

## **The Decline of the White Working Class and the Rise of a Mass Upper Middle Class**

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## ***Introduction***

Dramatic shifts have taken place in the American class structure since the World War II era. Consider education levels. Incredible as it may seem today, in 1940 three-quarters of adults 25 and over were high school dropouts (or never made it as far as high school), and just 5 percent had a four-year college degree or higher. But educational credentials exploded in the postwar period. By 1960, the proportion of adults lacking a high school diploma was down to 59 percent; by 1980, it was less than a third, and by 2007, it was down to only 14 percent. Concomitantly, the proportion with a BA or higher rose steadily and reached 29 percent in 2007. Moreover, those with some college (but not a four-year degree) constituted another 25 percent of the population, making a total of 54 percent who had at least some college education<sup>1</sup>. Quite a change: moving from a country where the typical adult was a high school dropout (more accurately, never even reached high school) to a country where the typical adult not only has a high school diploma, but some college as well.

Or consider the occupational structure. In 1940, only about 32 percent of employed US workers held white collar jobs (professional, managerial, clerical, and sales). By 2006, that proportion had almost doubled to 60 percent, including rises from 8 to 20 percent among professionals and from 17 to 26 percent among clerical-sales. On the other end of the occupational distribution, manual workers (production, operatives, craft, and laborers) declined from 36 percent to 23 percent<sup>2</sup>. So we have moved from an occupational structure where there were more manual than white collar workers, to one where there are nearly three times as many white collar as manual workers.

Finally, consider income levels. In 1947, the median family income (in 2005 dollars) was around \$22,000. By 2005, median family income was around \$56,000, two and a half times as high as in 1947. Looked at another way, in 1947, 60 percent of families made under \$26,000. But in 2005, only 20 percent made less than that figure and 40 percent made over \$68,000, a figure that was exceeded by less than 5 percent of families in 1947<sup>3</sup>.

In this paper, we discuss these shifts in the class structure and analyze their political implications, primarily by focusing on the decline of the white working class. We also take a look at another aspect of the shifting class structure, the rise of a mass upper middle class. We then assess whether and to what extent the trends reshaping our class structure are likely to continue in the future. We conclude with a discussion of how these future changes are likely to shift the political terrain facing the parties and present new challenges for policy-makers.

## *Defining the White Working Class*

Before we can discuss the decline of the white working class, it is necessary to define it. Perhaps the first thing to observe is that there is no “correct” way to do this. Reasonable cases can be made for defining the white working class by any of these criteria— education, occupation and income. Below we note the advantages and disadvantages of each.

There are several arguments for using education to define the working class. First, educational level is a proxy for skill level or human capital which, in turn, is a central determinant of not only the job a worker holds today but also the kind of job that worker can expect to hold in the future. Thus, educational level tends to shape a worker’s economic and life trajectory in profound ways.

Moreover, this relationship has strengthened in the years since 1979. In particular, the economic fates of those with a four year college degree and those without have diverged sharply. Between 1979 and 2005, the average real hourly wage for those with a college degree went up 22 percent and for those with advanced degrees, 28 percent. In contrast, average wages for those with only some college went up a mere 3 percent, actually fell 2 percent for those with a high school diploma, and for high school dropouts, declined a stunning 18 percent<sup>4</sup>.

A final reason to use education to define the working class is practical. Education data are almost always collected in political surveys and the educational categories used are usually commensurate across surveys. Moreover, education data are typically collected on all survey respondents, not just those who currently hold a job, so it is possible to categorize all individuals in the survey.

That said, education by definition does not capture the actual job a given individual holds and, therefore, departs from the traditional definition of class, which is rooted in a worker’s role in the economy. This can create anomalies: some individuals with low levels of education may have powerful or highly skilled jobs, while some with high levels of education may have very menial jobs.

Using occupation data to define the working class has the advantage of tapping directly into this traditional definition. A manual worker clearly belongs in the working class; a professional or businessman does not; and so on. But occupation data typically are not collected on political surveys. And when they are, the categories used vary wildly and typically leave out those not in the labor force, or even all those not holding a full-time job.

The third way to define the working class is to use income data. This method connects to the popular conception that one’s class is determined by the amount of money one makes. By that measure, the working class is simply those who don’t have much money.

One problem this approach creates is whether to use income relationally or absolutely. Is someone working class because they don't have much money relative to others or because they don't have much money period? By the latter criterion, the size of the working class—the bottom 20 (or 40 or 60) percent of the income distribution—could not change over time no matter how affluent a society becomes. By the former criterion, the size of the working class can change as society itself changes, which seems preferable.

There are also technical problems with using income data, though they are more commonly collected on political surveys than occupation. However, the data collected are usually categorical and these categories vary substantially across surveys. And then there is the problem of inflation, which makes comparison of categorical income data from different time periods very problematic.

It seems clear there is no perfect way to measure class; each way has its virtues and drawbacks. In this paper we shall therefore use all three indicators in our analysis, sometimes singly, sometimes combined into a summary measure. In addition, in analyzing survey data we make use of another measure, subjective class identification, that is related to all three of our more objective measures of class status.

How, then, should we define the white working class using these different indicators? In each case, there is both a broad and narrow definition that can be used. For education, a broad definition of the white working class would include all whites with less than a four year college degree—the dividing line between high and medium to low skill and, as we saw above, between positive and flat to negative economic trajectories since 1979. A narrower definition would assign only whites with a high school degree or less to the white working class.

For occupation, a broad definition of the white working class would include all whites without a professional or managerial job—that is, all whites with manual, service or low-level white collar occupations. A narrower definition would include only those whites with manual or service jobs.

Income is trickier, since the potential cut-points are less obvious and harder to motivate. A broad definition of the white working class might include whites with household incomes below \$60,000. A narrower definition might include only those whites with incomes below \$30,000.

Whether one uses a broad or narrow definition is, to some extent, a matter of taste. In popular terms, if one believes only the poor really belong in the working class, then a narrow definition is appropriate. But if one believes that the working class can and should overlap with the middle class—that a decent standard of living does not disqualify those of modest skill from membership in the working class—then a broader definition is appropriate. But as we shall see, whether a broad or narrow definition is used, the story of the white working class since the World War II era is one of profound change and substantial decline. That story is sketched below.

### *Change and Decline in the White Working Class*

Let's start with the basic numbers on the size of the white working class in the World War II era and the size of the white working class today. Using the broad education-based definition, America in 1940 was an overwhelmingly white working class country. In that year, 86 percent of adults 25 and over were whites without a four year college degree. By 2007, with the dramatic rise in educational attainment and the decline in the white population, that percentage was down to 48 percent<sup>5</sup>.

A similar trend can be seen using the narrow education-based definition. In 1940, 82 percent of adults 25 and over were whites with a high school diploma or less. By 2007, that figure was down to 29 percent.

Turning to a broad occupation-based definition, in 1940, 74 percent of employed workers were whites without professional or managerial jobs. By 2006, the steady climb in professional and managerial jobs, combined with the decline in the white population, had brought that percentage down to 43 percent<sup>6</sup>.

A narrow occupation-based definition yields a decline of similar magnitude. In 1940, 58 percent of workers were whites without professional, managerial or clerical-sales jobs (or looked at another way, whites who held manual, service or farm jobs). By 2006, that figure had fallen to 25 percent.

The final class indicator to look at is income. Using a broad income-based definition of the white working class, 86 percent of American families in 1947 were white families with less than \$60,000 in income (2005 dollars). With rising affluence—especially rapid in the period from 1947 to 1973—and the decline in the white population, that percentage had declined to 33 percent by 2005<sup>7</sup>.

Using a narrow income-based definition, 60 percent of families in 1947 were white families with less than \$30,000 in income. That figure had dropped to 14 percent by 2005.

So each indicator that can be used to define the white working class, whether applied broadly or narrowly, shows huge declines from the World War II era to today—declines roughly in the 30-50 percentage point range. The income-based definitions show the sharpest declines and the occupation-based definitions the least, with the education-based definitions somewhere in between. And in each case, these shifts have moved the white working class from being the solid and sometimes overwhelming majority of US adults (or workers or families) to being a minority.

But the story of the white working class in the post World War II era is not just one of sharp decline but also one of profound transformation. This is true no matter what indicator one uses to define the white working class. That is, whether one looks at white families with less than \$60,000 income, whites who do not hold professional-managerial

jobs or whites without a four year college degree, there have been dramatic shifts in the character and composition of the white working class.

Consider the following shifts among whites without a four year college degree. In 1940, 86 percent of these working class whites had never graduated from high school (or even reached high school). But today just 14 percent of the white working class are high school dropouts. About two-fifths have some education beyond high school, with 13 percent having achieved an associate degree<sup>8</sup>. (Note, however, that the economic situation of those with an associate degree is very similar to those with some college, but no degree: the median household income of whites with an associate degree is only a few thousand dollars more than those with some college only<sup>9</sup>).

While data unavailability preclude a precise estimate, the economic situation of the white working class has altered dramatically. A reasonable guess is that median family income among the white working class rose from around \$20,000 to \$50,000 between 1947 and 2005, a 150 percent increase.

And the jobs the white working class holds have also altered dramatically. Today, most white working class jobs are not manual or blue-collar, but are rather in low-level white collar (technical, sales, clerical) and service occupations. And the blue collar jobs that remain are increasingly likely to be skilled positions: only about a sixth of the white working class holds unskilled blue-collar jobs (even among white working class *men*, the figure is less than one-quarter)<sup>10</sup>.

Today, only about a sixth of the white working class holds manufacturing jobs (even among men, the proportion is still less than one-quarter). In fact, the entire goods-producing sector, which includes construction, mining and agriculture, as well as manufacturing, provides less than three in ten white working class jobs. This leaves the overwhelming majority—over seven in ten-- in the service sector, including government. There are about as many members of the white working class working in trade alone (especially retail) as there are in all goods-producing jobs.

### ***The White Working Class Abandons the Democratic Party***

Accompanying the decline and transformation of the white working class was a very significant shift in their political orientation, from pro-Democratic in most respects to pro-Republican, especially on the presidential level. The story of this shift away from the Democratic Party starts with the New Deal Democrats and their close relationship with the white working class.

The New Deal Democratic worldview was based on a combination of the Democrats' historic populist commitment to the average working American and their experience in battling the Great Depression (and building their political coalition) through increased government spending and regulation and the promotion of labor unions. It was really a rather simple philosophy, even if the application of it was complex. Government should help the average person through vigorous government spending. Capitalism needs

regulation to work properly. Labor unions are good. Putting money in the average person's pocket is more important than rarified worries about the quality of life. Traditional morality is to be respected, not challenged. Racism and the like are bad, but not so bad that the party should depart from its main mission of material uplift for the average American.

That worldview had deep roots in an economy dominated by mass production industries and was politically based among the workers, overwhelmingly white, in those industries. And it helped make the Democrats the undisputed party of the white working class. Their dominance among these voters was, in turn, the key to their political success. To be sure, there were important divisions among these voters—by country of origin (German, Scandinavian, Eastern European, English, Irish, Italian, etc.), by religion (Protestants vs. Catholics), and by region (South vs. non-South)—that greatly complicated the politics of this group, but New Deal Democrats mastered these complications and maintained a deep base among these voters.

Of course, the New Deal Coalition as originally forged did include most blacks and was certainly cross-class, especially among groups like Jews and southerners. But the prototypical member of the coalition was indeed an ethnic white worker—commonly visualized as working in a unionized factory, but also including those who weren't in unions or who toiled in other blue collar settings (construction, transportation, etc.). It was these voters who provided the numbers for four FDR election victories and Harry Truman's narrow victory in 1948 and who provided political support for the emerging U.S. welfare state, with its implicit social contract and greatly expanded role for government.

Even in the 1950's, with Republican Dwight Eisenhower as President, the white working class continued to put Democrats in Congress and to support the expansion of the welfare state, as a roaring U.S. economy delivered the goods and government poured money into roads, science, schools and whatever else seemed necessary to build up the country. This era, stretching back into the late 40's and forward to the mid-60's, was the era that created the first mass middle class in the world—a middle class that even factory workers could enter, since they could earn relatively comfortable livings even without high levels of education or professional skills. A middle class, in other words, that members of the white working class could reasonably aspire to and frequently attain.

So New Deal Democrats depended on the white working class for political support and the white working class depended on the Democrats to run government and the economy in a way that kept that upward escalator to the middle class moving. Social and cultural issues were not particularly important to this mutually beneficial relationship; indeed they had only a peripheral role in the uncomplicated progressivism that animated the Democratic party of the '30s, '40s and '50s. But that arrangement and that uncomplicated progressivism could not and did not survive the decline of mass production industries and the rise of postindustrial capitalism.

First, there was the transformation of the white working class itself, discussed in detail above. The white working class became richer, more educated, more white collar and less unionized (to get a sense of how important the latter factor was, consider the fact that, in the late 1940s, unions claimed around 60 percent or more of the Northern blue-collar workforce<sup>11</sup>).

Second, as this great transformation was changing the character of the white working class, reducing the size and influence of the Democrats' traditional blue-collar constituencies, the evolution of postindustrial capitalism was creating new constituencies and movements with new demands. These new constituencies and movements wanted more out of the welfare state than steady economic growth, copious infrastructure spending and the opportunity to raise a family in the traditional manner.

During the Sixties, these new demands on the welfare state came to a head. Americans' concern about their quality of life overflowed from the two-car garage to clean air and water and safe automobiles; from higher wages to government guaranteed health care in old age; and from access to jobs to equal opportunities for men and women and blacks and whites. Out of these concerns came the environmental, consumer, civil rights and feminist movements of the Sixties. As Americans abandoned the older ideal of self-denial and the taboos that accompanied it, they embraced a libertarian ethic of personal life. Women asserted their sexual independence through the use of birth control pills and through exercising the right to have an abortion. Adolescents experimented with sex and courtship. Homosexuals "came out" and openly congregated in bars and neighborhoods.

Of these changes, the one with most far-reaching political effects was the civil rights movement and its demands for equality and economic progress for black America. Democrats, both because of their traditional, if usually downplayed, anti-racist ideology and their political relationship to the black community, had no choice but to respond to those demands. The result was a great victory for social justice, but one that created huge political difficulties for the Democrats among their white working class supporters. Kevin Phillips captured these developments well in his 1969 book, *The Emerging Republican Majority*<sup>12</sup>:

The principal force which broke up the Democratic (New Deal) coalition is the Negro socioeconomic revolution and liberal Democratic ideological inability to cope with it. Democratic "Great Society" programs aligned that party with many Negro demands, but the party was unable to defuse the racial tension sundering the nation. The South, the West, and the Catholic sidewalks of New York were the focus points of conservative opposition to the welfare liberalism of the federal government; however, the general opposition ... came in large part from prospering Democrats who objected to Washington dissipating their tax dollars on programs which did them no good. The Democratic party fell victim to the ideological impetus of a liberalism which had carried it beyond programs taxing the few for the benefit of the many ... to programs taxing the many on behalf of the few.



But if race was the chief vehicle by which the New Deal coalition was torn apart, it was by no means the only one. White working class voters also reacted poorly to the extremes with which the rest of the new social movements became identified. Feminism became identified with bra-burners, lesbians and hostility to the nuclear family; the antiwar movement with appeasement of the Third World radicals and the Soviet Union; the environmental movement with a Luddite opposition to economic growth; and the move toward more personal freedom with a complete abdication of personal responsibility.

Thus the New Deal Democrat mainstream that dominated the party was confronted with a challenge. The uncomplicated commitments to government spending, economic regulation and labor unions that had defined the Democrats' progressivism for over thirty years suddenly provided little guidance for dealing with an explosion of potential new constituencies for the party. Their demands for equality, and for a better, as opposed to merely richer, life were starting to redefine what progressivism meant and the Democrats had to struggle to catch up.

Initially, Democratic politicians responded to these changes in the fashion of politicians since time immemorial: they sought to co-opt these new movements by absorbing many of their demands, while holding onto the party's basic ideology and style of governing. Thus, Democratic politicians didn't change their fundamental commitment to the New Deal welfare state, but grafted onto it support for all the various new constituencies and their key demands. After Lyndon Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act in 1964, the party moved over the next eight years to give the women's, antiwar, consumer's and environmental movements prominent places within the party. This reflected both the politician's standard interest in capturing the votes of new constituencies *and* the ongoing expansion in the definition of what it meant to be a Democrat, particularly a progressive one.

But there was no guarantee, of course, that gains among these new constituencies wouldn't be more than counter-balanced by losses among their old constituency—the white working class—who had precious little interest in this expansion of what it meant to be a progressive and a Democrat. And indeed that turned out to be the case with the nomination and disastrous defeat of George McGovern—who enthusiastically embraced the new direction taken by the party—in 1972. McGovern's commitment to the traditional Democratic welfare state was unmistakable. But so was his commitment to all the various social movements and constituencies that were re-shaping the party, whose demands were enshrined in McGovern's campaign platform. That made it easy for the Nixon campaign to typecast McGovern as the candidate of “acid, amnesty and abortion”. The white working class reacted accordingly and gave Nixon overwhelming support at the polls, casting 70 percent of their votes for the Republican candidate<sup>13</sup>.

Indeed, just how far the Democrat party fell in the white working class' eyes over this time period can be seen by comparing the average white working class (whites without a four year college degree) vote for the Democrats in 1960-64 (55 percent) to their average

vote for the Democrats in 1968-72 (35 percent)<sup>14</sup>. That's a drop of 20 points. The Democrats were the party of the white working class no longer.

With the sharp economic recession and Nixon scandals of 1973-74, the Democrats were able to develop enough political momentum to retake the White House in 1976, with Jimmy Carter's narrow defeat of Gerald Ford. But their political revival did not last long.

Not only did the Carter administration fail to do much to defuse white working class hostility to the new social movements, especially the black liberation movement, but economic events--the stagflation of the late 1970s--conspired to make that hostility even sharper. Though stagflation (combined inflation and unemployment with slow economic growth, including, critically, slow wage and income growth) first appeared during the 1973-75 recession, it persisted during the Carter administration and was peaking on the eve of the 1980 election. As the economy slid once more into recession, the inflation rate in that year was 12.5 percent. Combined with an unemployment rate of 7.1 percent, it produced a "misery index" of nearly 20 percent.

By that time, white working class voters had entered an economic world radically different from the one enjoyed by the preceding generation. Slow growth, declining wages, stagnating living standards, and, at the time, high and variable inflation and high home mortgage interest rates were really battering them economically. The great postwar escalator to the middle class had drastically slowed down and for some even stopped.

These economic developments fed resentments about race – about high taxes for welfare (which were assumed to go primarily to minorities) and about affirmative action. But they also sowed doubts about Democrats' ability to manage the economy and made Republican and business explanations of stagflation – blaming it on government regulation, high taxes and spending – more plausible. In 1978, the white backlash and doubts about Democratic economic policies had helped to fuel a nationwide tax revolt. In 1980, these factors reproduced the massive exodus of white working class voters from the Democratic tickets first seen in 1968 and 1972. In the 1980 and 1984 elections, Reagan averaged 61 percent support among the white working class, compared to an average of 35 percent support for his Democratic opponents, Jimmy Carter and Walter Mondale<sup>15</sup>.

Such a thrashing, coming not that long after the debacle of the McGovern campaign, led many Democrats, spearheaded by a new organization, the Democratic Leadership Council (DLC), to propose a reconfiguration of the Democratic approach. These "New Democrats argued that in the late '60s, the liberalism of the New Deal had degenerated into a "liberal fundamentalism," which

the public has come to associate with tax and spending policies that contradict the interests of average families; with welfare policies that foster dependence rather than self-reliance; with softness toward the perpetrators of crime and indifference toward its victims; with ambivalence toward the assertion of American values and

interests abroad; and with an adversarial stance toward mainstream moral and cultural values<sup>16</sup>.

Galston, Kamarck and the DLC advocated fiscal conservatism, welfare reform, increased spending on crime through the development of a police corps, tougher mandatory sentences, support for capital punishment, and policies that encouraged traditional families. This new approach did not really take off until it was embraced by Democratic Presidential candidate Bill Clinton in 1992, who synthesized these views with a moderate version of New Deal-style economic populism. It proved to be an electorally successful approach both in 1992 and, riding some good economic times, in 1996 as well.

But despite Clinton's electoral success, it was not the case that he received a great deal of white working class support. He averaged only 41 percent across his two election victories. But he did, at least, prevent these voters from siding with his Republican opponents in large numbers, eking out one point pluralities among the white working class in both elections (the rest went to Perot)<sup>17</sup>.

His designated successor, Al Gore, was not so successful. He lost white working class voters in the 2000 election by 17 points. And the next Democratic presidential candidate, John Kerry, did even worse, losing these voters by a whopping 23 points in 2004<sup>18</sup>. One could reasonably ascribe the worsening deficit for Democrats in 2004 to the role of national security and terrorism after 9/11 but the very sizeable 2000 deficit cannot be explained on that basis. Apparently, the successes of the Clinton years, which included a strong economy that delivered solid real wage growth for the first time since 1973, did not succeed in restoring the historic bond between the white working class and the Democrats.

It's worth asking what Democratic performance in 2004 looked like when one adds income to education for a more fine-grained consideration of white working class voting, as the exit poll data do permit (occupation cannot be looked at with exit poll data).

Here is what you find: those voters who seem to correspond most closely to one's intuitive sense of the heart of the white working class--that is, white voters who have a moderate income and are non-college-educated--are precisely the voters among whom Democrats did most poorly.

For example, among non-college-educated whites with \$30,000-\$50,000 in household income, Bush beat Kerry by 24 points (62-38); among college-educated whites at the same income level, Kerry actually managed at 49-49 tie. And among non-college-educated whites with \$50,000-\$75,000 in household income, Bush beat Kerry by a shocking 41 points (70-29), while leading by only 5 points (52-47) among college-educated whites at the same income level<sup>19</sup>.

Thus, the more voters looked like hardcore members of the white working class, the less likely they were to vote for Kerry in the 2004 election.

### ***How Can I Miss You If You Won't Go Away: Did the White Working Class Really Abandon the Democratic Party?***

As noted above, white working class support for the Democratic Party from the New Deal to the Great Society was based primarily on economic self-interest: Democrats stood for economic policies such as full employment and social programs such as Social Security and Medicare that benefited the white (and non-white) working class. Starting from the idea that voting for the Democrats would still be in these voters' economic self-interest, some analysts like Thomas Frank<sup>20</sup> have argued that Republicans' inroads among white working class voters in recent decades are entirely attributable to the GOP's emphasis on cultural issues like abortion and gay marriage. This led to a decline in class-based voting. Frank further argues that this decline has occurred not because white working class voters have become more conservative on cultural issues, but because they have been persuaded by Republican propaganda to weigh these issues more heavily than economic self-interest.

In contrast to Frank, Larry Bartels<sup>21</sup> has argued that the white working class never abandoned the Democratic Party in the first place. In fact, according to Bartels, data from the American National Election Studies shows that "white voters in the bottom third of the income distribution have actually become more reliably Democratic in presidential elections over the past half-century, while middle- and upper-income white voters have trended Republican (abstract)." This is a counter-intuitive and interesting finding, but there are a number of problems with it having to do with Bartels' definition of the white working class and with the indicators of Democratic orientation he chose to look at.

Start with his definition of the white working class. As noted above, family income is only one indicator of an individual's position in the class structure and it is not necessarily the most valid one. Compared with characteristics such as educational attainment and occupational status, income is more likely to fluctuate over the course of an individual's life. This may explain why, according to NES data, subjective class identification is more strongly related to both occupational status and education than to family income. For all years between 1952 and 2004, the average correlation between class identification and family income was .28 while the average correlation between class identification and occupational status was .34 and the average correlation between class identification and educational attainment was .37.

Another problem with equating low income with membership in the working class is that, as Gopoian and Whitehead<sup>22</sup> have pointed out, the large majority of low income white voters are not currently working. According to data from the 2004 American National Election Study, only 39 percent of white voters in the lowest income group were currently employed compared with 73 percent of white voters in the middle income group and 78 percent of white voters in the upper income group. The majority of lower income white voters in 2004 were retired, disabled, homemakers, or students. Similarly, data from the 2004 National Exit Poll show that low income white voters were disproportionately young or elderly—44 percent were either under 25 years of age or over 64 years of age compared with 19 percent of all other white voters. Only 15 percent

of white voters in their prime earning years (25 to 64) reported family incomes of less than \$30,000 compared with 38 percent of those under 25 years of age and 37 percent of those over 64 years of age.

In addition, it should be stressed that Bartels' definition of the white working class as those whites who fall in the bottom third of the income distribution is based on the overall income distribution, not the income distribution among whites. Thus, among whites we are talking about a substantially smaller group than one-third. According to Bartels' own data, over the 1984-2004 time period, whites in the lower third of the income distribution amounted to only about 23 percent of white voters (about 17 percent of all voters).

Finally, defining the white working class as, in essence, the white poor throws out of the white working class the very kind of workers who traditionally are most associated with that group. Using Bartels' definition, for example—while one must make inferences from inadequate historical data—it appears highly unlikely that the typical autoworker, steelworker, construction worker, mechanic, etc. back in the late '40s and '50s could have qualified for Bartels' white working class. They just weren't poor enough.

And today? Not too different. Consider these data from the Economic Policy Institute—the average unionized blue collar job in the US in 2003 paid \$22.74 an hour (presumably the average wage of whites in these jobs was somewhat higher). That's way too high to qualify for the Bartels white working class—and that's leaving out any possible income from a spouse.

These results suggest that an analysis of the relationship between social class and partisanship should include other indicators of class in addition to family income. The National Election Studies' surveys include four variables that measure different aspects of social class: family income, education, occupational status, and subjective class identification. These variables were moderately correlated with each other in every decade, indicating that they were all measuring some aspect of an individual's status in society. The average correlation (Pearson's  $r$ ) among these four variables was .34 for 1952 to 1960, .32 for 1962 to 1970, .32 for 1972 to 1980, .31 for 1982 to 1990, and .31 for 1992 to 2004. All of the individual coefficients were statistically significant. As a result, rather than relying on any one of these variables to measure social class, we created an index that combined all four.

All of the components of our socioeconomic status (SES) index except family income showed a marked upward shift over time among white voters, and the only reason that the income variable did not show such a shift was that it the NES recoded the original income categories into lower, middle, and upper terciles for each year in order to facilitate over time comparisons. As a result, even though the real median family income of white voters increased substantially between the 1950s and the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the proportion of white voters in each of the NES income groups was fairly stable. However, in the NES the proportion of white voters with no college education fell from 78 percent to 35 percent between 1952-1960 and 1992-2004, the proportion with

blue collar occupations fell from 47 percent to 28 percent, and the proportion identifying with the working class fell from 56 percent to 38 percent.

**Table 1. Distribution of White Voters on SES Index by Decade**

<b>SES Index</b>	<b>1952-60</b>	<b>1962-70</b>	<b>1972-80</b>	<b>1982-90</b>	<b>1992-2004</b>
<b>Low</b>	<b>52%</b>	<b>47%</b>	<b>43%</b>	<b>35%</b>	<b>33%</b>
<b>Middle</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>32</b>	<b>33</b>	<b>34</b>	<b>32</b>
<b>High</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>31</b>	<b>35</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>
<b>(n)</b>	<b>(1708)</b>	<b>(1737)</b>	<b>(3655)</b>	<b>(3306)</b>	<b>(2833)</b>

**Source: NES Cumulative File**

Table 1 displays the distribution of white voters on our combined SES index by decade. Despite the fact that the income component of the index was artificially constrained, the overall index showed a marked shift over time—the proportion of white voters in the lower SES group fell from 52 percent to 33 percent while the proportion in the upper SES group rose from 18 percent to 35 percent. Thus, the NES data, like the Census data examined earlier, indicate that since the end of World War II the white working class has been slowly but steadily shrinking as a proportion of the overall white electorate due to rising levels of education and changes in the American occupational structure.

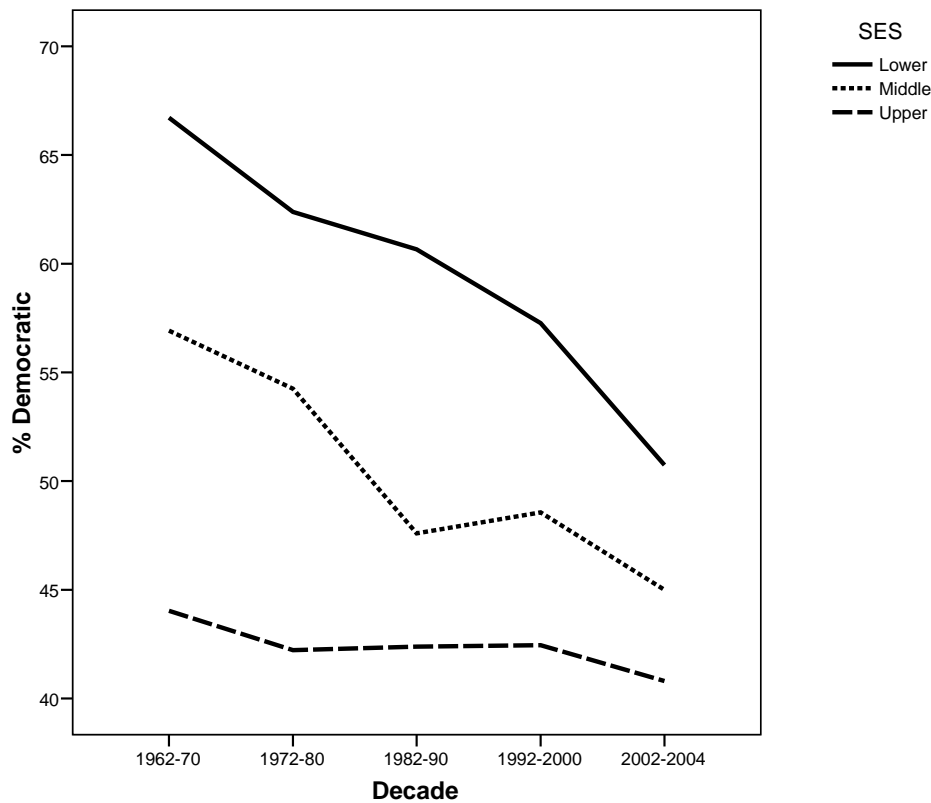
Despite the trends evident in the NES data, lower SES individuals still make up a large share of the white electorate in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. We would therefore like to know whether the political loyalties of this group have shifted over time. Have white working class voters remained solidly in the Democratic camp, as Bartels argues, or have they been moving toward the GOP as Frank claims and as other data adduced earlier suggest? Rather than relying on presidential voting to measure partisan loyalties, however, we will use party identification. We believe that party identification provides a broader and more accurate measure of the partisan orientations of voters than the presidential vote<sup>23</sup>. The presidential vote can fluctuate dramatically from election to election in response to short-term forces such as the state of the economy, the popularity of the incumbent president, and the relative appeal of the presidential candidates.

This is particularly important when looking at the white working class and starting in 1952 and 1956 as Bartels does. In these two elections, where Eisenhower, the Republican candidate prevailed, Democrats drew unusually low presidential support, including among white working class voters however defined and especially outside the south. To underscore the anomalous nature of the Eisenhower elections in the New Deal era, consider the fact that the Democrats averaged 55 percent support in the five New Deal elections from 1932 to 1948 and then an identical 55 percent in the 1960-64

elections which closed the era. That compares with an average of only 43 percent in the 1952-56 elections. Thus, starting with the Eisenhower elections sets up one's analysis (if the focus is the presidential vote) to see relatively little decline in Democratic support among working class whites.

In contrast, shifts in party identification tend to be gradual and reflect long-term changes in the images and ideological positions of the parties. This avoids the Eisenhower elections problem and other problems that can be created by the vagaries of the presidential vote. Moreover, party identification strongly influences voting for many offices from the presidency down to the state and local level.

**Figure 1. Democratic Identification among Lower, Middle, and Upper SES White Voters by Decade**



Note: Percentage of Democratic identifiers based on Democratic identifiers and leaners divided by all party identifiers and leaners.

Source: NES Cumulative File

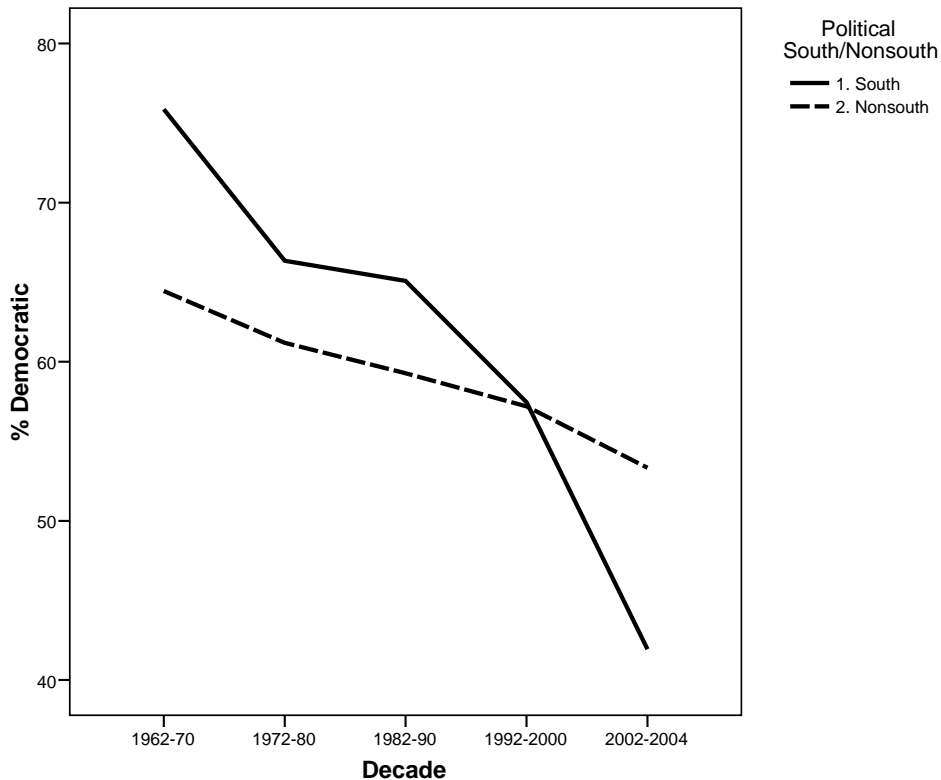
Figure 1 displays the trend in party identification among lower, middle, and upper SES white voters between the 1960s and the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The data show that over this time period there has been a dramatic decline in support for the Democratic Party among both lower and middle SES white voters while the party loyalties of upper SES white voters have changed very little. Using the terminology introduced earlier, the lower SES white voters correspond roughly to a narrow definition of the white working

class and match up best with the definition used by Bartels. The lower and middle SES white voters together correspond roughly to a broad definition of the white working class.

Between 1962-70 and 2002-2004, Democratic identification fell from 67 percent to 51 percent among lower SES white voters and from 57 percent to 45 percent among middle SES white voters. Thus, whether a narrow or broad definition of the white working class is used, there has been a substantial decline in Democratic identification over the past several decades.

In contrast, Democratic identification fell only from 44 percent to 41 percent among upper SES white voters over the same time period. This meant that the difference in Democratic identification between the lower and upper SES groups declined from 23 percentage points in the 1960s to just 10 percentage points in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century while the difference between the middle and upper SES groups declined from 13 percentage points to a mere four percentage points. As a result, lower and middle SES white voters have come more and more to resemble upper SES white voters in their party loyalties. Class differences in party identification have not disappeared but are considerably smaller than they were thirty or forty years ago.

**Figure 2. Democratic Identification among Lower SES White Voters by Decade and Region**



Note: Percentage of Democratic identifiers based on Democratic identifiers and leaners divided by all party identifiers and leaners.

Source: NES Cumulative File



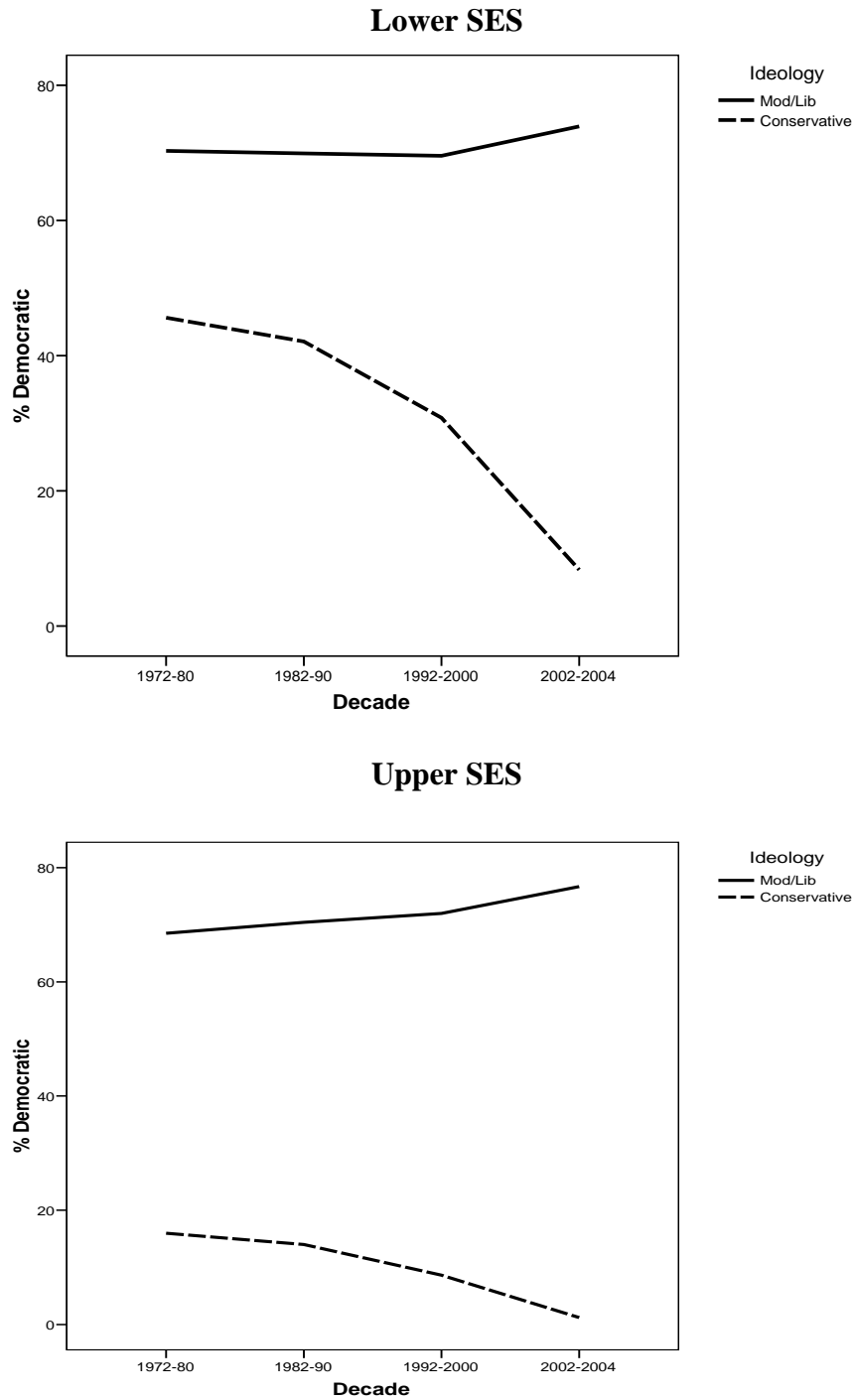
A related question is whether the decline in Democratic identification among white working class voters has been a national phenomenon or a regional phenomenon. In a recent article using education rather than family income to measure social class, Bartels<sup>24</sup> has argued this decline was confined entirely to the South. Outside of the South, according to Bartels, white working class voters have remained loyal to the Democrats. However, our data do not support this claim<sup>25</sup>. Figure 2 compares the trend in Democratic identification in the South with the trend the rest of the country among lower SES white voters (the closest analogue in our scheme to Bartels' definition of the white working class). These data show that while the decline in Democratic identification was much steeper in the South than in the rest of the country, there was a substantial drop in support for the Democratic Party among lower SES white voters in the North. Between 1962-70 and 2002-2004, Democratic identification among lower SES white voters fell from 76 percent to 42 percent in the South and from 64 percent to 53 percent outside of the South.

These findings raise the question of why support for the Democratic Party has declined dramatically among lower SES white voters since the 1960s while remaining fairly stable among upper SES white voters. They also raise the question of why this decline has been much greater in the South than in the rest of the country. It is not surprising to find that forty years ago Democratic identification was much higher among lower SES white voters in the South than in the rest of the country. This presumably reflected the traditional loyalty of southern white voters to the Democratic Party—a loyalty that traced its origins back to the Civil War and Reconstruction. However, it is not clear why, by the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Democratic identification among lower SES white voters in the South had fallen well below the level found in the rest of the country.

One explanation for the changes that have occurred in party identification over the past several decades, including the dramatic decline in Democratic identification among white southerners, is that they reflect an ideological realignment within the American electorate. According to this theory, the increasing clarity of ideological differences between Democratic and Republican elected officials and candidates has made it much easier for voters to choose sides based on their own ideological predispositions. As a result, there is now a much closer correspondence between ideology and party identification and a much greater degree of ideological polarization within the electorate<sup>26</sup>.

Ideological realignment theory provides a potential explanation for why the decline in Democratic identification among lower SES white voters has been much greater than the decline among higher SES white voters. It is possible that this realignment took place earlier among better educated and more affluent whites than among less educated and affluent whites. Conservative upper SES whites may have largely shifted their loyalties to the Republican Party by the 1970s or 1980s while conservative lower SES whites may not have fully shifted to the Republicans until the 1990s or the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

**Figure 3. Democratic Identification by Ideology among Lower and Upper SES White Voters by Decade**



Source: NES Cumulative File

Figure 3 compares changes in party identification since the 1970s among lower and upper SES white voters depending on their ideological identification.<sup>27</sup> The trends evident in this figure are consistent with our expectations. Among both lower and upper SES

whites, Democratic identification declined among self-identified conservatives but remained stable or increased among self-identified moderates and liberals. However, the patterns of change among lower and upper SES voters were quite different. Upper SES whites were already largely divided along ideological lines during the 1970s—seventy percent of moderate-to-liberal voters identified with the Democratic Party compared with less than 20 percent of conservatives. Over the next thirty years, the gap in party identification between these two ideological groups increased modestly. In contrast, lower SES whites were not as clearly divided along ideological lines during the 1970s—over seventy percent of moderate-to-liberal voters identified with the Democratic Party but so did almost half of conservative voters. Over the next three decades, however, the gap between these two ideological groups increased dramatically as conservative voters shifted decisively into the Republican camp while moderate-to-liberal voters moved even further toward the Democrats. By the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, ideological realignment was largely complete among lower as well as upper SES whites. In both groups, almost 80 percent of moderate-to-liberal voters identified with the Democratic Party while close to 90 percent of conservative voters identified with the Republican Party.

One question raised by these findings is whether the ideological realignment that has occurred among lower SES white voters since the 1970s has been driven primarily by cultural issues, as Frank has argued. In order to test this hypothesis, we used data from the 2004 National Election Study to examine the relationship between the attitudes of lower, middle, and upper SES white voters on abortion, which has been the most divisive cultural issue of the past quarter century, and their party identification. Respondents were classified as pro-life if they indicated that abortion should never be allowed or allowed only under exceptional circumstances such as rape, incest, or danger to the life of the mother. They were classified as pro-choice if they indicated that abortion should always be a woman’s choice or should be allowed under a variety of circumstances beyond rape, incest, or danger to the mother’s life. The results are displayed in Table 2.

**Table 2. Democratic Identification by Abortion Position among Lower, Middle, and Upper SES White Voters in 2004**

	<b>Pro-Life</b>	<b>Pro-Choice</b>	<b>Kendall’s tau-b</b>	<b>Significance</b>
<b>Lower SES</b>	<b>43%</b>	<b>57%</b>	<b>.14</b>	<b>.05</b>
<b>Middle SES</b>	<b>33%</b>	<b>55%</b>	<b>.22</b>	<b>.01</b>
<b>Upper SES</b>	<b>8%</b>	<b>60%</b>	<b>.50</b>	<b>.001</b>

Note: Percentage of Democratic identifiers based on Democratic identifiers and leaners divided by all party identifiers and leaners.

Source: 2004 NES

The results displayed in Table 2 do not support Frank’s hypothesis that Republicans have relied primarily on cultural issues such as abortion to lure working class white voters away from the Democratic Party. Lower SES white voters were somewhat more conservative on abortion than upper SES white voters. Forty-five percent of them chose the two pro-life options in the NES survey compared with 35 percent of upper SES white voters. However, the relationship between abortion attitudes and party identification was actually much stronger among upper SES whites than among lower SES whites. On the pro-choice side, similar proportions of lower and upper SES whites identified with the Democratic Party—57 percent vs. 60 percent. On the pro-life side, however, only 57 percent of pro-life lower SES whites identified with the Republican Party compared with 92 percent of upper SES whites. Based on these results, it appears that Republicans have been much more successful in attracting support from culturally conservative upper SES whites than from culturally conservative lower SES whites. It does not appear that cultural issues like abortion have played a major—and certainly not *the* major--role in the decline of Democratic identification among lower SES white voters. The story of declining white working class support for the Democrats is, as we outlined earlier, far more complex than that.

### ***The Geography of the White Working Class***

White working class dominance, as we have seen, has eroded. The minority population has burgeoned and education, occupation and income upgrading have also cut into the white working class’ population share. But these changes have not been uniformly distributed across the United States. Thus, we need to understand not only how today’s white working class lives differently than its predecessors, but also how it lives in different places. This is particularly important for assessing the political impact of the white working class.

Start with the distribution by state. Using a broad definition of the working class (non-college-educated), white working class voters range from lows of 3 percent in Washington DC and 15 percent in Hawaii to highs of 70 percent in Iowa and Wyoming and 72 percent in West Virginia. Of course, given that these voters are roughly half of voters nationally, they tend to be a significant percentage of the electorate everywhere but there is substantial variation between those extremes. The lowest percentages tend to be in states with high Hispanic populations (New Mexico, 34, California, 36), states with high black populations (Maryland, 37, Georgia, 42, Mississippi, 45, Louisiana, 45), states with substantial segments of both (Texas, 37), or states with an unusually large college-educated populations (Colorado, 45, Virginia, 45). The highest percentages are found in states where the minority population is small to minimal, typically rural with small college-educated populations (West Virginia, Wyoming, Iowa, South Dakota, 69, Maine, 69, North Dakota, 67, Idaho, 67, Montana, 66, Kentucky, 66)<sup>28</sup>.

Significantly, with the exceptions of New Mexico and Florida (48), the twelve most contested states in the last couple of presidential elections all have levels of white working class voters well above the national average. These are the five states which have been carried by Democrats by an average of less than 5 points in the two elections

(Michigan, 59, Minnesota, 58, Oregon, 64, Pennsylvania, 56, Wisconsin, 64), the three states that changed hands across elections (Iowa, 70, New Hampshire, 60, New Mexico) and the four states the GOP carried by an average of less than 5 points in the two elections (Florida, Missouri, 58, Nevada, 56, Ohio, 60)<sup>29</sup>.

Of course, the white working class is not equally distributed *within* states either. Over time, the white working class has tended to migrate out of cities as minorities have moved in and, as a result, is now seriously under-represented in our urban areas (comprising less than a third of voters). The white working class has also tended to migrate out of America's rapidly dwindling rural ones, but is still, at 68 percent of rural voters, over-represented in these areas due to lack of minority in-migration to change the mix. It is the suburbs that have been the recipient of white working class migration from both cities and rural areas and here the white working class now represents about half of voters<sup>30</sup>. Since the suburbs are clearly the battleground of US politics today, this is not an insignificant fact.

White working class voters on average favor the GOP as we have discussed at length. But the extent to which they do varies considerably by area of the country and type of community. Our previous analysis suggests that these differences in white working class support for the Democratic Party reflect differences in the ideological orientations of white working class voters in different regions of the country. The South, the most conservative region of the country, is the Democrats' worst region, where they lost white working class voters by 44 points, 72-28, in 2004. Outside the South, they did better, losing by a comparatively small 15 point margin overall. Their best region was the Northeast, the most liberal region of the country, where they lost these voters by 9 points, followed by the Midwest, where they lost by 11 points and the west where they trailed by 26 points<sup>31</sup>.

Nationally, Democrats tend to fare best among white working class voters in either large cities (over 500,000), where they ran a 13 point deficit in 2004, or the suburbs, where they had an 18 point deficit. They run worst in rural areas, where they lost 2:1 among the white working class (66-33) in 2004. In the Northeast and Midwest, they ran closer than nationally among the suburban white working class (trailing by 12 points) and ran particularly well in small cities and towns in the east and Midwest where they generally broke even among these voters.

Looking at the most competitive states mentioned above, in the five states which have been carried by Democrats by an average of less than 5 points in the two elections (Michigan, Minnesota, Oregon, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin), the Democrats ran fairly close among white working class voters in 2004, losing by an average of 8 points. This is considerably better than the national average. And in the four states that the GOP carried by an average of less than 5 points in the two elections (Florida, Missouri, Nevada and Ohio), the Democrats averaged a 13 point deficit. The relative closeness of the white working class vote in these states is clearly part of what puts them in play (and the differences between them in degree of closeness help explain why one group has leaned blue and the other red in the last two elections).

Finally, it is worth noting the difference between these groups of states and another group of states that are viewed as potentially being in play, albeit more distantly. These are the five states—Arizona, Arkansas, Colorado, Tennessee and West Virginia—that the GOP won by an average of less than 10 points (but more than 5) in the last two elections. In these states, the Democrats lost the white working class vote in 2004 by an average of 25 points<sup>32</sup>. There are other factors, of course, that put some of these states in play but the size of the Democratic deficit among these states' relatively conservative white working class voters is clearly a significant obstacle in the way of shifting them out of the GOP column.

### *The White Working Class and the 2008 Election*

During this year's Democratic primary season, Hillary Clinton generally ran far ahead of Barack Obama among white working class voters. But due to the structure of the Democratic primary electorate, with its heavy minority and college-educated representation, this did not translate into electoral dominance and she ultimately failed to secure the nomination (**Authors' note: in the unlikely event this turns out not to be true, this paragraph will have to be modified.**)

The story will be different in the November general election however. Here the voting proclivities of the white working class will make a huge difference and could well determine who the next president will be. At the most general level, Bush carried white working class voters by 23 points in 2004. A replication of this performance by the GOP candidate in 2008 would make it quite unlikely that the Democrat could prevail.

Indeed, given the structure of the rest of the electorate, the Democrats have to get that deficit down to around 10 points to achieve a solid popular vote victory. How feasible is this?

The results of the 2006 Congressional election indicate this is possible. In that election, the Democrats dramatically improved their performance among white working class voters, running only a 10 point deficit, down from a 20 point deficit in 2004 Congressional voting. Moreover, the Democrats reduced their deficit from 32 to 21 points among non-college whites with \$50,000-\$75,000 in household income and completely eliminated their deficit among non-college whites with \$30,000 to \$50,000 in household income, going from 22 points down in 2004 to dead even<sup>33</sup>.

Looked at in terms of states—and of course the presidential election is fought out on a state by state basis (though popular vote results typically track electoral vote results and in fact are amplified by them)—the challenge for the Democrats will be to hold the line at minimum on the white working class vote in the highly competitive states they won in both 2000 and 2004 (Michigan, Minnesota, Oregon, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin). This means keeping their white working class deficit in these states down to roughly eight points on average. And in the four highly competitive states they lost in both 2000 and

2004 (Florida, Missouri, Nevada and Ohio), they will have to cut their average 13 point deficit at least in half to carry these states.

The issue environment that favored the Democrats in 2006 and led to significant pickups (Senate, governor, state legislature and/or House) in almost all of these states--especially Ohio, where white working class voters backed both the Democrats' senatorial and gubernatorial candidates—remains in place for 2008. Negative views of the economy and the Iraq war, anxiety about health care and disapproval of President Bush continue to run high among white working class voters, making it quite plausible that the Democrats could replicate their 2006 form among these voters. That would all but guarantee a bad outcome for the GOP in 2008.

Moreover, the pattern of election results in 2006 and 2007 suggests that appeals to cultural conservatism and generic toughness on national security, divorced from concrete problems like Iraq, are of diminishing effectiveness in steering white working class voters away from the Democrats. If so, this could make the GOP's task in 2008 even harder.

### ***The Future of the White Working Class***

The decline of the white working class is likely to continue since current trends are likely to persist. First, there is the continuing decline in the white population. By the presidential election of 2020, Census Bureau projections indicate that non-Hispanic whites will be down to around 61 percent of the population. By 2050 that share will have dropped to almost exactly half.

Education upgrading is also likely to continue, though it may slow down. A Census Bureau paper<sup>34</sup> predicts a 4-7 point increase in the high school completion rate, a 7-12 point increase in the college attendance (some college or higher) rate and a 4-5 point increase in the four year college completion rate by 2028.

Occupational upgrading will continue, though here too the rate at which it will increase may slow down. Bureau of Labor Statistics occupational projections to 2016 indicate that, while professional (and service) jobs will grow at the fastest rate among major occupational groups, professional occupations will increase their *share* of jobs by only about a percentage point, a slowdown from the rate of share increase in the 1950-2000 period (changes in occupation coding make the comparison inexact). In addition, managerial occupations will grow at the second fastest rate (though their share will remain flat).

Income upgrading should also continue though the rate is very difficult to assess. Recall that median family income increased about 150 percent from 1947 to 2005. But most of that increase was in the 26 year period between 1947 and 1973 period, when family income more than doubled, with an annual growth rate of 2.8 percent. In the 32 years between 1973 and 2005, income only went up 23 percent, an annual growth rate of .6

percent<sup>35</sup>. So how much income goes up in the future will depend very much on whether income growth follows the pre or post 1973 pattern or something in-between.

Since we don't know the answer to this question and recent history is inconclusive--there was a period of rapid growth in median family income from 1995-2000 (up 11 percent), followed by negative growth from 2000-2005 (down 2 percent)—one approach is to use the growth rate over the entire 1947-2005 period (1.6 percent) which in effect averages the growth rates in the “good” (1947-73) and “bad” (1973-2005) periods. Applying this rate to median family income produces an estimate of \$83,000 for the year 2030 (2005 dollars). Moreover, if one applies this rate to the 40<sup>th</sup> percentile of the family income distribution, the 40<sup>th</sup> percentile would move up to around \$67,000 by 2030, meaning that roughly 65 percent of families in that year would have more than \$60,000 in income. In 2005, the corresponding figure was about 47 percent.

The downward trajectory of the white working therefore seems assured if its rate of decline is uncertain. As with the World War II to contemporary era trend data reviewed at the beginning of this paper, it appears likely that the future rate of decline will be fastest under an income-based definition, slowest under an occupation-based definition and intermediate under an education-based definition. More precise statements about the projected population share of the white working class are difficult but some educated guesses can be made.

Looking first at the broad education-based definition (whites without a four year college degree), the rate of decline of the white working class since the World War II era has been .57 percentage points a year. Adjusting this rate downward a bit to allow for the expected slowdown in educational upgrading and projecting it forward to the presidential election of 2020 yields an estimate of 41 percent of adults in the white working class and perhaps a percentage point more of voters. Under the occupation-based definition (whites without a professional or managerial job), the rate of decline since the World War II era has been .47 percentage points a year. Adjusting the rate downward to allow for the projected slowdown in occupational upgrading and projecting forward to 2020 yields an estimate of 37 percent of workers in the white working class. Finally, under the income-based definition (white families under \$60,000), the rate of decline since 1947 has been .91 percentage points a year. Keeping the rate the same and projecting forward to 2020 yields an estimate of 20 percent of families qualifying as white working class<sup>36</sup>.

These estimates suggest that the white working class, particularly under the broad education and occupation based definitions, will remain a substantial force in American society and politics even as it continues to decline. Indeed, the 2020 estimates above may, if anything, be underestimating white working class density in that year, since the rates of decline used here seem more likely to be too high than too low (observed rates of decline in this decade appear to be a bit lower than the historic rates of decline used as a base for these projections). Looking forward, then, what challenges will this still-substantial group of voters present to our political parties?



For the Democrats, the electoral challenge will be to keep their deficit among white working class (non-college-educated) voters as close to single digits as possible. Allowing the GOP to run up super-majorities among these voters will remain a recipe for electoral defeat for many election cycles to come. This suggests Democrats need a way of connecting with the white working class that has mostly been lacking for 40 years.

Certainly, Democrats' current emphasis on issues like health care and other aspects of economic security could be part of re-establishing that connection. There is no doubt that white working class voters are profoundly troubled by the insecurities of the new economic world they find themselves in and wish to see some serious reforms. And they are especially worried that the pressures of globalization could make their situations even more tenuous.

But simply calling for programs that would enhance economic security, leavened with a hefty dose of economic populist rhetoric, may not be enough. Indeed, the whole populist approach, where the privileged are portrayed as stacking the deck against the economic security of ordinary hardworking people, has some serious problems.

Perhaps the most serious is that it fails to take seriously the extent to which many of the "people" aspire to be among the "privileged" and believe they will be. In a March, 2005 New York Times survey, for example, 84 percent of Americans described themselves as middle class or poorer today, but 45 percent believed it was very or somewhat likely that they would become wealthy in the future. These findings are consistent with polls over many decades that show Americans to be great believers in class mobility (despite the reality that such mobility is probably no higher in the United States than in the supposedly class-bound nations of Western Europe).

In aspiring to rise higher on the economic ladder, Americans, including white working class Americans, generally adopt a bifurcated view of their economic situation that is not clearly reflected by populist rhetoric. On the one hand, they tend to believe that things have changed for the worse -- that the economy is doing poorly, that the security that families once enjoyed is disappearing, that leaders just don't get it. On the other hand, these very same members of white working class believe that they are holding up their end of the economic bargain, that they are working hard and doing right by their families, that their story is one of optimism and hope, not pessimism and despair. Even today, with most white working class voters embracing a negative economic story overall, many still believe a positive economic story applies to their own lives. Populism appeals to the negative, pessimistic side of these voters' outlook, but it frequently falls short in appealing to the positive, optimistic side. These are voters who, after all, are more and more likely to have at least some college education and, over time, have become decidedly more affluent than the New Deal working class for whom Democratic economic appeals were originally crafted. The white working class today is an *aspirational* class not a downtrodden one.

This suggests that Democrats may have to go a step farther to reach white working class voters and connect economic security to economic *opportunity*. When Democrats talk

about social insurance and economic security, they tend to focus on how programs like Social Security and Medicare help prevent financial disaster. But there is another, more positive way to talk about insurance: as a way for families to get ahead. Just as businesses and entrepreneurs are encouraged by basic protections against financial risk to invest in economic growth, so adequate security encourages families to invest in their own future - - something many now find quite difficult. It's not easy to invest in the future, after all, when a sudden drop in income or rise in expenses could completely blow away your family budget. That sense of insecurity will make a person less likely to invest in specialized training, cultivate new career paths, and readily change jobs -- the very things that are likely to allow that person to get ahead.

Democrats could therefore connect more positively to the white working by speaking convincingly about the need to provide economic security to expand opportunity. Efforts to increase health coverage and contain health-care costs (including the cost of prescription drugs), to improve the quality and availability of child care, to defend and extend guaranteed retirement benefits (including Social Security), to provide middle-class families with strong incentives to save and build wealth, and to make college and specialized training available to all are the subjects of countless and competing policy prescriptions. But it is critical that these policies be put in the context of helping Americans get ahead. These are measures that could allow the typical white working class family to raise its head from the day-to-day struggle in an insecure world and concentrate on its most heartfelt wish: to achieve the American Dream.

And there is no doubt that the white working class still believes it is feasible to attain this goal. In a March 2006 Greenberg Quinlan Rosner/Economic Resiliency Group (GQR/ERG) poll, 69 percent of white working class respondents said they had already attained the American Dream or would attain it in their lifetimes<sup>37</sup>. An interesting perspective on this optimism is provided by looking at another question in the ERG poll on whether increasing uncertainty or achieving the American Dream characterizes the economy today and comparing respondents' answers to their views on whether they themselves would achieve the American Dream. Here is the choice posed by the uncertainty question:

1. Most people today face increasing uncertainty about employment, with stagnant incomes, paying more for health care, taxes, and retirement, while those at the top have booming incomes and lower taxes.
2. Our economy faces ups and downs, but most people can expect to better themselves, see rising incomes, find good jobs and provide economic security for their families. The American dream is very much alive.

By almost 2:1 (63 percent to 32 percent), white working class respondents selected the first statement about increasing uncertainty as coming closer to their views. But of that group that said that increasing uncertainty, rather than achieving the American Dream,

characterized the economy, an amazing 60 percent nevertheless thought that they themselves would achieve the Dream.

The GOP, for its part, has been more successful in connecting to white working class aspirations than to its very real economic difficulties. There has been a tendency to deny these difficulties on the one hand and on the other to insist that the magic of the market, spurred on by tax cuts, will solve whatever minor difficulties there might be. This reflexively anti-government approach may have reached its limits at the current time, as a restless white working class finds more and more to like in the Democrats' economic approach.

To continue this approach going forward could create severe electoral problems for the Republicans. Currently, they are dependent on a super-majority of the white working class to cobble together a majority coalition. And the magnitude of the super-majority the GOP needs will only increase in the future as the white working class continues to shrink. Moreover, as it shrinks, it is likely to become more socially liberal, as younger cohorts of the white working class replace older ones. This makes a reliance on social issues as a counterweight to economic ones, already a faltering strategy, seem very suspect over the long run.

This suggests the GOP in the future will have to engage the Democrats directly on economic issues and programs if they wish to retain high levels of support among the white working class. Moreover, that engagement will have to go beyond support for tax cuts and a generic insistence that government programs don't really work. The white working class moving forward is asking, as they asked of the Democrats in the 1970's and 1980's, what have you done for us lately? The GOP needs an answer.

There are voices in the GOP that recognize this challenge and are trying to address it. A new book by conservative writers Ross Douthat and Reihan Salam, *Grand New Party: How Republicans Can Win the Working Class and Save the American Dream*<sup>38</sup>, directly acknowledges the need to retain supermajorities of the white working class vote and argue that the current Republican anti-government, tax-cutting philosophy is inadequate for doing so. They propose a new approach based on a series of substantial government programs that directly address health care and other aspects of economic insecurity, but do so in a way that reflects conservative principles—market-friendly, reliant on individual initiative and family-oriented. It remains to be seen whether the GOP can and will embrace such an approach but it seems a promising one, given the demographic dilemma the party faces.

### ***The Rise of a Mass Upper Middle Class***

This paper has focused on the decline of the working class—past, present and future. It's worth taking a few moments to consider other changes in the class structure that have accompanied this decline. Most of these changes have been covered in passing in our discussion—increasing affluence, the rise of the college-educated, the growth of the professional-managerial class (especially professionals) and so on.

We'll focus here on one particular aspect of these changes: the rise of a mass upper middle class. That is, it's not just true that more and more Americans over time have attained what might be called a middle class standard of living, it's also true that more and more Americans have reached a higher level of affluence we might call upper middle class. This term serves to differentiate them from the truly rich on the one hand and the ordinary middle class on the other.

Consider the following. In 1947, the 80<sup>th</sup> percentile of family income was less than \$37,000 and the 95<sup>th</sup> percentile was around \$60,000 (2005 dollars). At most a few percent could have had family incomes above \$100,000. By 2005, the 80<sup>th</sup> percentile was around \$103,000 and the 95<sup>th</sup> percentile was about \$185,000<sup>39</sup>. If we use \$100,000 income as a dividing line for the upper middle class, we have gone from a situation where the upper middle class was a tiny fraction of families to one where they qualify as a mass grouping (even subtracting out a few percent for the truly rich).

On the face of it, this might seem a straightforward benefit for the GOP, since more affluent voters tend to lean Republican. But there are some complications. As this group has gotten larger it has become a mix of affluent, liberal-leaning professionals on the one hand and managers, small business owners and midlevel white-collar workers on the other who are much more conservative. Indeed, one of the big stories of American politics in the last several decades is the diverging paths of professionals, who have shifted from the Republicans to the Democrats, and managers, who have remained Republican in their loyalties.

The 2004 and 2006 elections, where voters with over \$100,000 in income have been, respectively, 18 percent and 23 percent of voters, revealed a split in political behavior among the mass upper middle class that reflects this difference between managers and professionals. In the 2004 election, upper middle class voters with a four year college degree only (likely to be a managerial credential) favored Bush over Kerry by 60-39. But upper middle class voters with postgraduate study (likely to be a professional credential) favored Bush by only 51-48. Similarly, in 2006, college degree only upper middle class voters favored Republicans for Congress by 56-42, while postgraduate study upper middle class voters favored Democrats by 50-48. Between them, those with a four year college degree only and postgraduate study make up the great majority of upper middle class voters and are of roughly equal size with that group, so this split is of potentially great significance as this group continues to increase its share of the American electorate<sup>40</sup>.

And that increase in share will be quite significant over time. Just how much that share is likely to increase can be estimated by the same procedure used earlier. Assuming a 1.6 percent annual increase in family income at the 60<sup>th</sup> percentile, by the year 2030 the 60<sup>th</sup> percentile will actually be slightly over \$100,000. That would put roughly 40 percent of families in the upper middle class category. Even by the year 2020, that rate of increase would be enough to put roughly one third of families in the upper middle class<sup>41</sup>.

So the influence of the upper middle class on our politics will only grow larger as time goes on. Much will depend on how the political inclinations of the professional and managerial components of this group sort themselves out. The professional component could be especially significant since BLS projections suggest this is the strongest growth group within the professional-managerial class. At any rate, the comparatively liberal leanings of upper middle class professionals should blunt the conservative politics that one might expect from this group sheerly on the basis of income.

This suggests, once again, that the GOP may have to back off a hard right stand on social issues if it hopes to build a strong base among the emerging upper middle class. Such a stance runs the risk of alienating the sizeable professional contingent. In addition, professionals' views on economic issues tend to be more moderate than managers—less emphasis on tax cuts and more emphasis on government programs that serve the public good (albeit in a fiscally responsible manner). The same Reaganite program found wanting by Douthat and Salam for the white working class is likely also a poor fit for affluent professionals.

For the Democrats' part, traditional economic populism, which has serious problems as a program for the white working class, is even more poorly suited for affluent professionals. Such a stance could work at cross-purposes to Democrats' liberal stand on social issues which is generally attractive to this group. This suggests that, as with the white working class, an economic approach that melds security and opportunity—a sort of “aspirational populism”—is a better bet for expanding their base in the upper middle class.

Whether either party will effectively respond to the long-term challenges posed by the decline of the white working class and rise of the upper middle class remains to be seen. All that one can say with certainty is that these challenges will sorely test both parties' political strategies. In the end, the party that is most adaptable and sees the future most clearly is likely to emerge victorious.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Data in this paragraph from authors' analysis of 1940-2000 Census data and 2007 Current Population Survey Annual Social and Economic Supplement education data.
- <sup>2</sup> Data in this paragraph from authors' analysis of 1940 Census data and 2006 American Community Survey occupation data. Occupational categories used by the government have shifted between 1940 and 2007 but at this very broad level of occupational aggregation the effects on trend should be small.
- <sup>3</sup> Data in this paragraph from authors' analysis of 1947 and 2005 Current Population Survey Annual Social and Economic Supplement income data.
- <sup>4</sup> Lawrence Mishel, Jared Bernstein and Sylvia Allegretto, *The State of Working America, 2006/2007*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007, p.150.
- <sup>5</sup> Data in this and following paragraph from authors' analysis of 1940 Census data and 2007 Current Population Survey Annual Social and Economic Supplement education data.
- <sup>6</sup> Data in this and following paragraph from authors' analysis of 1940 Census data and 2006 American Community Survey occupation data.
- <sup>7</sup> Data in this and following paragraph from authors' analysis of 1947 and 2005 Current Population Survey Annual Social and Economic Supplement income data.
- <sup>8</sup> Authors' analysis of 1940 Census data and 2007 Current Population Survey Annual Social and Economic Supplement education data.
- <sup>9</sup> Ruy Teixeira and Joel Rogers, *America's Forgotten Majority: Why the White Working Class Still Matters*. New York: Basic, 2000, p. 16.
- <sup>10</sup> Data in this and following paragraph are conservative extrapolations from Teixeira and Rogers, p. 16-17.
- <sup>11</sup> John B. Judis and Ruy Teixeira, *The Emerging Democratic Majority*. NY: Scribner, 2002, p. 62.
- <sup>12</sup> Kevin Phillips, *The Emerging Republican Majority*. New York: Arlington House, 1969.
- <sup>13</sup> Judis and Teixeira, p. 63.
- <sup>14</sup> Teixeira and Rogers, p. 32.
- <sup>15</sup> Judis and Teixeira, p. 63 and Teixeira and Rogers, p. 32.
- <sup>16</sup> William Galston and Elaine Kamarck, *The Politics of Evasion*, Progressive Policy Institute, 1989.
- <sup>17</sup> Data in this paragraph from authors' analysis of 1992 and 1996 VNS national exit polls.
- <sup>18</sup> Data in this paragraph from authors' analysis of 2000 VNS and 2004 NEP national exit polls.
- <sup>19</sup> Data in this paragraph from authors' analysis of 2004 NEP national exit poll.
- <sup>20</sup> Thomas Frank. *What's the Matter with Kansas? How Conservatives Won the Heart of America*. New York: Metropolitan Books, 2004
- <sup>21</sup> Larry M. Bartels. "What's the Matter with What's the Matter with Kansas?" Presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, Washington, DC, 2005.
- <sup>22</sup> David Gopoiian and Ralph Whitehead, Jr. "Will the Real White Working Class Please Stand Up?" Emerging Democratic Majority weblog: <http://www.emergingdemocraticmajorityweblog.com/donkeyrising/archives/001317.php>, 2005
- <sup>23</sup> The Congressional vote can also serve much the same function as an indicator of partisan loyalties. Our analyses of the Congressional vote shows a very similar pattern to the one reported here for party identification. To simplify the exposition, we have omitted the Congressional vote results and present only the party identification results in this paper.
- <sup>24</sup> Larry M. Bartels. "What's the Matter with What's the Matter with Kansas?" *Quarterly Journal of Political Science*, 1: 201-226, 2006.
- <sup>25</sup> There are some other problems with this version of Bartels' analysis including his use of the Presidential vote which replicates the Eisenhower elections problem in his earlier analysis. In addition, his use of the two party instead of popular vote tends to overstate the strength of the Democratic vote in later elections like 1968, 1992 and 1996. The fact that large numbers of white working class voters supported Wallace in the former election and Perot in the latter two elections, leading to quite low Democratic popular votes in these elections, is surely some kind of indicator of diminishing white working class support for Democrats. But the two party vote in effect throws out this information.
- <sup>26</sup> See Alan I Abramowitz, "Constraint, Ideology, and Polarization in the American Electorate: Evidence from the 2006 Cooperative Congressional Election Study." Presented at the Annual Meeting of the

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American Political Science Association, Chicago, IL, 2007 and Alan I. Abramowitz and Kyle L. Saunders, “Ideological Realignment in the U.S. Electorate.” *Journal of Politics*, 60: 634-652, 1998

<sup>27</sup> To simplify the presentation, we do not present the results for middle SES white voters, but the trends in this group fall in between those seen in the lower and upper SES groups—the decline in Democratic identification among conservatives is larger than for upper SES whites but smaller than for lower SES whites.

<sup>28</sup> All data in this and following paragraph based on authors’ analysis of 2004 Current Population Survey Voter Supplement data. Figures presented here are estimates for 2008 voters. These estimates use the 2004 figures as a base and then adjust them for trend—that is, the continuing decline of the white working class since 2004.

<sup>29</sup> A similar pattern of results across states is obtained when ones uses a broad occupation-based definition of the white working class—white workers without a professional-managerial degree. The levels however are lower; as a rule of thumb subtract 8 points from the state estimate for percent non-college-educated white voters to get the state estimate for percent whites without a professional-managerial job (among working voters, however, not all voters).

<sup>30</sup> All data in this paragraph from authors’ analysis of 2004 Current Population Survey Voter Supplement data, adjusted for trend.

<sup>31</sup> All data in this paragraph and subsequent three paragraphs from authors’ analysis of 2004 NEP national exit poll and various 2004 NEP state exit polls.

<sup>32</sup> Where data available. No data available for Arkansas and Tennessee.

<sup>33</sup> All data in this paragraph from authors’ analysis of 2006 NEP national exit poll

<sup>34</sup> Jennifer Cheeseman Day and Kurt J. Bauman, “Have We Reached the Top?: Educational Attainment Projections of the US Population”. Census Bureau Population Division: Working Paper Series No. 43, May, 2000.

<sup>35</sup> Data in this and following paragraph from authors’ analysis of 1947-2005 Current Population Survey Annual Social and Economic Supplement income data.

<sup>36</sup> Data in this paragraph from authors’ analysis of 1940-2000 Census data and 2007 Current Population Survey Annual Social and Economic Supplement education data; authors’ analysis of 1940 Census data and 2006 American Community Survey occupation data; and authors’ analysis of 1947-2005 Current Population Survey Annual Social and Economic Supplement income data.

<sup>37</sup> Data in this and following paragraph from authors’ analysis of March, 2006 GQR/ERG survey.

<sup>38</sup> Ross Douthat and Reihan Salam, *Grand New Party: How Republicans Can Win the Working Class and Save the American Dream*, New York: Doubleday, 2008.

<sup>39</sup> Data in this paragraph from authors’ analysis of 1947 and 2005 Current Population Survey Annual Social and Economic Supplement income data.

<sup>40</sup> Data in this paragraph from authors’ analysis of 2004 and 2006 NEP national exit polls.

<sup>41</sup> Data in this paragraph from authors’ analysis of 2005 Current Population Survey Annual Social and Economic Supplement income data. Judging from current patterns, it looks like the higher propensity of the upper middle class to vote is roughly cancelled out by the fact that family income tends to be higher than household income which, in turn, is closer to the income of the typical voter. So the family share figure, assuming the projection is right, should closely approximate the share of voters corresponding to that income group—perhaps slightly overestimating it, but not by much.

Working-class whites give Trump the White House. Replay. More Videos MUST WATCH. Working-class whites give Trump the White House 02:20. Story highlights. This was Hillary Clinton's election to lose, says Stephanie Coontz. As a historian who has studied the rise and decline of working-class families since World War II, I listened to Hillary Clinton's speeches over the last few months, looking in vain for any sign that she grasped the mounting frustration that so many working people have felt over the past few decades. While Trump talked about "the working class," she carefully focused on "the middle class." She mentioned tuition breaks and family friendly work places far more often than she talked about investment in infrastructure and jobs. White working-class Americans have been supporting Republican presidential candidates at higher rates in recent elections, but that process long predates 2016, and narratives that center on Trump's alleged appeal obscure this important long-term trend. To test the four claims that make up the bulk of the Trump-centered narrative about the white working class in 2016, we gathered all of the available academic surveys conducted in 2016 that included questions about how respondents voted in the presidential election. These are the American National Election Studies (ANES), the Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES), and the Views of the Electorate Research (VOTER) panel study. Studying the middle class requires an operational definition of the group. This paper uses current money income to define class because current income is closely related to all the factors associated with social class and because data on current income are readily available. Tracking the evolution of the upper middle class required several significant methodological decisions, including selecting beginning and end points for the study, choosing a dataset, defining the unit of the analysis (e.g., individual, family, household), adjusting for differences in the number of individuals in each unit, and taking inflation into account. For the upper-middle class, marriage went from 94% to 84% between 1960 and 2010, but for the White working class it went from 82% to 48%. For the White working class, never-married went from 10% to 25%; and there has been dramatically lower work force participation. By 1970, when the White working class was at its economic peak, out of wedlock births had already increased 3-fold from 1960 levels. While the death rate among young whites rose for every age group over the five years before 2014, it rose faster by any measure for the less educated, by 23 percent for those without a high school education, compared with only 4 percent for those with a college degree or more.