



The White Working Class in 2016 (and Earlier)

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Donald J. Trump won the presidency by riding an enormous wave of support among white working-class voters.

—Nate Cohn¹

Working-class voters had been growing alienated from the Democratic Party since Bill Clinton's first term.

—Musa Al Gharbi²

Election commentary during most presidential campaigns seems to converge on some specific group or demographic as being particularly important for the outcome. Recent decades have seen the year of the woman (1992), soccer moms (1996), security moms (2002), and waitress moms (2012), as well as the angry White male (1994), office park dads (2002), NASCAR dads (2004), and Joe Six-Pack (2008). In the 2016 campaign the commentariat bestowed pride of place on the White working class, males in particular.

As discussed in Essay 4, “Economic Anxiety or Cultural Backlash: Which Is Key to Trump’s Support?,” much of the post-2016 commentary focused on the motivations of the White working class. Was support for Trump an expression of economic disappointment and distress or of something darker? A third factor, mentioned but not fully appreciated then, was pure class resentment.³ Although class conflict was viewed as the most important cleavage in democratic societies for most of the twentieth century, in recent decades race, gender, and sexual orientation have superseded class as lines of division, at least among the western political classes. But in 2016 anecdotal and fragmentary data suggest that something like class never vanished. Put very simply, many people like Trump because they resent the people who hate him. That *New York Times* and *Washington Post* readers and CNN watchers despise Trump is a feature, not a bug. He is a weapon that those left behind by modern social and economic changes can wield

An Era of Unstable Majorities Continues: Essays on Contemporary American Politics

against those who have prospered under such changes. This essay takes a decades-long snapshot of social class and the party coalitions.

MEASURES OF SOCIAL CLASS

Survey analysts commonly rely on variables like occupation, education, and income as indicators of social class, but as researchers recognize, all measures of socioeconomic status are crude and yield varying results.⁴ Some individuals with high levels of education, such as graduate students and adjunct professors, do not earn high incomes; conversely, some with little higher education or blue-collar occupations like electricians and plumbers can earn quite high incomes. Moreover, higher education may signify a less exalted status today when nearly one-third of the adult population has a bachelor's degree than in 1960 when only 10 percent of the population did.

Of the occupation/education/income trinity, sociologists seem to prefer occupation. One sophisticated sociological study using detailed occupational classifications reported that "Trump's appeal to the white working class was crucial for his victory."⁵ Contemporary data journalists and many political scientists, however, seem to have settled on education as their preferred indicator, perhaps because it is so easy to measure by a commonly used survey item: Does the respondent have a four-year college degree? People who have not earned a four-year degree are classified as working class; those with at least a four-year degree are middle class. Although graduates of the New Mexico Institute of Mining and Technology and Harvard are not identical, according to this blunt binary measure, the exit polls indicated that working-class Whites strongly supported Trump in 2016, whereas middle-class Whites broke almost evenly, with a slight edge to Trump. Similarly, as shown in table 1, more detailed educational breakdowns show a

TABLE 1 CLASS VOTING IN 2016 (WHITES ONLY)

	Clinton (%)	Trump (%)	Number
Men—high school	15	80	192
Women—high school	26	69	328
Men—some college	26	63	391
Women—some college	37	53	497
Men—college grad	35	55	348
Women—college grad	46	49	353
Men—postgrad	45	48	235
Women—postgrad	58	36	231

Source: Economist/YouGov Panel

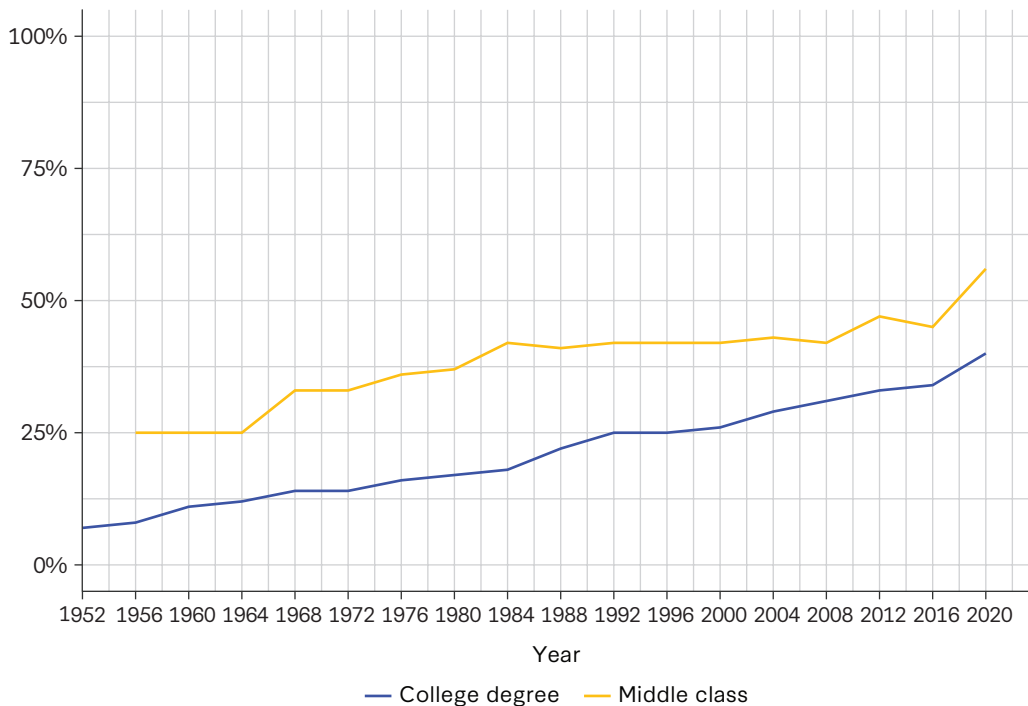
steady educational gradient, with Trump support especially strong among high school-educated men and Clinton support especially strong among women with more advanced degrees.

Two major social science databases, the American National Election Study (ANES) and the General Social Survey (GSS), include a third measure of social class—a subjective class identification item akin to the party identification item. This item too is imperfect: subjective identifications may not correspond to objective status, as when a Marxist college professor identifies as in the working class or a financially poor service worker claims to be middle class.⁶ But given that some commentators hypothesized an increase in White identity in 2016 as a reaction to the Democrats’ emphasis on various other non-White identities, an examination of this class identity item seems worthwhile.⁷ The ANES and GSS data track closely, but the ANES has included the item since 1952 compared to 1972 for the GSS item, so I rely on it in the analyses that follow.⁸ The ANES item reads,

There’s been some talk these days about different social classes. Most people say they belong either to the middle class or the working class. Do you ever think of yourself as belonging in one of these classes? (IF YES:) Which one?⁹

Figure 1 compares the proportions with middle-class identifications with those holding college degrees. The two series track fairly closely, with more people considering

FIGURE 1 Subjective class identification compared to college degree attainment: percent who identify as middle class versus percent who have a college degree (White respondents only)



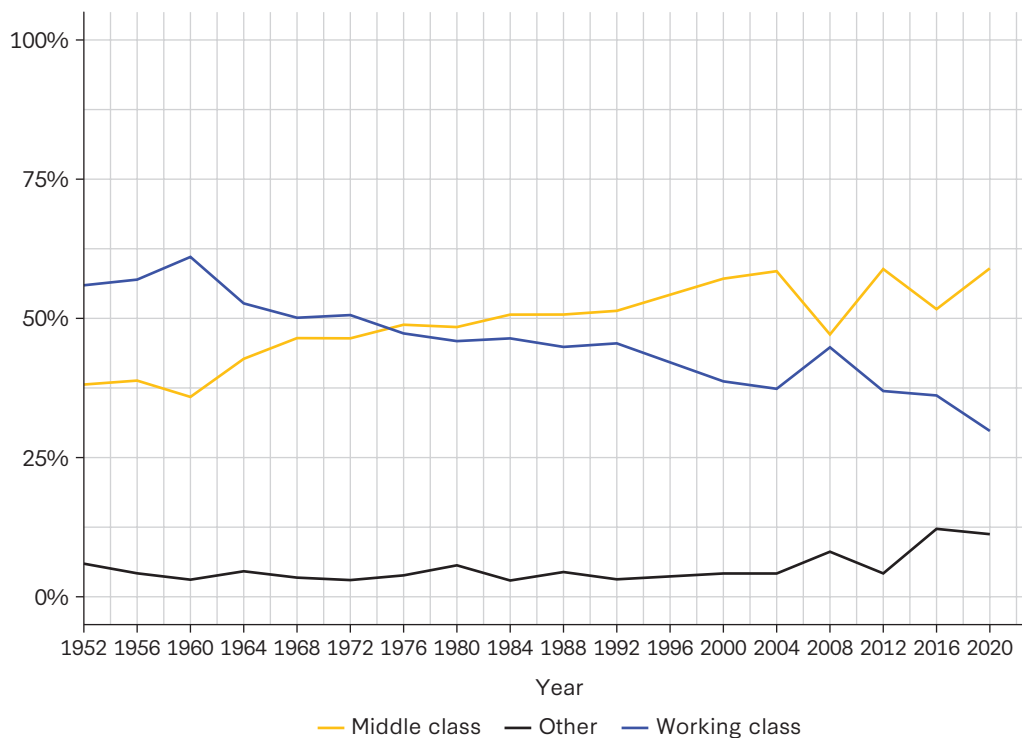
Source: American National Election Studies, 2024, <https://electionstudies.org/>

themselves as middle class than have college degrees. Consequently, the working-class people analyzed here are a somewhat narrower slice of the population than that captured as defined by college education.

As a proportion of the age-eligible electorate, non-Hispanic Whites declined from about 90 percent in the 1950s to less than 70 percent today. And as the industrial economy eroded and educational levels rose, the proportion of Whites thinking of themselves as working class declined from nearly 60 percent in the 1950s to a bit more than 30 percent by the 2000s.¹⁰ Possibly as a reaction to the Great Recession, the proportion of working-class identifiers rose seven percentage points in 2008 (and the proportion of middle-class identifiers fell even more); after that, working-class identification resumed its downward trend to less than one-third today (figure 2).

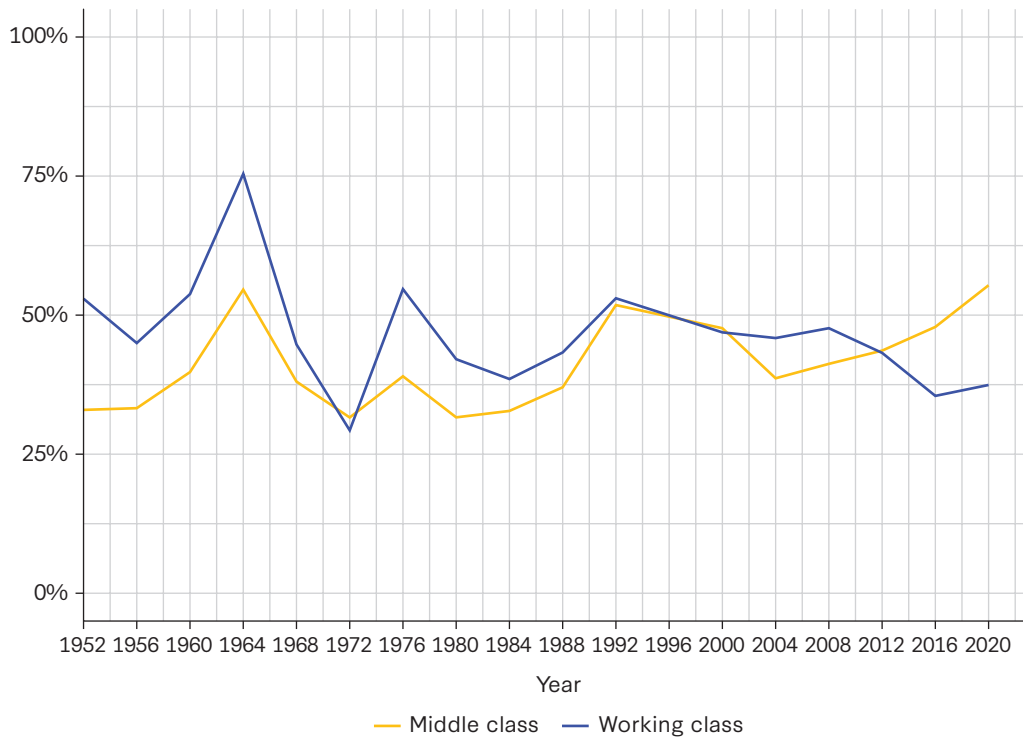
Figure 3 indicates that the attention to the working class in 2016 was justified. The graph shows how class identifiers voted. In a clear class inversion, the American public stood Karl Marx on his head in 2016, as the working class registered relatively higher support for the party of the Right than did the middle class. Importantly, however, the 2016 numbers look less like a departure from the past or even a downward trend beginning in Bill Clinton’s administration—as one commentator suggested earlier—than a continuation of a much longer development. Apart from periodic resurgences of

FIGURE 2 Social class identification among White respondents



Source: American National Election Studies, 2024, <https://electionstudies.org/>

FIGURE 3 Democratic presidential vote among White respondents



Source: American National Election Studies, 2024, <https://electionstudies.org/>

working-class support for Carter in 1976 and Clinton in 1992, the Democrats never recovered the level of working-class support that they had enjoyed up until the late sixties. In this light Trump looks more like the beneficiary of a long-standing movement away from the Democrats among working-class voters than as someone who generated a sharp break from past voting habits.

An examination of long-term party identification reinforces that suggestion. Figure 4 shows that Democratic party identification among working-class Whites declined precipitously from a clear majority in the 1950s to about 25 percent today. Democratic identification among middle-class Whites has declined from a lower level than among the working class, of course, and the decline has been shallower. Republicans have not gained much from the Democrats' decline, however, as working-class Republicanism has gone up only 10 percent or so since the Eisenhower era and middle-class Republicanism little if at all. The growth category is independents, as shown in figure 5. The proportion of working-class Whites in this category doubled between the 1950s and the 1970s and increased a bit more in the first decades of the 2000s before trending downward. The proportion of independents among middle-class Whites has increased as well, although with no change from the 1970s onward.

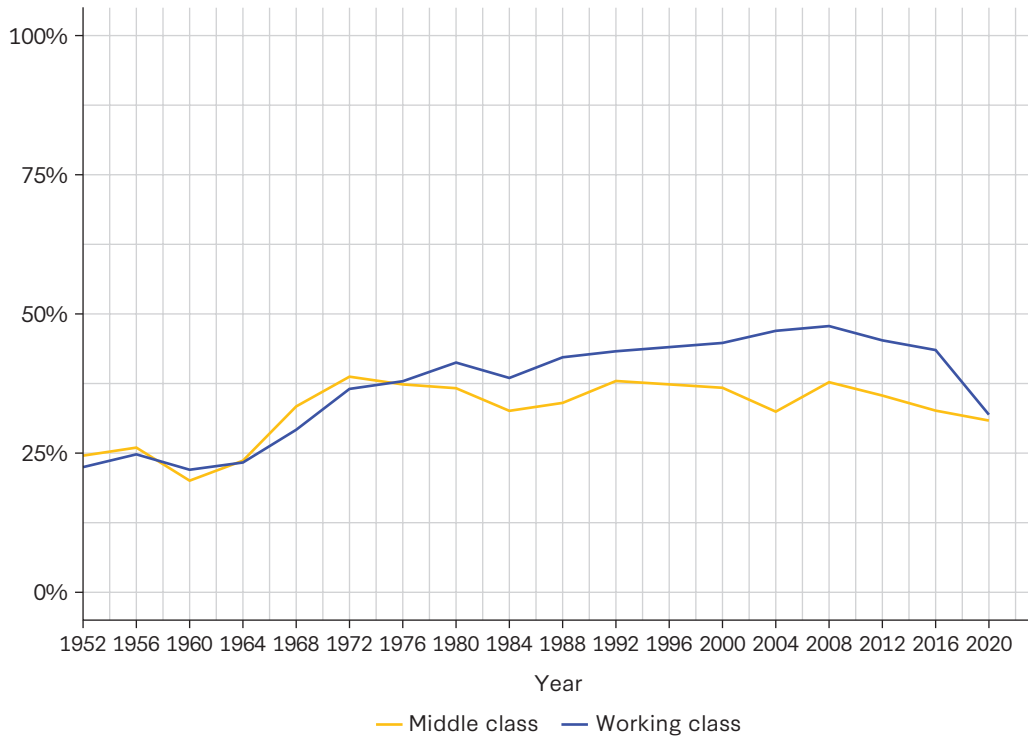
Do working-class male and female voters differ? Yes, but perhaps surprisingly, less so in 2016 than in the Reagan and Clinton eras. Figure 6 shows that after 1968, working-class

FIGURE 4 Democrat Party identification among White respondents



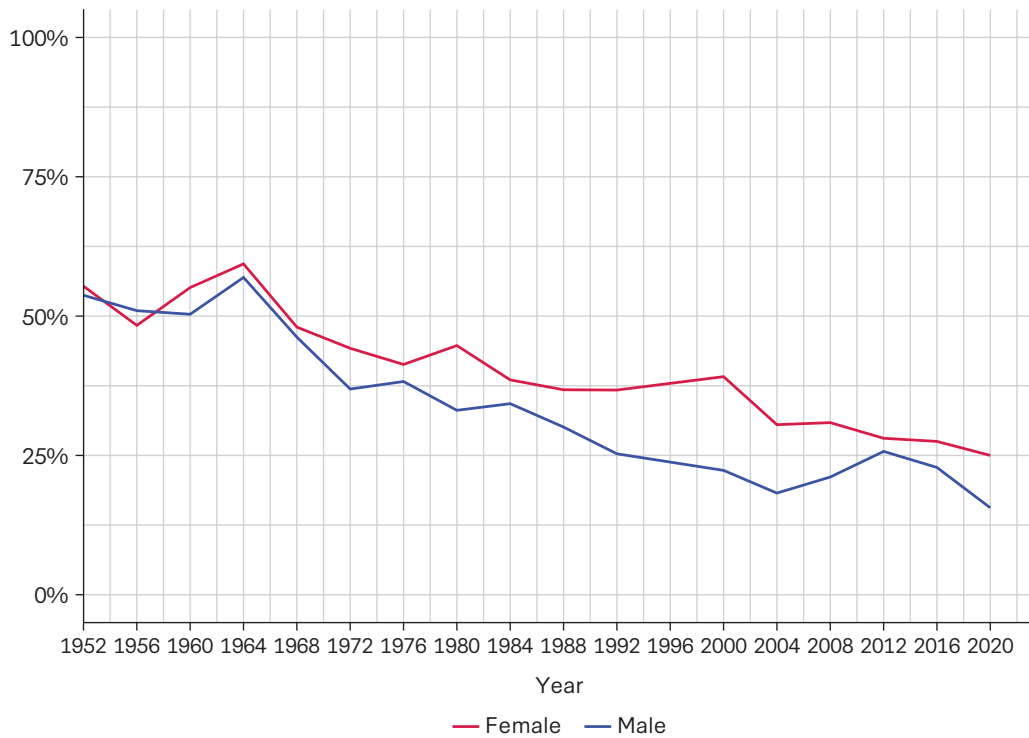
Source: American National Election Studies, 2024, <https://electionstudies.org/>

FIGURE 5 No party ID among White respondents



Source: American National Election Studies, 2024, <https://electionstudies.org/>

FIGURE 6 Democratic identification among White working-class men and women



Source: American National Election Studies, 2024, <https://electionstudies.org/>

White women began to leave the Democratic Party, but not as quickly as men. The gender gap peaked in 2000 and then began to close. Notice that Democratic identification *rose* during the Obama elections and then dropped back to 2004 levels in the Trump elections.

The presidential vote, depicted in figure 7, shows more volatility than party identification, of course. In the 1950s, when the Republicans were the “party of peace,” women voted more Republican than men. But among working-class identifiers, the gender gap first emerged in the Reagan era and peaked at twenty percentage points in 2000: working-class men *really* did not like Al Gore. In the past four elections, the gender gap among working-class Whites has been only about five percentage points.

In sum, an examination of the subjective class identities of White non-Hispanic Americans suggests a modification of some of the commentary surrounding the 2016 election. Yes, Trump did relatively better than prior Republican candidates among working-class White voters, but, with a few exceptions, Republican fortunes have been trending upward in that category for nearly sixty years. The decline in Democratic Party allegiance and electoral support among White working-class voters is long-standing, predating Trump by a half-century. Blame racial issues, the 1960s, Ronald Reagan, social issues,

FIGURE 7 Democratic presidential vote among White working-class men and women



Source: American National Election Studies, 2024, <https://electionstudies.org/>

automation, globalization, and other factors that came into play before Trump’s arrival on the scene. Trump was the beneficiary of these trends more than the cause.

WHAT ABOUT THE NON-WHITE WORKING CLASS?

In the aftermath of their 2020 loss, some Republicans found consolation in election statistics that showed reduced Democratic margins among minorities, especially Hispanics. Although the declines were particularly pronounced in some areas—for example, Miami-Dade County in Florida and the Rio Grande Valley in Texas—support for the Democratic candidate slipped throughout the country.¹¹ According to Catalyst, in the 2022 midterms Hispanic support for Republicans held steady, Black support marginally increased, and Asian support for Republicans increased by eight percentage points.¹² Polls throughout 2023 and 2024 consistently showed historically lower levels of non-White support for Joe Biden than for Hillary Clinton and previous Democratic candidates.¹³ As the 2024 election approaches, Democrats have expressed concern about minority turnout and minority support, and some Republicans have espoused the goal of constructing a new multiracial working class majority.¹⁴ Consistent with these hopes, recent polling data indicate that support for Trump is significantly higher among working-class Hispanics than among college-educated Hispanics.¹⁵ These developments suggest that we

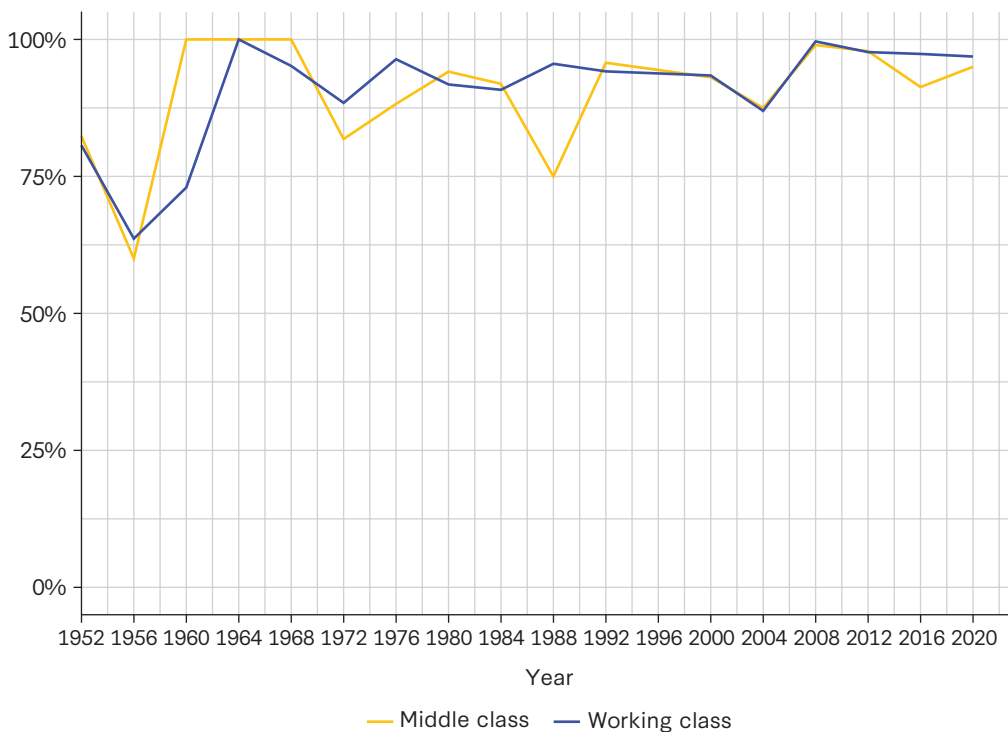
augment our earlier discussion with an examination of political change in the non-White working class.

In the early years of the ANES time series, the lion’s share of non-White respondents were African Americans, with a few Hispanics and only a handful of Asians. By the later years, Hispanics had overtaken African Americans as the modal category of non-Whites, and Asians had become a significant bloc of respondents. There are too few cases to analyze each racial/ethnic group separately, however, so the figures that follow necessarily combine all non-White and non-Black respondents. However, the goal here is to examine long-term trends, so imperfect as it is, I continue with the ANES data.

Figure 8 contrasts Democratic presidential voting among working-class and middle-class Blacks, and figure 9 does the same for all other non-Whites. Evidently, African Americans show no slippage in their partisan loyalty in this national sample. Working-class “others” do show some decline in Democratic support since 2008, but that year was a high point, and even today their level of Democratic support is higher than during the Reagan and Clinton eras.

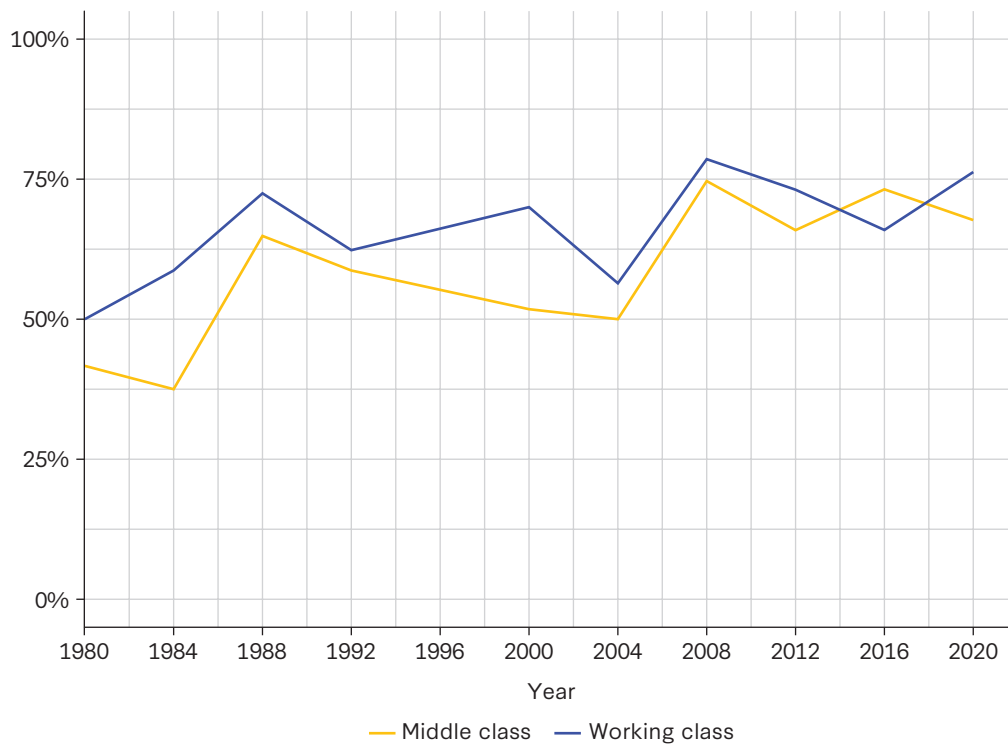
As for party identification, non-White working-class voters—most of whom are African American—overwhelmingly considered themselves working class in the

FIGURE 8 Democratic presidential vote (Black respondents only)



Source: American National Election Studies, 2024, <https://electionstudies.org/>

FIGURE 9 Democratic presidential vote (non-White, non-Black respondents only)



Source: American National Election Studies, 2024, <https://electionstudies.org/>

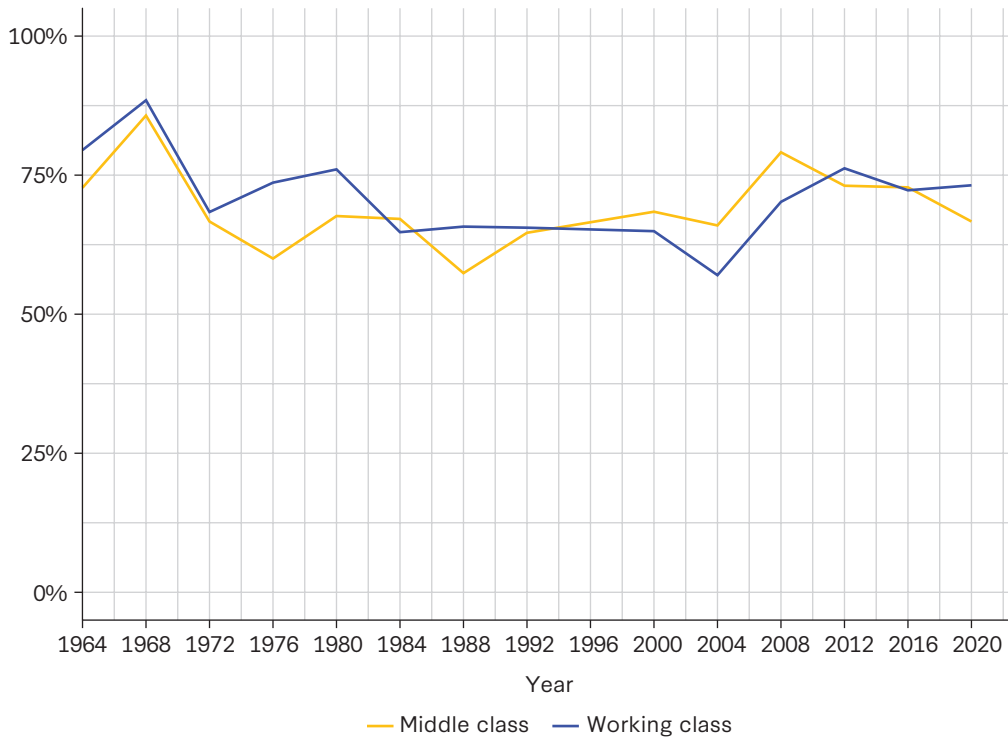
1950s, but the proportion dropped considerably during the great era of civil rights. Since then, there has been a gradual increase in middle-class identification until by 2020 middle-class identifiers were almost as common as working-class identifiers. The ANES data show some variation in African American Democratic identification in the first decade or so in the twenty-first century (figure 10) but no difference from 2012 to the present. Non-White and non-Black working-class respondents have differed little in their level of Democratic identification since 2000, but a small gap occurred in 2020, and the proportion of independents also increased a bit, consistent with some of the recent polling reports that show an erosion of Democratic support within such groups (figure 11).

A postelection essay that reports data from a very large survey project will revisit the subject of non-White political behavior.¹⁶ These surveys will enable a much finer-grained analysis, including an examination of age and gender differences (or lack of) in 2024.

SUMMARY

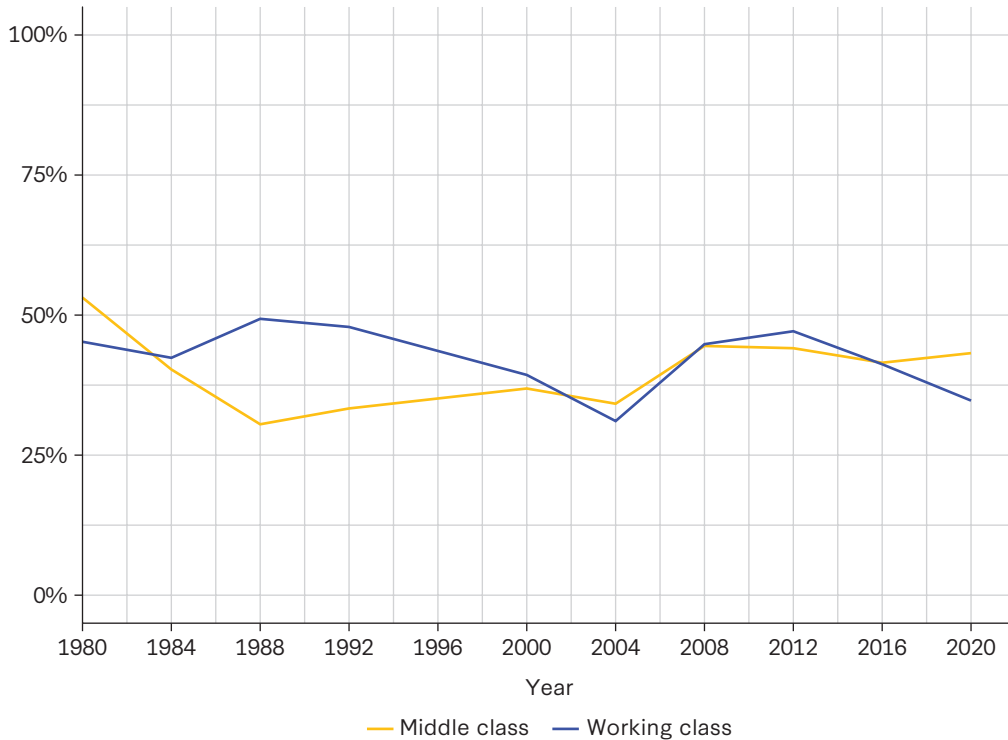
The White working class figured prominently in postelection discussions in 2016 and continued to draw attention in the run-up to the 2024 campaign. The spring and early summer notion that the Democrats had a narrow path to victory that ran through the

FIGURE 10 Democrat Party ID (Black respondents only)



Source: American National Election Studies, 2024, <https://electionstudies.org/>

FIGURE 11 Democrat Party ID (non-White, non-Black respondents only)



Source: American National Election Studies, 2024, <https://electionstudies.org/>

“blue wall” states of Pennsylvania, Michigan, and Wisconsin further emphasized the importance of this demographic category. The selection of JD Vance as the Republican vice presidential nominee was generally considered at least in part a move to solidify Trump’s strength among White working-class voters. Correspondingly, Kamala Harris’s choice of Minnesota governor Tim Walz as her vice presidential running mate was widely regarded as an effort to shore up Democratic chances of holding the blue wall.

These election-specific variations aside, the data in this chapter clearly indicate that the defection of the White working class from the Democratic Party has been a long-term process that began a half-century ago. Trump’s victory in 2016 was not a sudden sundering of the blue wall; rather, he exploited cracks in a political edifice that had been eroding for decades. Whether those cracks will widen or close will be seen very soon.

NOTES

1. Nate Cohn, “Why Trump Won: Working-Class Whites,” *New York Times*, November 10, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/10/upshot/why-trump-won-working-class-whites.html>
2. Musa Al Gharbi, “Joe Biden and Donald Trump Are Competing for Labor Support,” September 26, 2023, https://www.liberalpatriot.com/p/joe-biden-and-donald-trump-are-competing?utm_source=post-email-title&publication_id=239058&post_id=137401819&utm_campaign=email-post-title&isFreemail=true&r=k5so3&utm_medium=email
3. Morris Fiorina, *Unstable Majorities: Polarization, Party Sorting and Political Stalemate* (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 2017), chap. 11.
4. For a good discussion, see Jeffrey M. Stonecash, “The Puzzle of Class in Presidential Voting,” *The Forum*, May 17, 2017, <https://www.degruyter.com/document/doi/10.1515/for-2017-0003/html>.
5. Stephen L. Morgan and Jiwon Lee, 2018, “Trump Voters and the White Working Class,” *Sociological Science* 5 (2018):234–45.
6. Reflecting my own social mobility, I would have responded “working class” to this identity item for at least a decade after such a response had become outdated according to objective measures.
7. Ashley Jardina, *White Identity Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2019).
8. The social class item was present at the creation of what eventually became the ANES. Presumably, this reflected the fact that the four horsemen of the Michigan Survey Research Center (Angus Campbell, Philip Converse, Warren Miller, and Donald Stokes) grew up during a time when social class was an important political divide.
9. Between 1964 and 1968 the phrase “quite a bit of talk” was changed to “some talk.”
10. Using college education as a marker of class, the proportion of White working-class families stood at about 42 percent in 2016. Thus, the subjective measure identifies a somewhat smaller proportion of the White working class than standard journalistic treatments. See William R. Emmons, Ana H. Kent, and Lowell R. Ricketts, *The Demographics of Wealth* (St. Louis: Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, 2018).
11. Nicole Narea, “New Data Helps Explain Trump’s Gains Among Latino Voters in 2020,” *Vox*, May 19, 2021, <https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/22436307/catalist-equis-2020-latino-vote-trump-biden-florida-texas>.
12. Perry Bacon Jr., “Voters of Color Are Shifting Right. Are Democrats Doomed?” *Washington Post*, March 19, 2024, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2024/03/19/black-latino-asian-voters-2024-presidential-election-republican/>.

13. Philip Bump, "Young and Non-White Voters Have Shifted Right Since 2020," *Washington Post*, February 7, 2024, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2024/02/07/young-non-white-voters-have-shifted-right-since-2020/>.
14. Patrick Ruffini, *Party of the People: Inside the Multiracial Populist Coalition Remaking the GOP* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2023).
15. Ruy Teixeira, "Postcard from the Hispanic Working Class," *The Liberal Patriot*, April 25, 2024, <https://www.liberalpatriot.com/p/postcard-from-the-hispanic-working>.
16. The Say 24 Study (Stanford, Arizona State, and Yale) began in December 2023, with a survey of more than 100,000 respondents whom YouGov will attempt to interview four times, with the final survey being conducted after the elections. In addition, numerous smaller surveys will be conducted between the larger baseline surveys.



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An Era of Unstable Majorities Continues

A continuation of the Hoover Institution's *Unstable Majorities* series from the 2016 election season, the first half of this essay series leads up to the November 2024 elections with general discussions of the past and present political situation, of particular interest to students and professionals in the fields of political science and political journalism. The second half continues post-election with analyses focused specifically on the 2024 elections, addressed to a wider audience. The series begins by looking back at the issues raised in 2016 that continue today.

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