DRAFT*

Bowling for Voters? In Search of the White Working Class in American Politics

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Research on class and American political behavior is currently muddled. While polarization between the voting of the wealthiest and the poorest is widely documented, scholars of American politics have not recognized meaningful distinctions between the working and middle classes. I find that a measurement strategy that distinguishes between the poor, the working class, the middle class, and the wealthy reveals four distinct groups of voters. My findings also suggest that when Democratic candidates for president win, the working class provides more support than the middle class. When the working class divides evenly or supports Republicans, the G.O.P. tends to capture the White House. I conclude that an interaction between the electoral context and individual-level factors likely accounts for the distinctiveness of working class and middle class voters.

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It is a rite of passage in recent American politics that in order to become President, one must try to establish his or her working class credibility. In the 2008 Democratic presidential primaries, Candidate Barack Obama famously (perhaps infamously) tried to pin down blue-collar support at a campaign stop at a bowling alley in Altoona, Pennsylvania. Though he landed in the gutter far more often than he landed a strike, his visit was clearly a signal that he was just as much a regular guy as he was an Ivy League alumnus and member of the United State Senate. His opponent for the Democratic nomination, Senator Hillary Clinton, also took a shot at brandishing her working class bonafides by taking a shot of Crown Royal whiskey at a campaign stop in Crown Point, Indiana. While Kentucky bourbon may have been a more appropriate choice than Canadian whiskey, the senator from New York and former First Lady was trying to demonstrate that despite her exceptional life experiences, she was not so distant from the average lifestyle that she could not kick back and enjoy a little whiskey on occasion.

The widely cited perception that presidential candidates must win over the working class "Joe Six-pack" archetypal voter is not unique to the Democratic Party, nor is it merely a blip on the radar of the 2008 electoral cycle. 2008 Republican nominee John McCain was widely lampooned for failing to recall off the top of his head how many houses he owned. Meanwhile, his running mate, Alaska Governor Sarah Palin, touted her love of hunting moose, her days as a "hockey mom," and enthusiastically wore the badge of class-based cultural resentment against liberal elites like no one since Richard Nixon and Spiro Agnew. Thinking back to the not-too-distant past, the perception among many observers of American politics is that the difference between a

one-term Bush presidency and a two-term Bush presidency may in part be a function of whether the Bush in question recognizes a supermarket scanner when he sees one (in 1992, George H.W. Bush famously did not, and he lost), or whether the Bush in question chokes on a pretzel while watching football at home (in 2002, George W. Bush famously did, and he subsequently won). The common theme among all of these examples is that those who seek the highest office in the land must somehow indicate to "lunch pail voters" that they identify with their life circumstances and are thus well equipped to serve their interests.

In this paper, I begin to investigate the relationship between class and political behavior in the U.S. How should political scientists conceptualize and measure class? Specifically, does the white working class vote matter to electoral outcomes? Perhaps even more to the point, does the white working class even exist as a politically distinct portion of the electorate? What distinguishes the working class from the poor and the middle class? The first step in this research is to clearly identify those voters who belong to the working class, and those who are more accurately classified as the poor, middle, and wealthy classes. For most groups in the electorate, political scientists often are able to clearly identify who belongs; for examples, Catholics are Catholics, women are women, and union members are union members. When it comes to demarcating class, however, the lines dividing one group from another are decidedly more blurred. My approach to this task differs most from the extant literature in that I distinguish between the poor and the working class, the working class and the middle class, and I redraw the

line between the middle class and the wealthy.[1] As a result, I reach different conclusions about the nature of class as it relates to American political behavior.

Once I go through the exercise of rethinking and offering alternative measures of class, a second goal of this paper is to decipher whether such conceptual and methodological refinements are analytically useful for understanding American politics. If it matters where we draw the class lines around various segments of the American electorate, then there should be evidence of distinctive voting behavior between these different groups. I explore this question with descriptive data on voting behavior in presidential elections from 1948 through 2004 and conclude that it does indeed matter. While increasingly polarized voting between the highest and lowest income Americans has been well documented (e.g., Stonecash 2000; Bartels 2008; McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2008), political science literature does not yet recognize that the vast population between the rich and the impoverished is not a monolithic voting bloc in terms of class.

In contrast, I find evidence of a division between the lower- and upper-middle classes that appears to be more episodic rather than trending in any particular direction. By and large, when Democrats win the White House, it corresponds with a greater proportion of working class whites in their coalition. When Republicans gain control of the presidency, it corresponds with broad support within both the upper- and lower-middle classes. I conclude this paper with an attempt to explain the patterns that I have uncovered, and I preview some of what I intend to accomplish in later chapters of this project.

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[1] I use the term "lower-middle class" interchangeably with "working class" and accordingly sometimes refer to the "middle class" as the "upper-middle class."

Rethinking the Measurement of Class

In tackling the issue of how to assign voters to a class, I have several theoretical and practical priorities. First and foremost, I want to set up an approach to the measurement of class that recognizes the functional needs of researchers of politics. Scholars require indicators that are theoretically rich, valid, replicable over time, and broad enough to yield sufficient sample sizes. At the same time, drawing more or less arbitrary lines around groups of voters simply for the purpose of producing useful sample sizes is misguided and ultimately leads to inaccurate depictions of the world that we wish to understand. My goal here is to strike an appropriate balance between the functional needs of quantitative research and the demand for a theoretically sound approach to the empirical question at hand.[2]

From a theoretical standpoint, I argue that class is best understood as an individual's *relative position in the distribution of material resources* and their *relative level of security* in that position. I suggest that both income and education tap into critical aspects of socio-economic status and should *both* inform our conceptualization of class. Income is the best measure of relative material holdings, while education is the best measure of relative economic security (Cites). Income and education both have an obviously valid connection to economic success and indeed are highly correlated with each other (Cites). They also have the advantage of reliably appearing in survey data

[2] Note that this paper deals only with non-Hispanic whites. I follow in the footsteps of other scholars who argue that it is preferable to separate African Americans, Latinos, and other non-whites from an analysis of the political behavior of class (Stonecash 2000; McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2008; Bartels 2008). It is widely understood that African Americans and whites have had distinct political histories in the United States such that it is standard to theorize the dynamics of each group's political behavior separately. Similarly, Latinos are often viewed as a distinct group in American society and are analyzed accordingly.

going back as far as survey data has been collected, thus allowing for analyses that extend far into the past and can be replicated for the future.[3]

My emphasis on income and education represents an improvement over the extant literature. Typically, political scientists divide the American population into income thirds, assigning those in the top third as "upper class," those in the middle third as "middle class," and those in the bottom third as "poor" or "working class" (e.g., Stonecash 2000; Bartels 2008; McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2008), or in another variant of this approach, income is divided into fifths, with the lowest two fifths serving as a proxy for working class (Leege et al. 2002). Income is certainly an appropriate starting point in thinking about what sets apart one class from another. As Bartels argues, "…as a general matter, it does not seem implausible to suppose that people's *relative* positions in the *current* income distribution provide a meaningful, historically consistent indication of their class status" (2008, 71; italics in original). If class is to be a meaningful concept, it must necessarily include some notion of relative income levels, as income is the most direct measure of material wealth that is readily available. This approach also serves the interests of the analyst who wishes to conduct a study of class over time, as cutoff points at particular income percentiles more or less alleviates issues

[3] There are, of course, other possible measures of class. Jackman and Jackman (1983) investigate class self-identification, though this research is both quite dated and never gained favor among scholars due to the lack of correlation between objective measures of class and self-reported class identity. Sociologists such as Manza and Brooks (1997) utilize a methodology that divides occupations into a seven-category class scheme that would replace the old blue-collar/white-collar divide of past literature. I discuss my reasons for choosing education and income over occupation in greater depth elsewhere, but the major reasons for rejecting occupation are 1) occupational status has changed dramatically over time, while *relative* levels of education and income can be assessed the same way at any time, and 2) the Manza and Brooks approach cuts the electorate into a greater number of smaller groupings than is helpful for addressing my research question.

of inflation and adjustments for cost of living.

However, though "not implausible," income is also not sufficient, particularly with regard to individuals in the middle of the American class structure. In the middle of the income distribution, educational attainment takes on quite a bit of significance to one's economic position. A few examples are illustrative. While President Obama may consider a household in 2009 that earns $200,000 "middle class," anyone with a passing acquaintance with the income distribution in the U.S. knows that this household is, in relative terms, among the economic elite. Regardless of whether they made their way to a $200,000 salary with years of education or shrewd business dealings, they have attained an income level greater than 98% of other Americans. On the other end of the spectrum, a household with 2009 earnings under $20,000 is by the U.S. government's objective standards living in poverty. Unless this household is occupied by a graduate student, they are uneducated, impoverished, perhaps disabled, and more likely than not, working part-time if they are working at all. In these examples, it is difficult to argue that income does not capture the essence of the class structure in American life. At the upper and lower ends of the spectrum, income seems a perfectly reasonable proxy for class.

However, when we consider the vast middle in between these examples, the usefulness of income as a singular measure of class becomes murkier. Consider the following two hypothetical households in 2004. In one case, the household income is $65,000, split between two full-time workers, but neither has a college degree. In the second household, the income is $40,000, but all of this income comes from one college-educated worker. As I will argue more thoroughly in the coming pages, the household with $65,000 might be considered middle class, at around the sixtieth percentile of

income, while the $40,000 income might be considered working class, coming in below the fiftieth percentile. Although $25,000 is not a trivial difference in earnings, I would argue that the worker making $40,000 with a college degree is of roughly equal economic standing to the $65,000 household simply by virtue of the advantage accrued from having the security of an education. These two households are effectively both middle class.

Increasingly, a college education is necessary to ensure a higher and more stable source of income; likewise, enjoying higher income is a major predictor of successfully completing a four-year degree (Brewer and Stonecash 2007). Since 1970, income inequality has been growing (Stonecash 2000; Bartels 2008; McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2008), and along with it, income *instability* has risen (Hacker 2006). According to Jacob S. Hacker (2006), in 1970, an American family had a 7 percent chance of experiencing a 50 percent decline in their income in a given year. Today, the odds of such a decline have risen to 16 percent. Especially when economic times are tough, absolute levels of income are arguably just as important as is security in maintaining a given standard of living.

Even those who are fortunate enough to avoid such a dramatic drop in income as reported by Hacker are likely to find that their wages have stagnated, or that they must work far more hours to keep up with their modest standard of living (Teixeira and Rogers 2000). It is clear that a college education leads to higher income, more stable income, and greater potential for an increase in wages over a worker's lifetime. Lacking a college education predicts lower income, higher instability of income, and predicts decreasing or stagnating wages over the course of a worker's lifetime.

So, you might ask, if education is so important to achieving both high income and

greater income security, then why not just split the electorate into the educated and the uneducated, and call the most educated the upper class, and the less educated the working class? Indeed, in recent accounts of the politics of class, those without college degrees are often described as poor and/or working class, and those with college degrees are upper-middle and upper class. Such an approach is common in journalistic attempts to define the working class (see Teixeira and Rogers 2000; Judis and Teixeira 2002; Frank 2004; Douthat and Salam 2008), and was conspicuously on display in cable news coverage of the 2008 presidential contests, but it too has its drawbacks. For one, again thinking of a contemporary example, only one third of white voters in 2004 held a college degree (Bartels 2008), with forty percent of these voters enjoying household income over $60,000, thereby underestimating the economic status of high-income, low-education voters. Similarly, it would underestimate the class position of a highly educated, low-income individual (something to which everyone reading this paper can relate) who, by virtue of their relatively elite educational attainment, has greater opportunities for upward mobility and greater job security.

Furthermore, many consider education an ambiguous (spurious) indicator of other variables omitted from statistical models (for review, see Bobo and Licari 1989; Stenner 2005; Houtman 2001). Education, if taken as a singular measure of class position, could be conflated with measures of political knowledge and sophistication (Delli Carpini and Keeter; Bobo and Licari 1989) or tolerance of other cultures (Houtman 2003). While it is surely relevant to a discussion of class that education has such an impact over a wide range of politically relevant variables, it is inappropriate to merely equate level of education with class position.

My resolution to the deficiencies inherent in choosing either income or education is to utilize both. Income is an essential measure of the relative economic success of an individual or household. Meanwhile, indictors of education correct the deficiencies of income when it comes to assigning class position to the majority of Americans that exist between the rich and impoverished extremes. Next, I illustrate shortcomings in the extant literature's treatment of one class of voters – the white working class – to preview a new measurement of class in the American electorate.

A Case in Point: The Conflation of the Working Class and the Poor

To put a finer point on my argument, consider recent literature on the politics of the white working class. This literature is perhaps the best example of how current conventions for measuring class lead to erroneous conclusions about the nature of the relationship between class and political behavior in American politics. The error in existing accounts of the political behavior of the working class is that it is treated interchangeably with those at the bottom of the American income distribution. In contrast, I view the working class as distinct from the poorest class.

In 2004, whites in the lowest income third earned less than $35,000, and such a demarcation has been treated interchangeably with working class status (Stonecash 2000; Bartels 2008; McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2008). The problem with treating the two as synonymous is that it includes a number of individuals who are either too poor or too unemployed to fall into a meaningful definition of the working class. In fact, the bottom income third contains some working class, the working poor, elderly that subsist on fixed incomes, students, the disabled, part-time workers, recipients of welfare aid, and some

citizens that are utterly impoverished. In 2000, the official poverty line was $17,600 (Gilbert 2003). One sociology textbook that aligns income levels with class status fix the "working poor" at a median income of roughly 125% of the poverty line, which was $22,000 in the year 2000 (Gilbert 2003). Viewed in this way, nearly 25% of households in 2000 were at or beneath 125% of the poverty line, representing a majority of those individuals currently classified as working class in the extant literature (Gilbert 2003).

However, if the term "working class" is to mean anything, it must at least require that those included in the definition be *working*, or in the case of retirees, that they once consistently worked.[4] Most in the lowest income quintile (roughly those at or below the poverty line) simply do not work.[5] A definition of "working class" also must distinguish between those in the direst economic straits and those who are merely located in the lower rung of the vast American middle class. At the lowest end of the class spectrum are those who subsist on government transfers and have limited labor force participation. At the highest end of the class spectrum are those who enjoy high income, and/or benefit from generationally accumulated wealth and assets. In between, the vast majority of Americans depend on income from steady employment. At the bottom of the American working population lies the American working class (Gilbert 2003).

Of course, this whole argument might seem like a largely pointless exercise or a purely methodological debate if it were of no consequence to our understanding of the politics of class in the U.S. However, there is a great deal of debate about the role of the white working class in American elections and which issues animate this constituency

[4] As of now, I do not separate out retirees. I am open to suggestion on how to treat them.
[5] In 2006, the median number of income earners per household in the lowest income quintile was zero. Source: U.S. Census 2006 Current Population Survey, Economic Survey.

most. Some see a working class that is overwhelmingly concerned with the culture wars and trending Republican, while others see a constituency moving towards the Democrats on economic grounds. Needless to say, both arguments cannot be right.

The most recent and widely known effort to recast the politics of class as a battle over culture is Thomas Frank's *What's the Matter with Kansas?* (2004). Frank argued that the Republican Party has duped the lower-middle class into joining its coalition based on its image as the party of traditional moral values, while it has simultaneously advanced a vision of free market capitalism that has had deleterious effects on their economic fortunes. Republican advantages in recent national elections are in large part credited to the ability of the GOP to direct working class whites' frustration at the rapidly changing American culture rather than at the continually rising level of income inequality. For their part, according to Frank, the Democratic Party has ceded the economic agenda to the
Republican Party by moving to the right on fiscal matters (see also Phillips 1990; Reed 2005), thus failing to represent the economic interests of the downtrodden, giving downscale whites little reason to vote for Democrats.

Furthermore, Frank contends that working class religious voters have grown distracted by such issues as abortion and gay marriage, all to the economic benefit of the rich and privileged, and the political benefit of the GOP. Many commentators in the popular press rushed to validate Frank's conclusions when it was discovered in 2004 exit polls that "moral values" were the most important issue to voters choosing between the Republican incumbent, President George W. Bush and the Democratic challenger, Senator John F. Kerry.

It took little time for political scientists to respond critically to Frank's widely discussed (and in popular discourse, widely accepted) and controversial thesis. The most direct challenge to the Frank's analysis of working class political behavior came from Larry Bartels (2006, 2008). Joining several other scholars (e.g., McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2008; Nadeau et al. 2004; Stonecash 2000), Bartels dismissed the notion that the working class has defected to the Republican coalition, pointing to an increased income gap in presidential voting and party identification. Since the 1970s, the white electorate has seen a widening split between the increasingly Democratic voters in the lowest income third and the increasingly Republican voters in the highest income third (Stonecash 2000; Bartels 2006, 2008; McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2008). These studies note that the income gap in political behavior corresponds with widening levels of income inequality over the same timeframe, thereby offering a parsimonious explanation based in the tradition of economic voting (see Downs 1957; Fiorina 1981; Key 1966): as economic inequality has risen, low-income and high-income voters have increasingly based their political behavior on their economic interests.

The hypothesis that economic inequality is driving the political attachments of the white lower-middle class marks quite a departure from the conventional wisdom of the past half- century that pointed to the displacement of class as a cleavage in electoral politics due to the unique role played by race (e.g., Abramson 1974; Beck and Souraf 1992; Black and Black 1987; Carmines and Stimson 1989; Cowden 2001; Edsall and Edsall 1992; Huckfeldt and Kohfeld 1989; Key 1949; Lawrence 1997).[6] According to this account, the class basis of the New Deal coalition was upset by the integration of

[6] An emblematic title in this tradition is Huckfeldt and Kohfeld's *Race and the Decline of Class in American Politics* (1989).

African- Americans into the Democratic coalition following the acquisition of full suffrage rights in the 1960s. As a result of racial animus, fear of crime and urban unrest (Hurwitz and Peffley 1997; Rieder 1985), and resentment against the perception that African-Americans were undeserving recipients of welfare benefits (e.g., Gilens 1999; Katz 1989), low-status whites formerly entrenched in the New Deal coalition broke with the Democratic Party over its embrace of African-American interests. Though often referred to as "Reagan Democrats," a commonly acknowledged starting point for the breakdown of white lower-middle class Democratic support was the Kevin Phillips/Richard Nixon "Silent Majority" strategies of 1968 and 1972, in which Nixon explicitly made appeals to the white working class on the basis of their cultural and racial conservatism in order to cut into their traditional support for the Democratic Party (see Phillips 1969).

While both theoretical and methodological disagreements animate the confusing picture of white working class political behavior, the first step in resolving discrepancies in this literature is to get the measurement of class right. A good start down that path is to recognize the reality that the working class is a distinct group from the poor, and thus should be treated as such in our measurement strategy. As Douthat and Salam (2008, 6) note:

> The poorest Americans *haven't* turned right over recent decades… Instead, they've turned left, voting for Democrats more reliably than even in the heyday of the Great Society. But this turn hasn't delivered liberals a majority, because most working-class voters aren't poor. They're relatively prosperous… (italics in original).

Compared to the poorest Americans, the working class *is* relatively prosperous. They have the means required to survive without government assistance and they have at least

one breadwinner per household, but they are by no means wealthy. So, where do we redraw the line between the poor and the working class? What does this mean for our definition of the middle class and the wealthy? The next section presents a new classification of economic status, followed by descriptive data bearing on the voting behavior and political attachments of those in each class grouping.

A Reexamination of Class in American Politics

My discussion thus far indicates that existing literature tends to focus on three classes of voters: wealthy, middle class, and the interchangeably used poor or working class. Here, I introduce a scheme that identifies all *four* of these classes as distinct portions of the electorate. My approach, using both income and education, satisfies the two goals that I laid out at beginning of this discussion: measures of class must be 1) theoretically sound, and 2) readily available for replication over time. While any attempt to segment the electorate into classes may be met with the criticism that it is arbitrary, my contribution represents an improvement upon the overly arbitrary division of classes into income thirds.

Table 1 lays out the exact manner in which I slice voters by economic status using both income and education. The biggest challenge here is to delineate class markers that both accurately reflect the class dynamics of a given cross-section of data, yet also allows for consistent measurement over time.

For the poor, I aimed for the lowest 25 percent of the electorate, which roughly approximates those beneath or just slightly above the official government poverty line in most years since the government started tracking poverty (Cite). The working class is

conceptualized as the next quartile of income, but only those in 25th-50th percentile that also fall in the lowest two thirds to three quarters of the education distribution. If a household income falls into the 25th-50th percentile of income, but also falls in the top one third or one quarter in terms of education, this household is considered middle class rather than working class. The middle class contains the 51st percentile of income to the 90th percentile, plus anyone with a lower income that falls into the highest 67-75 percent of the education distribution. Finally, the wealthy are understood as the top 10 percent of income earners.

<Table 1 about here>

Due to data limitations, I could not actually hit these ideal parameters with specificity. In some years, American National Election Studies (ANES) divided income in such a way that I had to make choices about whether to draw the line around a given class at slightly above or below the 25th, 50th, and 90th percentiles. However, on average across all fifteen years of data, the poor falls precisely in the lowest income quartile, the working class ends up within the 25th-52nd percentiles (and the lowest 72 percent of educated voters), the middle class ranges from the 52nd to the 89th percentile of income (plus those with incomes above the 25th percentile and educations above the 72nd percentile), and the wealthy comprises the top 11% of household income.[7]

Readers familiar with recent literature on class and American politics would immediately notice at least two ways in which my framework departs from conventional class schemes. First, those who I call "poor" are virtually identical to voters who other scholars call "working class" (Stonecash 2000; Bartels 2008; McCarty, Poole, and

[7] See appendix for the distribution of these divisions as each group's share of the electorate.

Rosenthal 2008). As a result of this refinement, the perspective that the white working class has been one of the most reliably Democratic constituencies over the past three decades must be reconsidered. Second, and not emphasized in my discussion thus far, the economic elite in the U.S. is a far smaller club than previous treatments of the voting behavior of the upper class indicate. Instead of taking a household with a 2004 income $65,000 and pretending that it has anything economically in common with a household with greater than a $120,000 income, I argue that the cutoff for those we call "wealthy" must be extended higher up the income distribution than the 67th percentile, as is customary among political scientists. My approach comes much closer to the reality of the distribution of the population into classes in the U.S., namely, that it looks far more like a slightly top-heavy hourglass, with most voters falling in the upper-middle class, than is acknowledged in the extant literature.

Political Implications

At this point, you might be asking yourself, why bother with all of this fuss? Why should we care if one researcher uses one set of terminology and methodology and another uses something else? The answer to those questions is that it is politically and analytically relevant whom we call rich, poor, working class, and middle class. Figure 1, showing the two-party share of the presidential vote by class from 1948 to 2004, sheds light on why this matters.[8]

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[8] These figures are the two-party share of the presidential vote, and thus exclude third party candidates. Please see the appendix for the numbers that were used to create the graphs.

Figure 1 shows six panels, with the Democratic share of the two-party vote graphed for all voters, all white voters, and each of the four classes of voters as measured in the previous section. Overall, the patterns echo previous research that finds polarization between the wealthiest and the poorest; poor whites are the most reliable white demographic for Democratic presidential candidates, while rich whites are firmly entrenched in the Republican electoral coalition. Poor whites have not given more votes to Republicans than Democrats since 1988, while wealthy whites have provided a majority of their support to Republicans in every year except 1964.

Comparing Figures 1d and 1e, we see a more volatile, but more Democratic-leaning working class than middle class. Both groups are more likely to prefer Republican presidential candidates to Democrats, but the upper-middle class is more supportive of the G.O.P. than the lower-middle. Whereas working class whites episodically lend a majority of their support to Democratic candidates, the white middle class has preferred Republican candidates to Democrats in every year since 1964 (they were split 50/50 in 1992, thanks in part to Ross Perot's candidacy). In the last fifteen elections, the working class was more Republican than the middle class three times (1956, 1960, 1968) and had identical support to the middle class twice (1972, 2000). In four out of five of these years, Republicans won. In the other ten elections, the working class was more Democratic than the middle class, but the Democratic candidate was only successful in half of those elections. Of those ten elections, the half that Democrats won corresponds identically to years in which they won more working class whites than the G.O.P. (1948, 1964, 1976, 1992, 1996). In fact, JFK was the only Democrat to win the White House without winning more lower-middle class votes than his Republican opponent over this

span of time.

<Figure 1 about here>

While I would caution against the conclusion that, based on these results alone, the white working class is therefore a crucial swing vote that Democrats must win in order to gain power, these graphs do suggest that the working class swings between looking more like poor voters and more like middle class voters, and these fluctuations appear to bear some correlation to the outcomes of these elections. We might speculate that when the economic interests of the working class resemble those of the poor more than those of the upper-middle class, they swing in a Democratic direction. However, before we go any further with such conjecture, I direct your attention to Figure 2. As every political scientist learns in his or her first semester of graduate school, "What about the South?" is always a good question. Figure 2 replicates Figure 1, but shows two lines, one for the South, and one for the rest of the country.[9]

<Figure 2 about here>

Unsurprisingly, Southern whites across all classes contributed fewer votes to Democratic presidential candidates than non-Southern whites. Again, there are evident differences between the lower-middle and upper-middle classes in these figures: whereas the Southern middle class has been more Republican than Democratic in their voting every year since 1960 (with the exception of 1976) than the non-Southern middle class, the Southern working class only grew demonstrably more Republican in their voting than the non-Southern working class in the elections of George W. Bush. Indeed, other than the elections of 2000 and 2004, there is not a substantial difference in presidential voting

[9] The South is coded as those states formerly part of the Confederacy.

behavior between working class whites in the South and those in other states since 1952. In some elections, particularly when a Southerner is on the ballot, the Southern working class is actually more supportive of Democratic candidates than their non-Southern peers. In contrast, the Southern middle class is fairly consistently more Republican in their presidential voting than the non-Southern middle class.[10]

By its nature, the vote for president is a more volatile indicator of political support than party identification. Figure 3 shows trends in partisan identification from 1952 to 2004 across all classes of white voters. Figure 4 splits the sample by region, with one line showing Democratic party affiliation for Southern whites, and one line for non-Southern whites. Turning first to Figure 3, similar patterns emerge that we see in the graphs of the presidential vote. Poor whites are the most Democratic, whereas rich whites are the most Republican. The working and middle classes, however, have only small substantive differences from each other in their party identification. Both groups grew decidedly more Republican over the last half of the twentieth century and into the 2000s, with the middle class showing somewhat more Republican identification.

<Figure 3 about here>

Looking now at Figure 4, we see a regional split within each of the three wealthier classes, but a fairly homogeneous poor class. Poor whites inside and outside of the South tend to identify with the parties in roughly the same measure, with a pro-Democratic tilt. In the working class, Southern Republicans did not outnumber Southern Democrats for the most part until the elections of George W. Bush, and the middle class looks more or

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[10] Some of these samples are quite small, so use caution in drawing conclusions from them. For instance, there were only 12 rich Southern white voters in the 1964 sample, 9 of whom voted for Johnson over Goldwater.

less similar in that regard. On the other hand, the Clinton years seems to have been a bigger boon to Southern working class Democratic identification than for the Southern middle class. Taken together, the graphs for the presidential vote and for partisan identification indicate the need for a nuanced theory of the relationship between class and political behavior in the U.S. In the final section of this paper, I begin to lay the groundwork for such a theory.

<Figure 4 about here>

Trying to Make Sense of Class in American Political Behavior

The preceding evidence shows that it is important to distinguish between the poor, the working class, and the middle class. If we are to understand the relationship between economic position and political behavior in the U.S., we need to start with a solid foundation, taking greater care to be precise about which voters we group together by socio-economic status and what terms we use to describe them. The poor are the most Democratic in their voting and party identification, and the rich are the most Republican. This is not news (Stonecash 2000; Bartels 2008; McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2008; Gelman 2008). That there are meaningful differences between the poor and the working class on one hand, and between the working and middle classes on the other, is news. The working class tends to be more Democratic than the middle class, but not always, and not demonstrably so in terms of party identification. When the working class trends towards a coalition with the poor, Democrats tend to be more successful. When the working class leans more towards the middle class, Republicans tend to be more successful. To conclude this discussion, I suggest a few explanations for the patterns revealed above and preview future research into this topic.

The most plausible explanation for the episodic emergence of a distinctly more Democratic working class is that certain contextual factors from election to election nudge these voters to support either party. Particularly given the lack of major differences between the working and middle classes with regard to party identification, other factors such as candidate (and campaign) quality, the state of the economy, and the issues on which a given campaign is waged are likely to shape the context in which these voters behave. Existing literature that points to an increasing class polarization between high- and low-income Americans rests a great deal on the assumption that economic interests lead the poor to support Democrats and lead the rich to support Republicans. Indeed, particularly given the consistent salience of the economy to voters' decision-making, it would be difficult to objectively argue that these poor and rich voters are not behaving in a highly rational manner: poor voters largely depend upon the redistribution of resources in order to survive, while rich voters understandably prefer lower taxes. However, it is less objectively clear that voters in between these two ends of the class spectrum should have as direct a connection between their economic standing and their voting behavior.

In the absence of a clear link between their economic well-being and the fiscal policies offered by either of the major parties, it is no wonder that the lower- and upper-middle classes are more split between the two parties than both their wealthier and poorer peers, though both classes in the middle have tended to favor the G.O.P. in recent decades. This may be the result of a stronger rhetorical message on the part of the Republican Party, whereby they have successfully shifted the terms of the debate away from the rhetoric of the Great Society and infused their sales pitch with the repetition of

themes of jobs and growth, jobs and growth, jobs and growth (Smith 2007). Republicans have owned stewardship over the economy in recent decades (Petrocik 1996), and so all else equal, we might expect the vast middle to lean towards the G.O.P.

Another aspect of the story is the variable prominence of non-economic issues in American political campaigns in recent decades. While recent work has argued that the culture wars are largely waged among the rich rather than the poor (Bartels 2008; Gelman 2008), such conclusions are drawn on the basis of a methodology and approach to the research question that ignores careful attention to voters in the middle. It should come as no surprise that Americans living in poverty vote for candidates who are willing to advocate for policies that help put food on their tables; they do not have the post-materialist luxury of engaging in a culture war.

Those in the working and middle classes, however, do not directly depend on the government for their daily sustenance, and thus are more likely to consider a wider range of issues that tap into a diverse array of social identities when they are drawn to support one candidate over another. Cultural dimensions of class have come to dominate political discourse since Richard Nixon discovered the Silent Majority and Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush portrayed themselves as more culturally in tune with the values of the working class. This, too, shapes how voters view the alignment of their own values and interests with those of the parties' standard-bearers. Providing Republicans with a culturally populist frame to counter the economic populism of the Democratic Party, both sides are fully equipped to brandish their opponents as disingenuous elitists who view the average working person with condescending disdain.

All of this discussion points to the need for a new framework for understanding how class influences the politics of the vast majority of American voters. Such a framework must be sensitive to both variation in the electoral context from one election to another, the demographic diversity of the voters in question, and the rhetoric used in the parties' respective sales pitches. A key variable in assessing the electoral context is the salience of issues and the contemporaneous performance of the parties on those issues.

For instance, in 1992, the economy was the dominant issue and the Republican incumbent had presided over a recession. In contrast, the 1988 election was fought on a wider terrain, with cultural considerations, race, and patriotism infused into the electoral context (Leege et al. 2002). When a poor economy 1992 highlighted their precarious economic position, the white working class responded by rewarding the Democratic candidate with far more support than the Republican candidate. In 1988, however, the economic stakes were not so high and the white working class could break slightly Republican due to questions about the patriotism and perceived lack of (racialized) crime-fighting zeal of the Democratic candidate. The same attacks that worked on Dukakis fell flat when applied to Clinton because Clinton both ran in a context in which he could train voters' attention on the poor economy, and was a more talented salesman of Democratic ideas than Dukakis.

Moving beyond the realm of anecdotes, my goal in subsequent analyses of this topic is to systematically assess why some working and middle class whites are drawn to Republican candidates and why others are attracted to Democrats. Paying careful attention to the context of a given election, I see promise in situating my theoretical

approach in the longstanding literature on cross-pressured voters.[11] Lazarsfeld and Franzen (1944, 264) refer to cross-pressured voters as, "… people who were subject to opposing political pressures by virtue of their membership in certain social groups". Berelson et al. (1954, 19) characterize people with cross-pressured opinions on issues, candidates, or parties as holding "views simultaneously supporting different sides" and as "a combination of characteristics, which, in a given context, would tend to lead the individual to vote on both sides of a contest" (Berelson et al. 1954, 283). The classic example given in the early literature of a cross-pressured voter is the wealthy Catholic, who must decide between support for the traditionally Catholic Democrats or the traditionally wealthy Republicans. A wide range of issues – economic, racial, cultural, and foreign policy – have separated the two parties over the past several decades, providing ample opportunity for campaigns to contest votes on those issues most likely to benefit their side.

I anticipate that cross-pressures are more prevalent in between the wealthy and the poor for two reasons. First, as argued above, the rich and poor have obvious reasons to support either party on the basis of economic issues. Since the economy is so often dominant on voters' minds and the parties have staked out such clearly divergent economic agendas for these voters, it is no wonder that they are politically polarized. This is not so cut and dry for those in the middle, and so there is little evidence of class polarization of any kind. Second, and related, certain groups and individual attributes are more prone to cross-pressures than others. Kaufmann et al. (2008), for instance, find that Catholics, union members, and non-college educated voters are more likely to swing

[11] A nice recent review of the cross-pressures literature appears in *Unconventional Wisdom* by Kaufmann, Petrocik, and Shaw (2008).

from one election to another. By definition, the working class contains less educated voters. Education bears a strong relationship to variables such as political sophistication and political knowledge, two factors that condition the ability of an individual to receive and process information that leads to uniformly strong partisan attachments and behavior (Zaller 1992; Layman and Carsey 2002; Carsey and Layman 2006). Thus, working class voters possess neither the obvious economic incentive to break strongly and consistently in support of one party over the other, nor do they possess the same cognitive tools to act in a strictly partisan manner as their more educated peers. It follows that the white working class should be the most cross-pressured of all classes, followed by the upper-middle class.

In the next stages of this research, I investigate several demographic and political factors that should provide insight into the politics of class. What effect do religious practices and beliefs have on pushing some working and middle class voters to one party, and some to the other? Are the dynamics of the gender gap consistent across class groupings? Which of these voters privilege egalitarianism over individual freedom, and do other such values shape their political behavior? In sum, I intend to slice up the various class groupings by their other attributes and look for patterns that compel some voters to lean Republican, and others to lean Democratic, paying close attention to those combinations of characteristics that resemble cross-pressured voters.

Conclusion

Finally, I began this discussion questioning the distinctiveness and relevance of the white working class in American politics. I found evidence that the white working

class is a distinct group of voters, and that Democratic candidates for president tend to lose when they are unable to galvanize support among these voters. While this could certainly be interpreted as evidence that the white working class is an important swing vote, two notes of caution are advised. First, as evident in Appendix Table 1, the middle class share of the vote dwarfs the working class share of the vote. A much more efficient electoral strategy would be to target voters in the upper-middle class than the lower-middle class, as it just makes sense to hunt where the ducks are. As 2012 approaches, Barack Obama and his eventual Republican challenger should consider abandoning bowling practice and perhaps brush up on their golf game instead.

Second, although it appears that a correlation exists between Democratic success and increased white working class support, it is not clear that such a pattern continued in 2008, in which the Democratic nominee cruised to a resounding victory. According to 2008 exit polls, John McCain narrowly bested Obama among whites earning under $50,000 (51-47%), and convincingly trounced Obama among whites without a college degree (60-40%). If we assume that whites living in poverty continued their longstanding support of the Democratic ticket, theses numbers suggest that McCain may have resoundingly won the white working class in 2008, which could possibly signal the dawning of a new Democratic electoral constituency of non-whites, poor whites, and some critical mass of support among the upper-middle class. It is therefore possible that whatever heyday the white working class may have had as a critical segment of the Democratic coalition may have come and gone with the emergence of the Obama coalition. Only time and access to better data will tell. Having said that, the white working class has comprised anywhere from 12 to 28 percent of the electorate in

elections since 1948, and even if their share of the electorate continues to shrink slowly as it has since 1996, it is likely to remain a large enough number of votes that it cannot be ignored. An open question remains as to whether the white working class will continue to fluctuate between each party's presidential candidates, or whether the swing to the Republicans during the Bush years continues into 2008 and the future.

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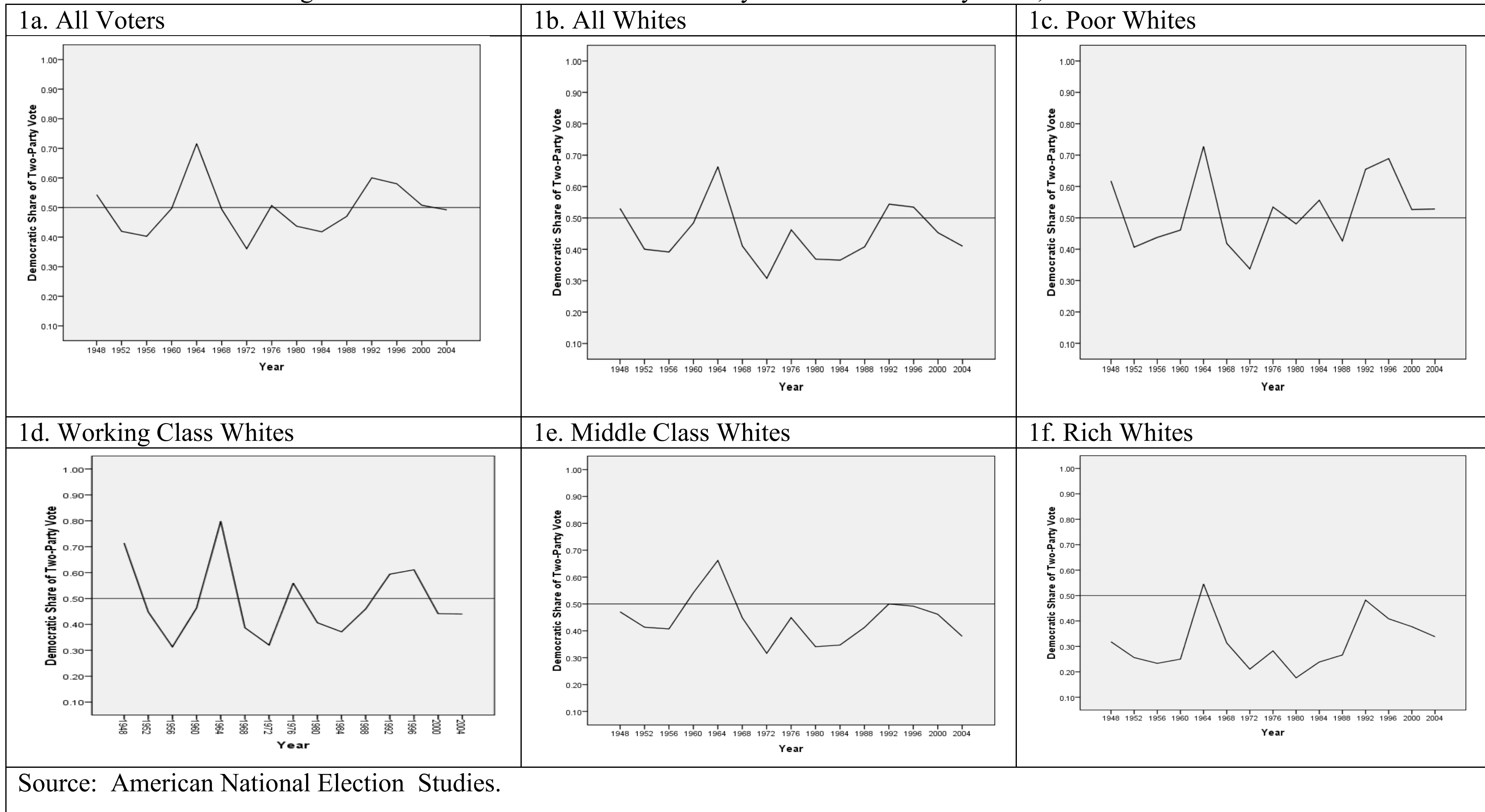
Table 1. Class Groupings in the United States, 1948-2004.

Year	Poor	Working Class		Middle Class	Wealthy
	Income	Income	Education	Income	Income
1948	Lowest 27% (< $2K)	27-55% ($2K-2,999)	Lowest 85% (≤ H.S. degree)	55-87% ($3K-4,999)	Top 13% (≥ $5K)
1952	Lowest 20% (< $2K)	20-58% ($2K-3,999)	Lowest 76% (≤ H.S. degree)	58-91% ($4K-7,499)	Top 9% (≥ $7,500)
1956	Lowest 25% (< $3K)	25-54% ($3K-4,999)	Lowest 71% (≤ H.S. degree)	54-92% ($5K-9,999)	Top 8% (≥ $10K)
1960	Lowest 23% (< $3K)	23-44% ($3K-4,999)	Lowest 70% (≤ H.S. plus training)	44-86% ($5K-9,999)	Top 14% (≥ $10K)
1964	Lowest 27% (< $3K)	27-49% ($3K-4,999)	Lowest 67% (≤ H.S. plus training)	49-87% ($5K-9,999)	Top 13% (≥ $10K)
1968	Lowest 26% (< $4K)	26-48% ($4K-6,999)	Lowest 71% (≤ H.S. plus training)	48-89% ($7K-14,999)	Top 11% (≥ $15K)
1972	Lowest 25% (< $5K)	25-49% ($5K-8,999)	Lowest 69% (≤ H.S. plus training)	49-90% ($9K-19,999)	Top 10% (≥ $20K)
1976	Lowest 24% (< $6K)	23-50% ($6K-11,999)	Lowest 71% (< 2 years of college)	50-88% ($12K-24,999)	Top 12% (≥ $25K)
1980	Lowest 26% (< $10K)	26-54% ($10K-19,999)	Lowest 67% (< 2 years college)	54-86% ($20K-34,999)	Top 14% (≥ $35K)
1984	Lowest 23% (< $10K)	23-52% ($10K-21,999)	Lowest 78% (< junior college degree)	52-90% ($22K-49,999)	Top 10% (≥ $50K)
1988	Lowest 24% (< $12K)	24-52% ($12K-24,999)	Lowest 74% (< junior college degree)	52-90% ($25K-59,999)	Top 10% (≥ $60K)
1992	Lowest 25% (< $13K)	25-49% ($13K-24,999)	Lowest 73% (< junior college degree)	49-88% ($25K-59,999)	Top 12% (≥ $60K)
1996	Lowest 26% (< $17K)	26-53% ($17-34,999)	Lowest 72% (< B.A. level degree)	53-92% ($35K-89,999)	Top 8% (≥ $90K)
2000	Lowest 27% (< $25K)	27-56% ($25K-49,999)	Lowest 70% (< B.A. level degree)	56-90% ($50K-104,999)	Top 10% (≥ $105K)
2004	Lowest 27% (< $25K)	27-52% ($25K-49,999)	Lowest 70% (< B.A. level degree)	52-89% ($50K-119,999)	Top 11% (≥ $120K)
Averages:	Lowest 25%	25-52%	Lowest 72%	52-89%	Top 11%

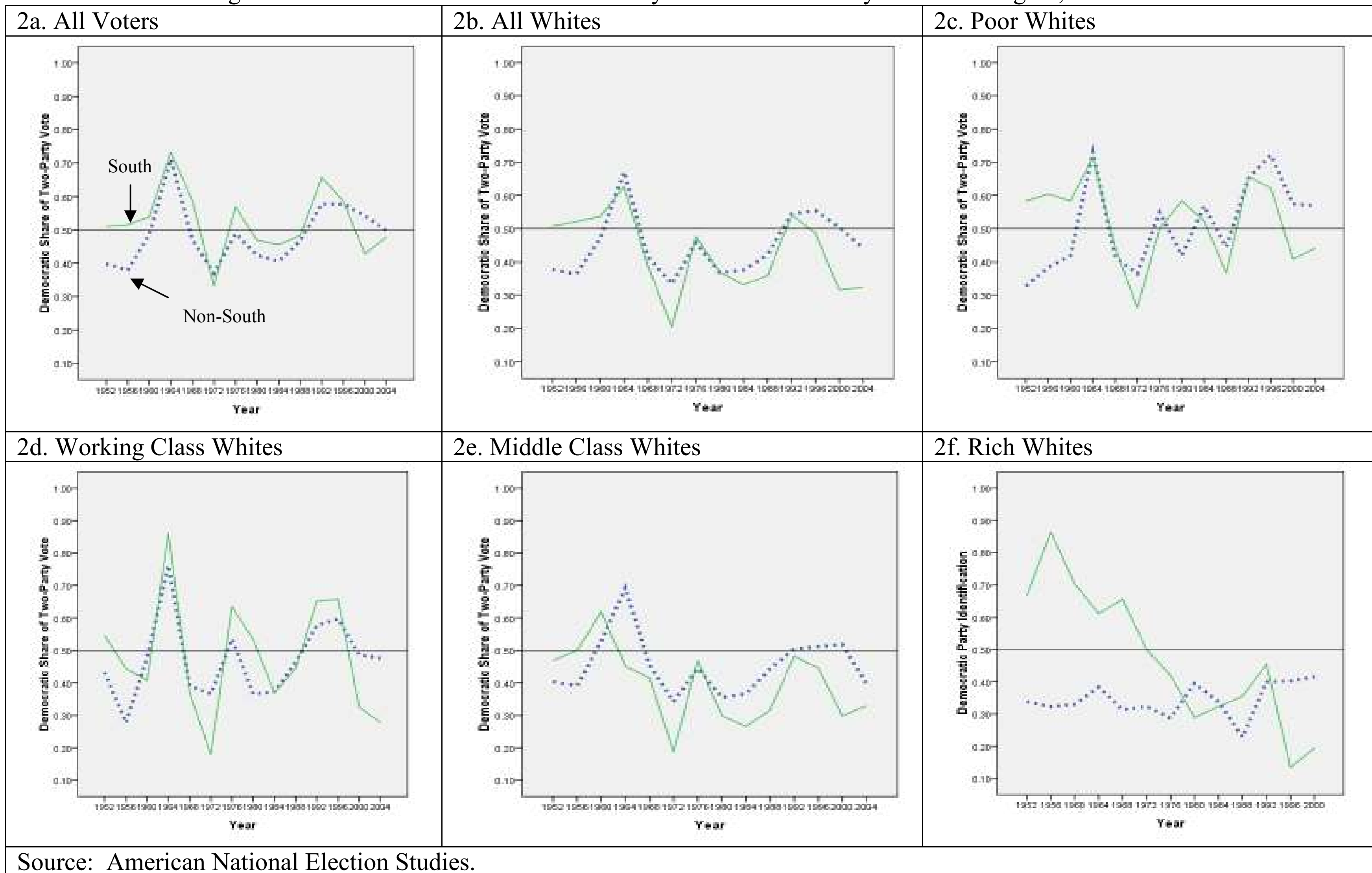
Notes: Data drawn from American National Election Studies. Middle class includes those with working class incomes, but educations above the working class threshold.

Figure 1. Democratic Share of the Two-Party Presidential Vote by Class, 1948-2004.



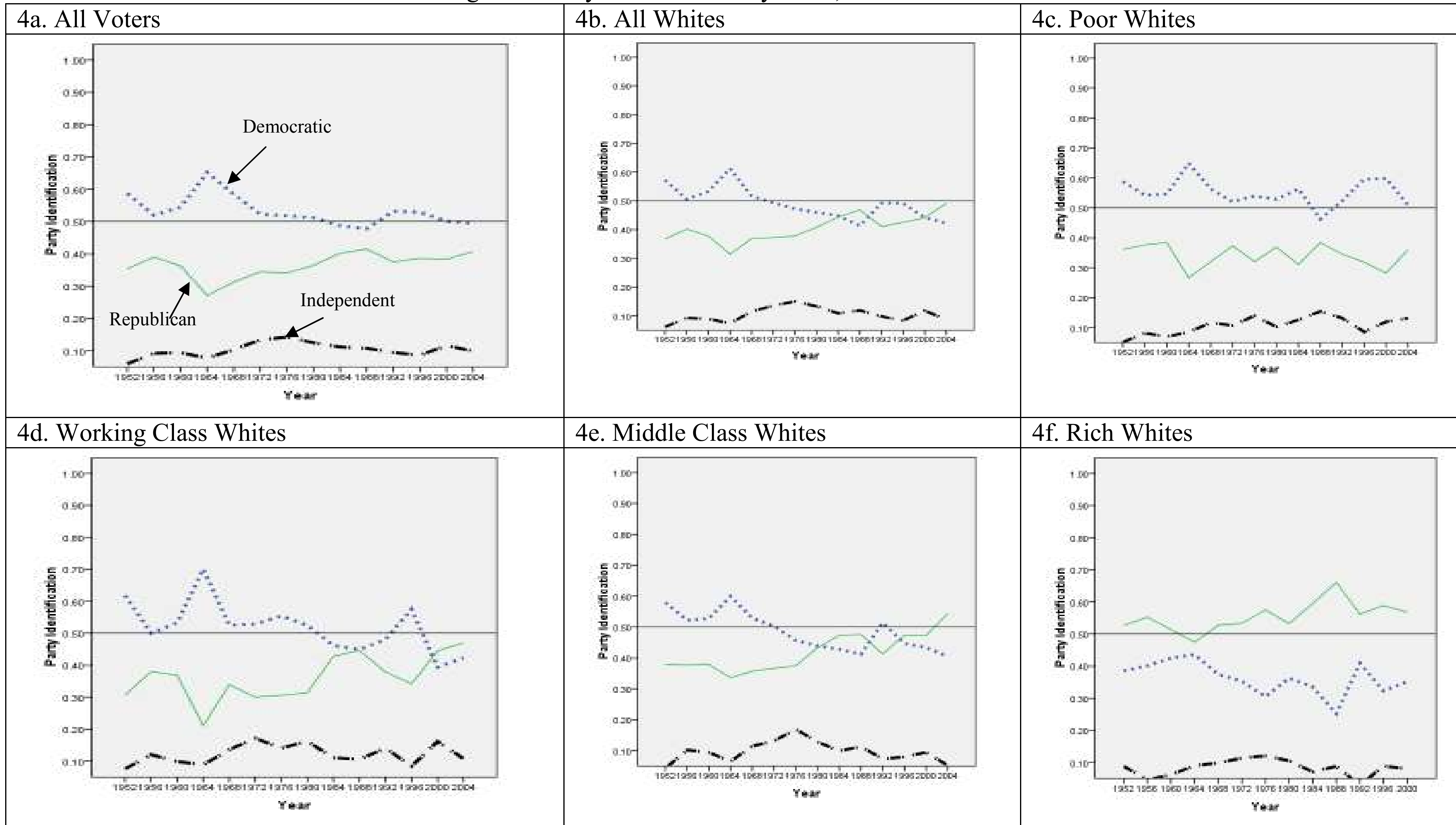
Source: American National Election Studies.

Figure 2. Democratic Share of the Two-Party Presidential Vote by Class and Region, 1952-2004.



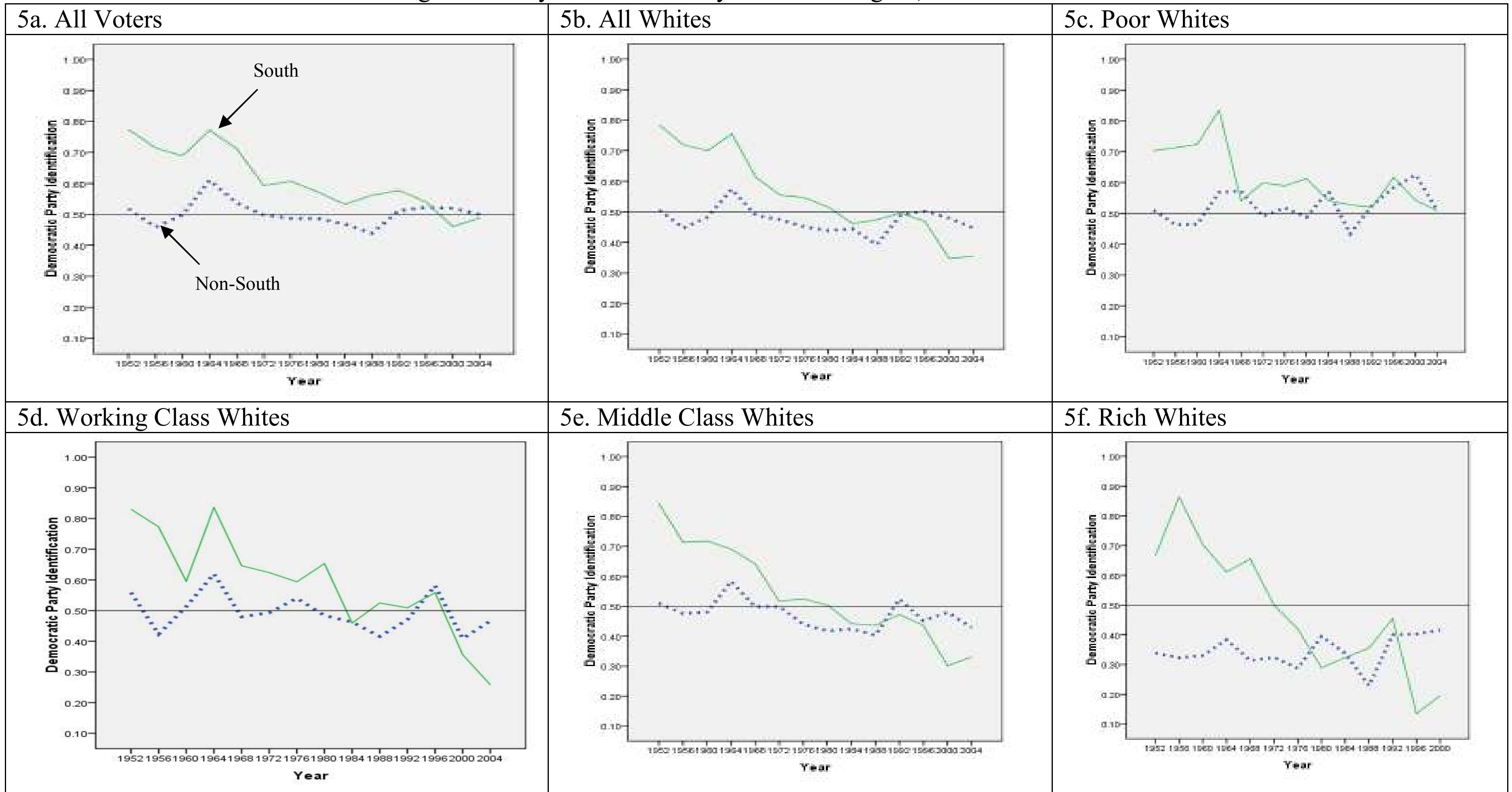
Source: American National Election Studies.

Figure 3. Party Identification by Class, 1952-2004.



Source: American National Election Studies.

Figure 4. Party Identification by Class and Region, 1952-2004.



Source: American National Election Studies.

Appendix

Table A1. Proportion of the Electorate of Classes in the United States, 1948-2004.

	All Voters (N)	All Whites	Poor Whites	Working Class Whites	Middle Class Whites	Wealthy Whites
1948	390	0.93	0.17	0.22	0.37	0.17
1952	1235	0.91	0.13	0.28	0.40	0.10
1956	1264	0.96	0.17	0.21	0.49	0.09
1960	898	0.93	0.16	0.19	0.51	0.07
1964	1274	0.84	0.16	0.18	0.45	0.05
1968	964	0.84	0.13	0.14	0.45	0.12
1972	1597	0.90	0.15	0.15	0.48	0.12
1976	1322	0.90	0.13	0.18	0.46	0.13
1980	877	0.87	0.15	0.18	0.40	0.14
1984	1376	0.89	0.12	0.19	0.47	0.11
1988	1193	0.85	0.11	0.17	0.45	0.12
1992	733	0.83	0.15	0.16	0.41	0.11
1996	1034	0.87	0.13	0.19	0.50	0.09
2000	1120	0.81	0.13	0.14	0.45	0.09
2004	811	0.76	0.13	0.12	0.43	0.08

Notes: Data drawn from American National Election Studies, 1948-2004.

Table A2. Democratic Share of Two-Party Presidential Vote, 1948-2004.

	All Voters	All Whites	Poor Whites	WC Whites	MC Whites	Wealthy Whites
1948	54	53	62	71	47	32
1952	42	40	41	45	41	26
1956	40	39	44	31	41	23
1960	50	48	46	46	54	25
1964	72	66	73	80	66	55
1968	49	41	42	39	45	31
1972	36	31	34	32	32	21
1976	51	46	53	56	45	28
1980	44	37	48	41	34	18
1984	42	37	56	37	35	24
1988	47	41	43	46	41	27
1992	60	54	65	59	50	48
1996	58	53	69	61	49	41
2000	51	45	53	44	46	38
2004	49	41	53	44	38	34

Notes: Data drawn from American National Election Studies, 1948-2004. These numbers exclude votes for independent candidates.

Table A3. Democratic Share of Partisan Identification, 1948-2004.

	All Respondents	All Whites	Poor Whites	Working Class Whites	Middle Class Whites	Wealthy Whites
1948						
1952	59	57	59	62	59	39
1956	52	51	54	50	51	37
1960	54	53	55	53	56	28
1964	65	61	65	70	61	44
1968	58	52	56	53	53	37
1972	52	49	52	53	50	35
1976	52	47	54	55	45	30
1980	49	45	56	46	43	34
1984	48	41	46	45	41	25
1988	53	49	52	48	51	41
1992	53	49	60	57	45	32
1996	50	44	60	39	43	35
2000	50	42	51	42	40	39
2004	53	49	55	52	49	35

Notes: Data drawn from American National Election Studies, 1948-2004.