. While Obama narrowly lost lower-income whites to McCain on a national level (51

¹⁴ Bartels, Larry M. 2006. "What's the Matter with *What's the Matter with Kansas?*" *Quarterly Journal of Politics* 1:201-226.

¹⁵ Note that this downward trend in support for Democratic presidential candidates amongst non-college educated Americans is strictly limited to white non-college educated voters. Including non-whites without college degrees in the analysis produces a two percentage point increase in working class support for Democratic candidates over the last half century. See Bartels, 2006.

¹⁶ For a detailed analysis, see McCarty, Nolan, Keith T. Poole and Howard Rosenthal. 2006. *Polarized America: The Dance of Ideology and Unequal Riches*. MIT Press. See also Gelman, Andrew, et. al. 2008. *Red State, Blue State, Rich State, Poor State: Why Americans Vote the Way They Do*. Princeton University Press.

Over time, non-college whites have become somewhat less likely to vote for Democratic presidential candidates, while college-educated whites have become somewhat more likely to vote for Democrats in those contests. These results suggest that, for white voters, class as defined by education has become a *less salient* indicator of political preferences than it was half a century ago.

to 47 percent), he lost non-college whites at an even sharper rate (58 to 40 percent).¹⁷ Obama's national losses of lower-income whites were substantially driven by Southern voting patterns, however, a key detail that I'll return to in a moment. For now, however, the key point is the ascendancy of income divisions' electoral salience, an empirical development that is at odds with the punditry's emphasis on "the significance of the social rather than economic dimensions of contemporary class politics."¹⁸

Third, and perhaps most importantly because it is so often overlooked in popular analysis, the defection of the white South from the Democratic Party plays a central role in driving the overarching story of white working class politics. As Bartels succinctly summarizes: "Democratic presidential vote share has declined by almost 20 percentage points among [S]outhern whites without college degrees. Among non-southern whites without college degrees, it has declined by one percentage point. That's it. Fourteen elections, 52 years, one percentage point."¹⁹ The same basic relationship holds across all income groups of non-college-educated whites: a 20-point-gap between the South and the rest of the country. This is Richard Nixon's Southern Strategy come to life, not a widespread national defection of white working class voters from the Democratic Party. Case in point: in 2008, Obama won 54 percent of whites with incomes under \$50,000 outside of the South, while he secured just 35 percent of this group in the South.²⁰

In addition to rebuffing the conventional wisdom regarding the decline of the Democratic Party's political power amongst white working class voters, Bartels' analysis pushes back against the idea that the white working class votes primarily based on cultural concerns rather than economic issues. This idea persists in political commentary today, and has woven its way through the 2012 campaigns despite a general recognition of the special importance of the economy in the wake of the Great Recession. See, for instance, the left-leaning critiques of Romney's appeals to the working class levied by *Daily Beast* columnist Peter Beinart and *The New Republic* columnist John Judis, both of which implicitly take for granted the power of cultural narrative over economics.²¹

¹⁷ See CNN's 2008 exit poll data, broken down by demographics and state, at <http://www.cnn.com/ELECTION/2008/results/polls.main/>.

¹⁸ Bartels, 2006, at page 209.

¹⁹ Bartels, 2006, at page 210.

²⁰ CNN 2008 exit poll data at <http://www.cnn.com/ELECTION/2008/results/polls.main/>. Author's tabulations for South/non-South based on the Census definition of South, which includes the 11 former Confederate states plus Delaware, Kentucky, Maryland, Oklahoma, and (when available) D.C. D.C. exit poll demographics are not available for 2008. It is worth noting that some portion of white voters with incomes under \$50,000 are likely to be younger voters, including students, which is a group with whom Democrats have historically performed quite well and a group is unlikely to be included in the public vision of the "white working class." Exit poll data do not allow for the more detailed three-way tabulations necessary for sorting out how much the Obama's advantage with younger voters explains his solid performance with lower-income whites.

²¹ Beinart, Peter. "Mitt Romney's Bubba Strategy." *The Daily Beast*, August 28, 2012. <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2012/08/28/peter-beinart-on-mitt-romney-s-bubba->

As the analysis presented below illustrates, the same basic message holds if we simply take voters at their word and define white working class individuals as those who report a white working class self-identity.

Bartels' data-rich analysis knocks down this argument, as well. Using ANES data on voters' positions on six social and economic policy issues combined with presidential vote choice from 1984 through 2004, Bartels finds that the Frank argument is, if anything, backwards. For non-college-educated whites, economics issues' predictive power on vote choice is nearly twice as large as the predictive power of cultural issues. While college-educated whites are also more likely to vote based on economic policy preference than on cultural issues, the influence of cultural issues on better-educated whites' vote choice is substantially stronger than it is for that of less-educated whites. In other words: the white working class does not vote based on cultural preferences, but rather makes its political decisions based on economic policy. Moreover, Bartels finds little dramatic change in the predictive power of cultural issues on voting over between 1984 and 2004. While abortion has become a more politically-salient issue over time, the growth in importance is far more substantial for college-educated whites than for the white working class. In contrast, economic policy issues have grown in importance for the white working class. In short: James Carville was right. It's "the economy, stupid."²²

Another Perspective: Self-Identified White Working Class Voters

Bartels and others have made a convincing case against the conventional wisdom regarding the white working class defined in terms of education and income. As the analysis presented below illustrates, the same basic message holds if we simply take voters at their word and define white working class individuals as those who report a white working class self-identity.²³

Regardless of income or educational background, most Americans (including the vast majority of whites) identify as "middle class" when asked if they belong to the "upper, middle, or lower" class.²⁴ However, when asked to choose between

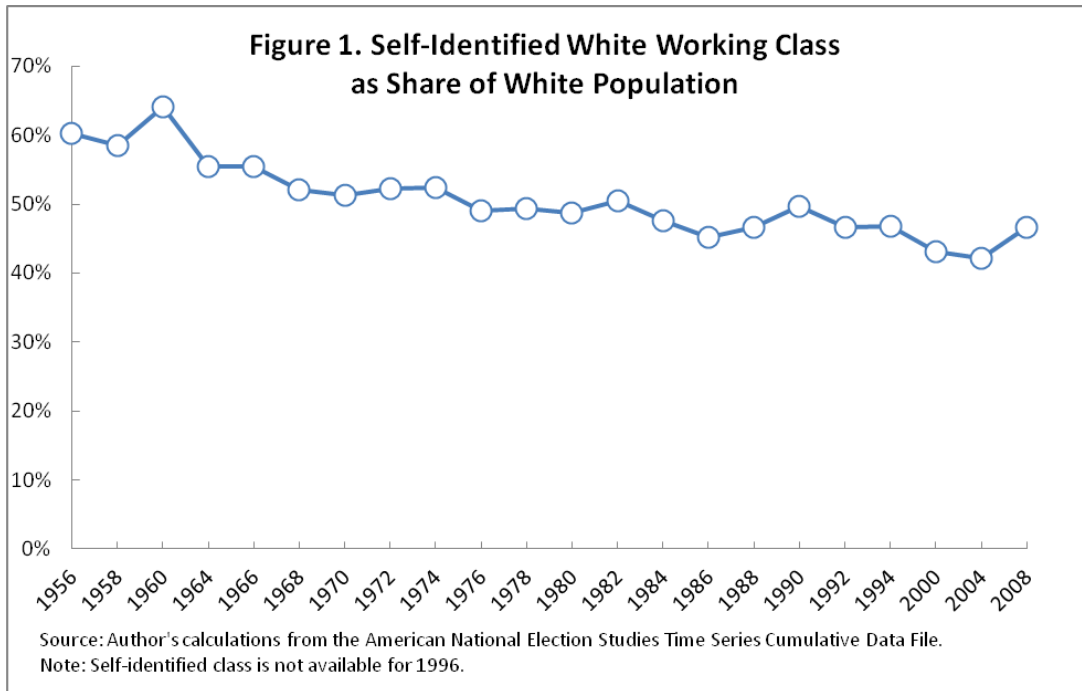
[strategy.html](#); Judis, John. "Romney's Losing Strategy." *The New Republic*, August 27, 2012. <http://www.tnr.com/blog/plank/106587/romney-losing-strategy>. Note that while both columnists argue that Romney's strategy of playing on white working class racial animus is not a winning one, it is not because they reject the premise that white working class racial animus is a real, wide-spread, and important national phenomenon.

²² "The economy, stupid" was one of three key messages for the 1992 Clinton campaign, coined by key advisor James Carville on a hand-written sign that hung in the campaign's Little Rock headquarters.

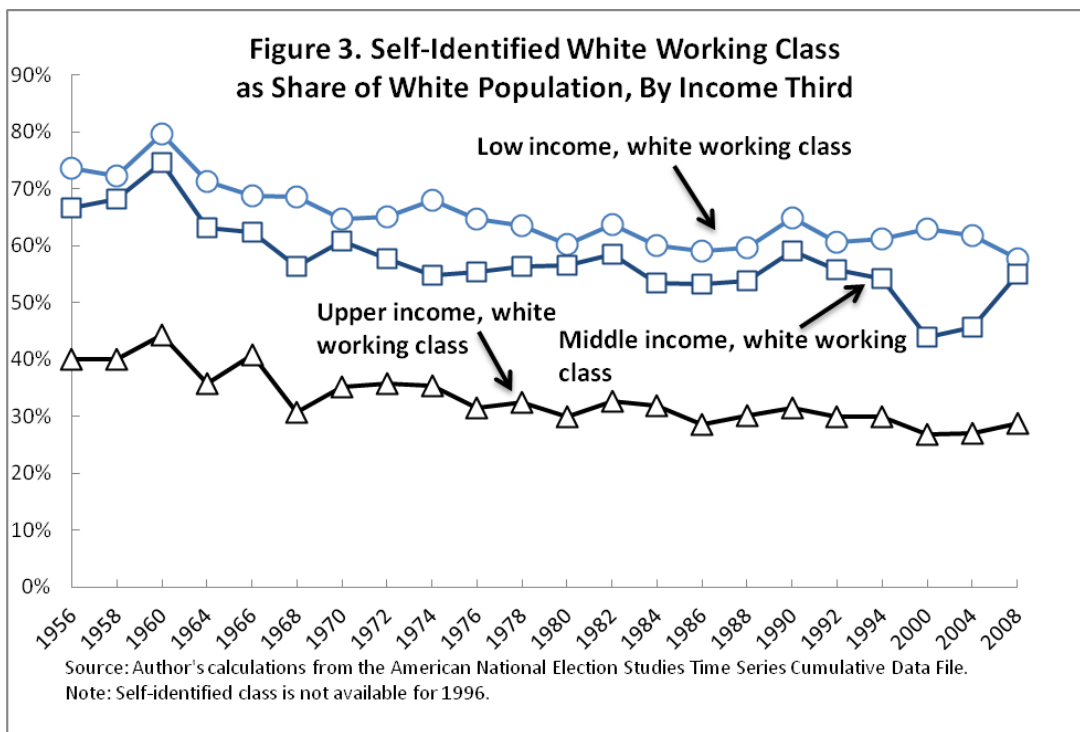
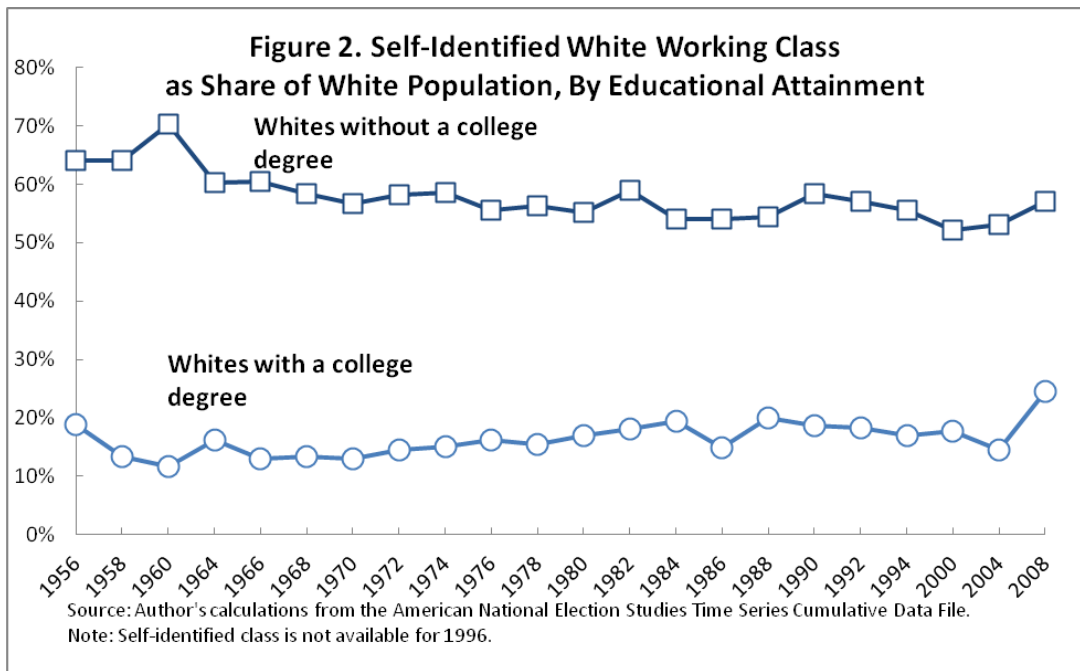
²³ Unless otherwise noted, all data analysis utilizes the American National Election Studies Time Series Cumulative Data File, which is available for download at http://www.electionstudies.org/studypages/download/datacenter_all.htm. "White" is defined as non-Hispanic white. "College-educated" is defined as those holding a bachelor's degree or higher; "non-college educated" are all those without a bachelor's degree. "Voters" is defined as all major party voters.

²⁴ Pew Research Center. 2012. "Fewer, Poorer, Gloomier: The Lost Decade of the Middle Class." Pew Research Center on Social and Demographic Trends. <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/files/2012/08/pew-social-trends-lost-decade-of-the-middle-class.pdf>.

“working class” and “middle class,” a substantial share of white Americans identify as working class. (See Figure 1.) In 2008, 47 percent of white Americans chose to identify as “working class.” While this figure is down from a high of 60 percent in 1956, it still represents a sizeable share of the white population, and suggests that a working class identity still resonates for myriad white voters. Moreover, it is worth noting that while a white working class self-identify correlates strongly with educational attainment, the relationship is by no means perfect. (See Figure 2.) The share of non-college educated whites self-identifying as working class has declined somewhat over the last half-century, while the share of college-educated whites self-identifying as working class has actually ticked upwards somewhat. Perhaps most notably, the share of self-identified working class whites with a college degree or beyond moved sharply upwards in 2008. Nearly a quarter of all whites with college identified as working class in 2008, likely reflecting the impact of the Great Recession on many individuals’ conception of their place in the economic hierarchy. Similarly, lower- and middle-income whites are far more likely than upper-income whites to identify as working class; the share of middle-income whites who identify as working rather than middle class shifted upwards sharply in the wake of the Great Recession. (See Figure 3.)

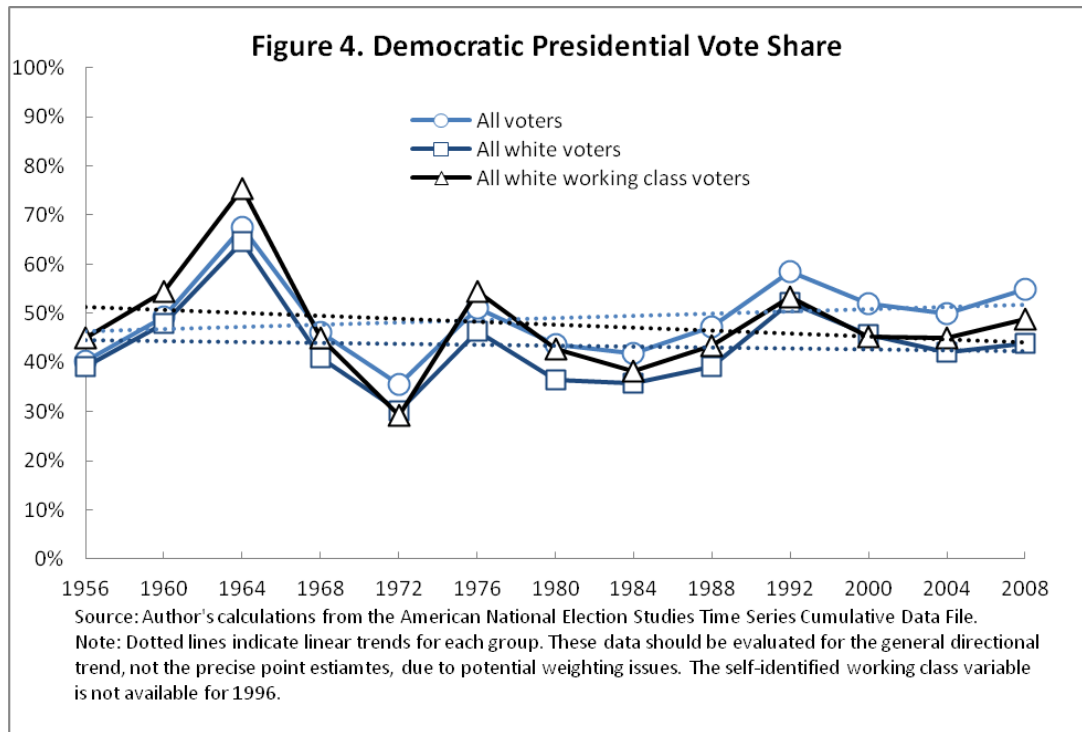


On average, Democratic presidential candidates prospects with self-identified white working class voters have diminished somewhat over time. Yet, the downward trend in Democratic presidential vote choice between 1956 and 2008 is concentrated amongst the Southern white working class.

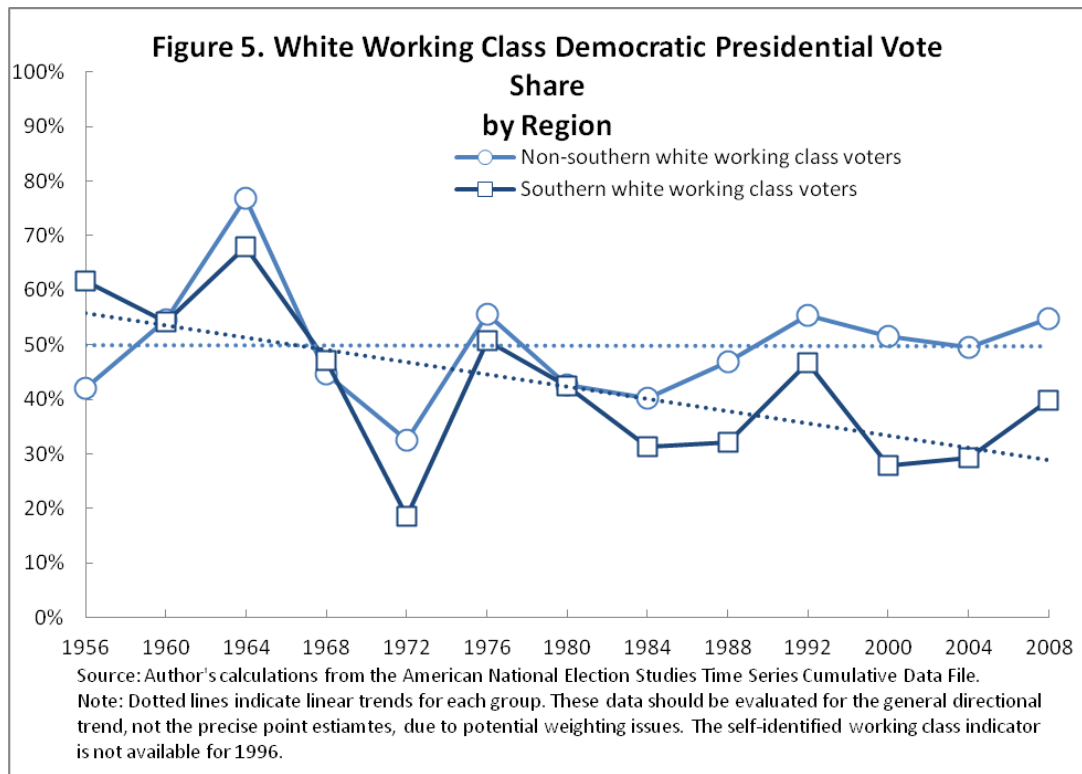


On average, Democratic presidential candidates prospects with self-identified white working class voters have diminished somewhat over time. (See Figure 4.) Yet, the downward trend in Democratic presidential vote choice between 1956 and

2008 is concentrated amongst the Southern white working class. (See Figure 5.) White working class presidential party vote choice for non-Southerners is remarkably stable over time; if anything, the period between 1984 and 2008 has been one of improvement for the Democrats amongst this group. The opposite is true in the South. Prior to the 1960s rights revolutions (including, most notably for the South, the major upheavals of the Civil Rights Movement), a strong majority of the Southern white working class voted for Democratic candidates. Southern white working class voting appears to have settled into a basic equilibrium with Reagan's 1984 election, with the notable exception of an uptick for Clinton's first election in 1992, and again for Obama's 2008 election gambit. This story is entirely consistent with that of Bartels and others who find that the "decline" in white working class allegiance to the Democrats is largely a regional phenomenon explained by the dissolution of the Southern Democratic Party's coalition in the wake of civil rights.

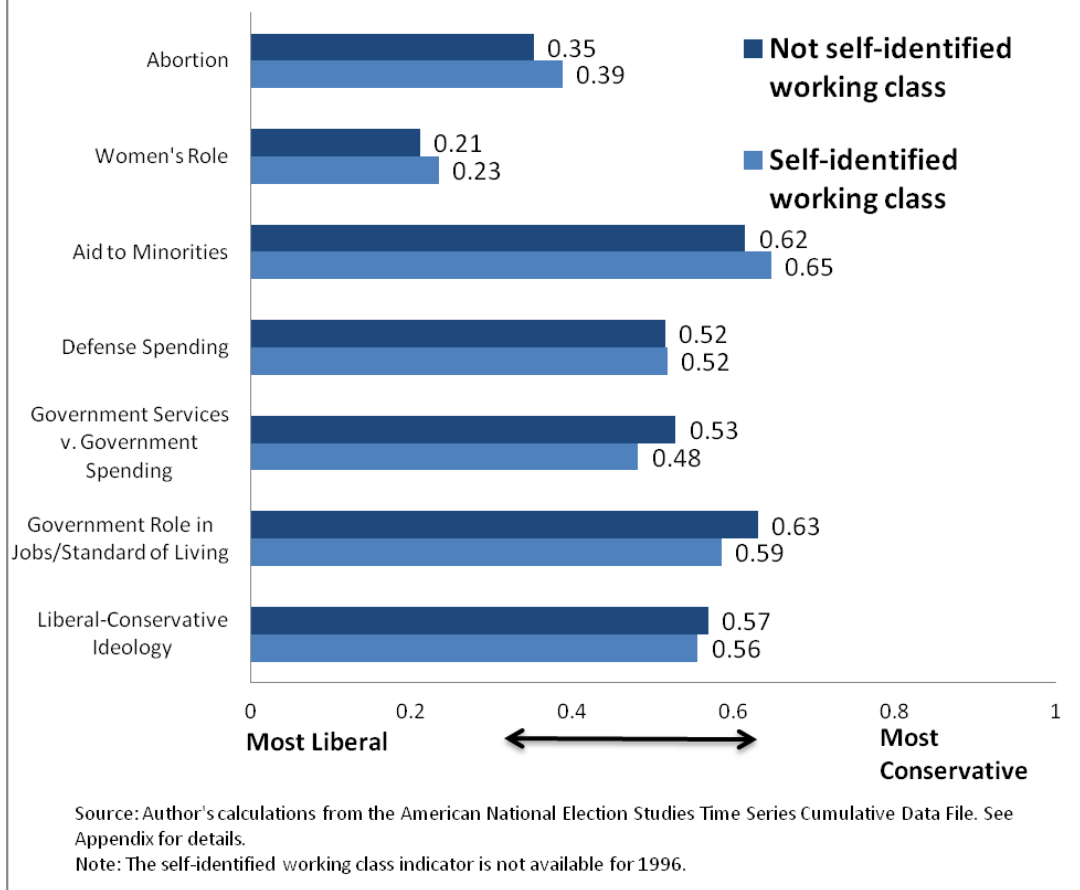


In contrast, however, the white working class is substantially more liberal on issues of economic policy.



In keeping with conventional wisdom regarding the policy preferences of the white working class, the data suggest that self-identified white working class voters are indeed somewhat more socially conservative than their peers. (See Figure 6.) The white working class is marginally more conservative on abortion policy, the appropriate role of women in society, and the role of government in aiding minority groups. In contrast, however, the white working class is substantially more liberal on issues of economic policy. White working class respondents gave more liberal responses to questions about the appropriate balance between government services and government spending, and to questions about the role of government in seeing that people have jobs and a good standard of living. In general, when asked to place themselves on a liberal-to-conservative ideological scale, self-identified white working class voters are marginally more liberally-identified than their peers. (For details on question wording and coding, please see the Appendix.)

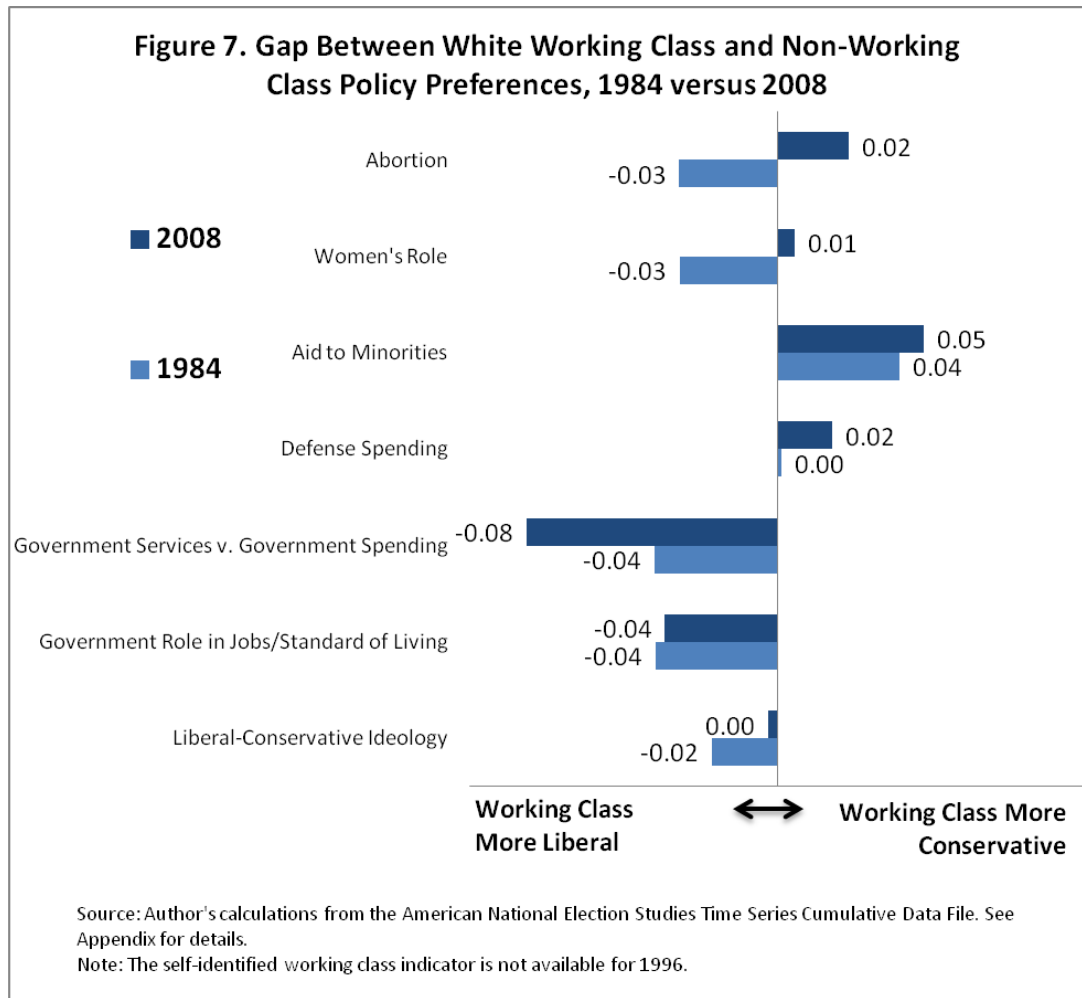
Figure 6. White Voters' Social and Economic Policy Preferences, Pooled 1984-2008



Has the self-identified white working class grown more conservative over time as compared to their non-working class peers? The most prominent over-time shifts in the “preference gap” have occurred in opinions regarding the appropriate balance between government services and government spending. (See Figure 7.)²⁵ Between 1984 and 2008, the white working class grew substantially more liberal than their peers on this key indicator of economic policy preferences. On all three social policy indicators – abortion, women’s role in society, and government aid to minorities – the white working class grew marginally more conservative than their peers. Indeed, in 1984, white working class identifiers were actually somewhat

²⁵ Figure 7 demands a bit of explanation regarding the appropriate interpretation. The length of the bars indicates the size of the gap between whites who self-identify as working class and those who do not. The direction of the bars indicates whether the white working class is more or less liberal than their peers. In other words, the further left the bar, the more liberal the white working class as compared to their peers. The further right the bar, the more conservative the white working class as compared to their peers. For example, a long leftward bar would indicate that the white working class is substantially more liberal than their peers. A short rightward bar would indicate that the white working class is marginally more conservative than their peers.

more liberal than their peers on both abortion and women’s role. By 2008, they were somewhat more conservative. And on broad questions of liberal/conservative ideological self-placement, the white working class is somewhat more conservative today compared to their peers.²⁶



While the self-identified white working class may be somewhat more culturally conservative than their peers, it is simply not true that social policy preferences drive vote choice over and above economic policy preferences. For all

²⁶ It is worth noting that both the white working class and others view the gap between their own placement on the liberal-conservative ideology scale and their placement of the Democratic Party on that same scale has grown at nearly twice the rate of the gap between self-placement and that of the Republican Party. Both self-identified working class whites and others believe that the Democratic Party is about twice as liberal as themselves, and that gap has nearly doubled between 1984 and 2008. Both groups believe the Republican Party is about half again as conservative as themselves, and that gap has grown by only about half as much as the gap between self-placement and placement of the Democratic Party. Details available from the author upon request.

white voters, economic policy preferences are stronger predictors of presidential vote choice than social policy preferences. This finding holds even after controlling for whether or not a respondent lives in the South. For instance, preferences regarding the appropriate balance of government services and spending are more than twice as important for predicting vote choice than are abortion policy preferences. The same relationship holds for white working class voters, although the importance of economic policy versus social policy as a predictor of presidential vote preference is even stronger than it is for the overall white population. For example, a white self-identified working class voter is nearly three times more likely to make a presidential voting decision based on his or her opinion regarding the appropriate balance of government services and spending than he or she is based on abortion policy preferences.²⁷ In sum, while white working class voters may be marginally more culturally conservative than their peers, their economic preferences gain priority in the voting booth.

White Working Class Politics in 2012

It should come as no surprise that economic policy preferences carry great weight for the white working class, given the impact of a changing economy on this group. The hollowing out of the American labor market has resulted in expanding opportunities for high-skill, high-wage occupations and low-skill, low-wage occupations; the traditional “working class” job that allowed a less-educated (and less-skilled) worker to earn a decent wage is increasingly rare.²⁸ While the jury is still out as to whether the Great Recession exacerbated existing trends in job polarization, recent work suggests that middle-skill workers who experienced unemployment spells and subsequently become reemployed suffered proportionally greater wage losses than other groups during the Great Recession than during prior expansionary periods.²⁹ As of 2011, the unemployment rate for non-Hispanic whites without a college degree was over one and a half times that of

²⁷ Note that these results are for the pooled 1984–2008 sample. Models run on each individual year suggest similar results, although the sample size may be too small to obtain truly valid results. That said, the 2008 model suggests that only economic policy preferences were statistically significant predictors of vote choice; social policy preferences were statistically meaningless. Full detailed results of all probit models, which predict Democratic presidential vote choice based on economic and social policy preferences, are available from the author upon request.

²⁸ For an excellent review of the polarization of the labor market, see Autor, David. 2010. “The Polarization of Job Opportunities in the U.S. Labor Market.” Center for American Progress/Hamilton Project at Brookings. <http://economics.mit.edu/files/5554>.

²⁹ Mitchell, Josh and Austin Nichols. 2012. “Job Polarization and the Great Recession.” Urban Institute. <http://www.urban.org/UploadedPDF/412680-Job-Polarization-and-the-Great-Recession.pdf>. For a conflicting take on the overall impact of the Great Recession on levels and trends in polarization, see Bernhardt, Annette. 2012. “The Low-Wage Recovery and Growing Inequality.” National Employment Law Project. http://nelp.3cdn.net/8ee4a46a37c86939c0_qjm6bkhe0.pdf.

[E]conomic policy preferences are stronger predictors of presidential voter choice than social policy preferences. This finding holds even after controlling for whether or not a respondent lives in the South.

those with a bachelor's degree or more education (5 percent versus 3 percent).³⁰ Whether defined by education, income, or self-identification, it seems reasonable to believe that the “white working class” includes some substantial share of individuals who have watched their economic prospects erode over the course of the last several decades, and in turn place great emphasis on economic policy preferences in the presidential voting booth.

This year is likely to be no exception. Despite the culture war skirmishes over the course of the campaign, economic policy will be front and center in voters' minds – particularly for the white working class. The cultural messaging is arguably meant for the base, for well-educated, affluent elites who are economically comfortable enough to prioritize social issues over basic economic policy preferences. This isn't to say that cultural concerns are not of paramount importance to white working class voters. Of course, many care a great deal about these issues, and will use them as a litmus test to decide which candidate they'll choose. But long-term trends in the data tell us over and over again that white working class Americans outside of the South make political decisions based on their economic preferences, and we have no good reason to believe that will be any different this year. The question is whether President Obama or Governor Romney will have done a better job convincing these voters that they're the man with the plan that will provide a life-raft to a better economic future for the working class.

Obama's slim lead in the Ohio polls suggests that the combined success of the auto bailout, effective economic messaging around “vulture capitalism,” and Governor Romney's dismissal of the “47 percent” will give Obama the edge in the state on November 6. Indeed, Romney's last-minute efforts to deceive Ohio voters into believing that Chrysler is set to move thousands of jobs to China suggests just how important the economic message is in this campaign, and just how desperate the Romney campaign has become in its desire to win on economic policy issues with working class voters.³¹ Of course, as many have noted, shifting demographics mean that turnout amongst other key groups, especially minorities, is an important element of the road to victory for the Obama team – potentially more important than the political behavior of the white working class.³² And past results are

³⁰ Author's calculations from the Current Population Survey, Annual Social and Economic Supplement, 2012. See <http://www.census.gov/cps/data>. More recent data on unemployment combining both race and educational attainment is not yet available. The most current data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics suggest that the basic relationship likely holds. Unemployment amongst college-educated Americans stands at 3.8 percent, compared to 8.4 percent for all high school graduates. See Bureau of Labor Statistics/Haver Analytics October 2012 data.

³¹ For a summary of the Romney lies around Chrysler, see “Romney Versus the Automakers.” Editorial. *New York Times*, October 31, 2012. <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/11/01/opinion/mitt-romney-versus-the-automakers.html>. For a local take on the issue, see “Auto Toxin.” Editorial. *Toledo Blade*. November 1, 2012. <http://www.toledoblade.com/Editorials/2012/11/01/Auto-toxin.html>.

³² Teixeira and John Halpin. 2011. “The Path to 270: Demographics versus Economics in the 2012 Presidential Election.” Center for American Progress. http://www.americanprogress.org/wp-content/uploads/issues/2011/11/pdf/path_to_270.pdf; Frey, William H. 2012. “Why Minorities Will

certainly not a perfect predictor of future behavior. But, if history proves correct, Obama is likely to do well enough amongst the white working class to hold onto the state (and perhaps other key states outside of the South as well). The larger unanswered question is whether he will be able to effectively move policies to benefit this group if re-elected, especially given the likely continued intransigence on the part of Congressional Republicans.

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Appendix

The policy analysis presented in this paper utilizes the same basic approach as Larry Bartels' work in "What's the Matter with *What's the Matter with Kansas?*" Questions gauging social and economic policy preferences are drawn from those asked consistently of respondents from 1984 through 2008. Detailed question

Decide the 2012 U.S. Election." Brookings Institution.
<http://www.brookings.edu/research/opinions/2012/05/01-race-elections-frey>.

Understanding America's White Working Class: Their Politics, Voting Habits, and Policy Priorities

wording from the ANES is indicated in the table below. In most cases, these questions' response sets consist of seven-point scales with the indicated positions as a liberal and conservative end-point. In each case, I recoded the responses to range from 0 to 1 in equal intervals, with 0 (the left-most point) representing the most liberal position and 1 (the right-most point) representing the most conservative position.

Issues in American National Election Studies Surveys, 1984-2008		
	<i>Most Liberal Position</i>	<i>Most Conservative Position</i>
Abortion	By law, a woman should always be able to obtain an abortion as a matter of personal choice.	By law, abortion should never be permitted.
Women's Role	Women should have an equal role with men in running business, industry, and government.	A woman's place is in the home.
Government aid to minorities	Government should help minority groups.	Minority groups should help themselves.
Defense spending	We should spend much less money for defense.	Defense spending should be greatly increased.
Government services v. government spending	Government should provide many more services even if it means greatly increasing spending.	Government should provide many fewer services to reduce spending.
Government role in jobs/standard of living	Government should see to it that every person has a job and a good standard of living.	Government should just let each person get ahead on their own.
Liberal-Conservative Ideological Self Placement	Extremely liberal	Extremely conservative