

# **What's the Matter with *What's the Matter with Kansas?***

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- Has the white working class abandoned the Democratic Party? No. 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. Low-income whites have become less Democratic in their partisan identifications, but at a slower rate than more affluent whites – and that trend is entirely confined to the South, where Democratic identification was artificially inflated by the one-party system of the Jim Crow era.
- Has the white working class become more conservative? No. The average views of low-income whites have remained virtually unchanged over the past 30 years. (A pro-choice shift on abortion in the 1970s and '80s has been partially reversed since the early 1990s.) Their positions relative to more affluent white voters – generally less liberal on social issues and less conservative on economic issues – have also remained virtually unchanged.
- Do working class “moral values” trump economics? No. Social issues (including abortion) are less strongly related to party identification and presidential votes than economic issues are, and that is even more true for whites in the bottom third of the income distribution than for more affluent whites. Moreover, while social issue preferences have become more strongly related to presidential votes among middle- and high-income whites, there is no evidence of a corresponding trend among low-income whites.
- Are religious voters distracted from economic issues? No. The partisan attachments and presidential votes of frequent church-goers and people who say religion provides “a great deal” of guidance in their lives are much more strongly related to their views about economic issues than to their views about social issues. For church-goers as for non-church-goers, partisanship and voting behavior are primarily shaped by economic issues, not cultural issues.

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## **What's the Matter with *What's the Matter with Kansas?*<sup>1</sup>**

Thomas Frank's *What's the Matter with Kansas?* provides a colorful and passionate account of the emergence of a new "dominant political coalition" uniting "business and blue-collar" (2004, 8) in an increasingly conservative Republican Party. In Frank's telling, "conservatives won the heart of America" by convincing Kansans and other people of modest means to vote against their own economic interests in a vain effort to defend traditional cultural values against radical bicoastal elites. The result is "a populist uprising that only benefits the people it is supposed to be targeting" – the "assortment of millionaires and lawyers and Harvard grads" pushing the Republican economic agenda of tax cuts, deregulation, free trade, and corporate welfare (109, 196). As for the working-class cultural conservatives who provide the crucial political support for these policies,

All they have to show for their Republican loyalty are lower wages, more dangerous jobs, dirtier air, a new overlord class that comports itself like King Farouk – and, of course, a crap culture whose moral free fall continues, without significant interference from the grandstanding Chrusters whom they send triumphantly back to Washington every couple of years. (136)

The supposedly decisive role of "values voters" in the 2004 election seemed to reinforce both the empirical force and the political significance of Frank's analysis. While academics derided the exit poll finding that "moral values" were the most important issue in the campaign,

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journalists and pundits seized on the notion that Frank's working-class cultural conservatives swung the election to the Republicans. Consider the following examples from the *New York Times* in the four days following the election. The *Times*' in-depth exit poll analysis (Seelye 2004) was headlined "Moral Values Cited as a Defining Issue of the Election." Maureen Dowd (2004) wrote that Bush "got re-elected by dividing the country along fault lines of fear, intolerance, ignorance, and religious rule." Garry Wills (2004) hailed Karl Rove's "brilliance" in calculating that "the religious conservatives, if they could be turned out, would be the deciding factor." Steven Waldman (2004) claimed that "Opposition to gay marriage probably paid [sic] a significant role in Mr. Bush's victory, especially in drawing voters to the polls in Ohio, where a referendum against gay marriage passed easily."

In a piece written even before the outcome of the election was clear, *Times* columnist Nicholas Kristof (2004a) wrote that Kerry supporters "should be feeling wretched about the millions of farmers, factory workers, and waitresses who ended up voting – utterly against their own interests – for Republican candidates." Kristof praised *What's the Matter With Kansas?* as "the best political book of the year," citing approvingly Frank's assertion that "Democratic leaders have been so eager to win over suburban professionals that they have lost touch with blue-collar America." A few days later Kristof (2004b) returned to that theme, arguing that "Democrats need to give a more prominent voice to Middle American, wheat-hugging, gun-shooting, Spanish-speaking, beer-guzzling, Bible-toting centrists."

Of course, the notion that American politics has been transformed by the defection from the Democratic ranks of working-class social conservatives is not entirely new. As far back as Richard Nixon's first year in the White House, Kevin Phillips (1969) published an attention-getting blueprint for constructing *The Emerging Republican Majority* along neopopulist

conservative lines. Ladd and Hadley (1975, 240, 232) proclaimed “an inversion of the old class relationship in voting” due to “the transformations of conflict characteristic of postindustrialism.” Edsall and Edsall (1991, 154) argued that “[w]orking-class whites and corporate CEOs, once adversaries at the bargaining table, found common ideological ground in their shared hostility to expanding government intervention.” And Huckfeldt and Kohfeld (1989, 84) argued that “race served to splinter the Democratic coalition” because the policy commitments of the Civil Rights era provoked “[r]acial hostility, particularly on the part of lower-status whites.” All of these works, and many others, suggested that the class basis of New Deal voting patterns had given way to a new cleavage structure in which conservative ideology and cultural issues brought large numbers of working-class whites into the Republican camp.

Meanwhile, however, systematic analyses of class divisions in partisanship and voting have seemed to contradict important elements of this familiar story. Most notably, Jeffrey Stonecash’s book *Class and Party in American Politics* provided a good deal of evidence that “less-affluent whites have not moved away from the Democratic Party and that class divisions have not declined in American politics” (2000, 118). Stonecash’s analysis suggests that net Republican gains since the 1950s have come entirely among middle- and upper-income voters, widening rather than narrowing the traditional gap in partisanship and voting between predominantly Democratic lower income groups and predominantly Republican upper income groups. Similarly, McCarty, Poole and Rosenthal (forthcoming, chap. 3) have shown that income has become an increasingly strong predictor of Republican partisanship and presidential voting since the 1950s. If that is so, where are Frank’s working-class cultural conservatives?

My aim here is to test Frank’s thesis by examining class-related patterns of issue preferences, partisanship, and voting over the past half-century using data from National Election

Study (NES) surveys.<sup>2</sup> I focus on four specific questions inspired by Frank's account: Has the white working class abandoned the Democratic party? Has the white working class become more conservative? Do working class "moral values" trump economics? Are religious voters distracted from economic issues? My answer to each of these questions is "no."

## **Frank's Thesis**

Frank begins his book by pointing to George W. Bush's puzzling success in the 2000 election in "[t]he poorest county in America." This result is puzzling to him because "it is the Democrats that are the party of workers, of the poor, of the weak and the victimized" (1). What "tragically inverted form of class consciousness" (259) could bring these people to support "a populist uprising that only benefits the people it is supposed to be targeting" (109)?

Within ten pages, Frank elaborates this puzzle into

a panorama of madness and delusion worthy of Hieronymous Bosch: of sturdy blue-collar patriots reciting the Pledge while they strangle their own life chances; of small farmers proudly voting themselves off the land; of devoted family men carefully seeing to it that their children will never be able to afford college or proper health care; of working-class guys in midwestern cities cheering as they deliver up a landslide for a candidate whose policies will end their way of life, will transform their region into a 'rust belt,' will strike people like them blows from which they will never recover. (10)

The basis of this "Great Backlash," in Frank's telling, is the "class animus" of blue-collar, working-class people against the cultural values and liberal policies of "the wealthy, powerful, and well-connected – the liberal media, the atheistic scientists, the obnoxious eastern elite" (102,

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<sup>2</sup> Data and documentation are available from the NES website, <http://www.umich.edu/~nes>.

7); “above all it is a class war” (102). However, this class war makes strange bedfellows, uniting working-class cultural conservatives with wealthy, powerful, and well connected conservative business interests in support of Republican candidates and policies.

“As a formula for holding together a dominant political coalition,” Frank writes (2004, 8),

the backlash seems so improbable and so self-contradictory that liberal observers often have trouble believing it is actually happening. By all rights, they figure, these two groups – business and blue-collar – should be at each other’s throats. For the Republican Party to present itself as the champion of working-class America strikes liberals as such an egregious denial of political reality that they dismiss the whole phenomenon, refusing to take it seriously. (Frank 2004, 8)

This new “dominant political coalition” is not without its tensions. Indeed, within the narrower spectrum of contemporary politics in Kansas, the primary manifestation of “class war” is the conflict within the state’s Republican Party between the more radical, socially conservative lower-class faction and the more traditional, economically conservative upper-class faction.<sup>3</sup> This difference, too, Frank emphasizes, is “a class difference. . . . I mean this in the material, economic sense, not in the tastes-and-values way our punditry defines class” (2004, 104).<sup>4</sup> And

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<sup>3</sup> In portraying this conflict, Frank contrasts “shady lawns and purring Porsches” in “the land of sensible, moderate Republicanism” with “peeling paint and cheap plywood construction” in the more conservative “backlash” strongholds of Johnson County (2004, 103).

<sup>4</sup> A surprising number of Frank’s dramatis personae are a long way from the working class. The “hero” of modern Kansas conservatism, Republican Senator Sam Brownback, is “a member of one of the wealthiest families in the state” (30). More generally, the state’s “most prominent conservatives” are described as “an assortment of millionaires and lawyers and Harvard grads” (196). Conservative propagandist Ann Coulter is the “daughter of the creamy suburb of New Canaan, Connecticut” and of a successful corporate lawyer (118). Even the author himself, in his misguided younger days, grew up in the “Edenic preserves” of a prosperous suburb of Kansas City where “[b]usiness men were average,

class wins out, in the sense that “The leaders of the backlash may talk Christ, but they walk corporate. Values may ‘matter most’ to voters, but they always take a backseat to the needs of money once the elections are won” (6).

Franks suggests that “the religiosity of credulous Kansas” (225) has provided a crucial cultural and organizational basis for its populist conservative movement. Many of the state’s leading conservative activists were drawn into politics by Operation Rescue’s anti-abortion “Summer of Mercy” in 1991. “They had lain beneath cars to stop abortion, and now they were putting their bodies on the line for the right wing of the Republican Party. ... And in 1992 this populist conservative movement conquered the Kansas Republican Party from the ground up ...” (95). As a result, ever since, the state’s lawmakers have combined “flamboyant public piety with a political agenda that only makes the state’s material problems worse” (71). “Kansas,” Frank writes, “has trawled its churches for the most aggressively pious individuals it could find and has proceeded to elevate them to the most prominent positions of public responsibility available, whence these saintly emissaries are then expected to bark and howl and rebuke the world for its sins” (69).

If Frank is caustic about the political rationality of his working-class protagonists, he is even more caustic about the political rationality of the party that has squandered their allegiance. According to Frank, the Democratic Party’s “more-or-less official response to its waning fortunes” has been “to forget blue-collar voters and concentrate instead on recruiting affluent, white-collar professionals who are liberal on social issues” (242-243). This “criminally stupid strategy ... has dominated Democratic thinking off and on ever since the ‘New Politics’ days of the early seventies” (243).

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authentic people by definition, since they accounted for all the adults I knew” (154, 148). Nevertheless,

“Democrats,” he writes (245),

no longer speak to the people on the losing end of a free-market system that is becoming more brutal and more arrogant by the day. ... [B]y dropping the class language that once distinguished them sharply from Republicans they have left themselves vulnerable to cultural wedge issues like guns and abortion and the rest whose hallucinatory appeal would ordinarily be far overshadowed by material concerns.

As one reviewer (Brownstein 2004) put it, “Frank is a talented stylist and engaging storyteller, and his stew of memoir, journalism and essay produces many fresh insights.” On the other hand, it seems fair to suggest that systematic political analysis is not his strong suit. His historical reckoning is sometimes vague.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, it is not even clear from Frank’s account whether Kansas is a leader or a follower in forging the new “dominant political coalition” he portrays. “We are accustomed,” he writes at one point, (91) “to thinking of the backlash as a phenomenon of the seventies (the busing riots, the tax revolt) or the eighties (the Reagan revolution); in Kansas the great move to the right was a story of the nineties, a story of the present.” On the other hand, Frank claims that Kansas “has proudly taken a place at the front” of the “onrushing parade of anti-knowledge,” and suggests that “things that begin in Kansas – the Civil War, Prohibition, Populism, Pizza Hut – have a historical tendency to go national” (248).

My aim here is not to question Frank’s account of what has happened on the ground in Kansas. I have no reason to doubt that Tim Golba, “a line worker at a soda pop bottling plant,”

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Frank insists that the conservative backlash is “a working-class movement” (6).

<sup>5</sup> For example, although Kansas was “a reliable hotbed of leftist reform movements a hundred years ago” (Frank 2004, 9), one would hardly guess from Frank’s account that the state has been one of the most reliably Republican states in the nation for most of the last century. How much of its “progressive legacy” remained to be swept away by the conservative activists of the 1990s?



is “toiling selflessly every day of the year” on behalf of conservative causes (166-169). I am even willing to believe that a reactionary Catholic in an “isolated, ramshackle farmhouse ... called a papal election, and he got himself chosen pope: Pope Michael I. Pope Michael of Kansas” (219).

However, with all due respect to Kansas, it seems unlikely that the widespread favorable attention Frank’s book has generated owes much to the specific political significance of Tim Golba or Pope Michael, or even of Sam Brownback. Rather, political observers seem to have accepted Frank’s suggestion that “what’s the matter with Kansas” explains “how conservatives won the heart of America.”<sup>6</sup> But is it really true that the Republican Party has built “a dominant political coalition” by selling itself as “the champion of working-class America”? My aim here is to test that broader claim about the evolution of the American party system. Perhaps, as Frank (2004, 19) himself writes about a different strand of punditry, “It’s pretty much a waste of time ... to catalog the contradictions and tautologies and huge, honking errors blowing round in a media flurry like this.” Nevertheless, Frank’s thesis seems sufficiently important to deserve serious scholarly scrutiny.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Even critics of Frank’s politics have seemed to accept the broad outlines of his account, minus the stinging assertions of false consciousness. For example, George Will (2004) wrote that “many people, emancipated from material concerns, can pour political passions into other – some would say higher – concerns. These include the condition of the culture as measured by such indexes as the content of popular culture, the agendas of public education and the prevalence of abortion.” About all that’s the matter with Kansas, Will concluded, is that it “has not measured up – down, actually – to the left’s hope for a more materialistic politics.”

<sup>7</sup> In an interesting review essay, Brian Glenn (2004) noted that the title of the British edition of Frank’s book is not *What’s the Matter with Kansas?* but *What’s the Matter with America?* Glenn, a political scientist, pointed out that “There is not one regression table in this book on political behavior .... If he has ever heard of the National Election Study, he has kept that fact to himself. ... This is one place that

## **Has the White Working Class Abandoned the Democratic Party?**

Frank is not alone in seeing a “mysterious inversion” of class politics in contemporary America. Many commentators have supposed that the Republican Party’s success in winning control of the White House and Congress rests on significant Republican inroads among white working-class voters. For example, in a piece entitled “Meet the Poor Republicans,” *New York Times* columnist David Brooks (2005) wrote that “we’ve seen poorer folks move over in astonishing numbers to the G.O.P. George W. Bush won the white working class by 23 percentage points in this past [2004] election.”

Assessing claims of this sort requires more precise definitions of evocative but vague terms like “poorer folks” and “working class.” Brooks’s 23% figure, for example, turns out to be based on white voters without college degrees.<sup>8</sup> This is a rather odd definition of “poorer folks” – not only because the correlation between educational attainment and economic status is quite imperfect, but also because two-thirds of white voters in 2004 (and even larger proportions of white non-voters and non-whites) qualified as “poorer folks” by this standard. In any case, for purposes of historical analysis of the sort pursued here, educational attainment is a problematic indicator of socio-economic status because its distribution has changed so dramatically over

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members of our own profession can make a significant contribution, using the tools of our trade to test in a more robust manner the claims Frank makes” (2004, 11-12). At that point he observed in a footnote that “existing empirical data indicate that nationally, class voting remains as distinct as ever”; however, that observation does not seem to have had much effect on his overall response to the book, which is generally laudatory.

<sup>8</sup> Brooks’s figure is based on data from the Edison/Mitofsky 2004 exit poll. The comparable figure from the 2004 NES survey is only slightly smaller, 19.7%.

time.<sup>9</sup>

An alternative approach is to categorize people on the basis of their occupation (or a family member's occupation) as "working class" or "middle class." Textbook descriptions of a long-term decline in class voting (for example, Bibby 1996, 273-274; Hershey 2005, 123-125) frequently cite Abramson, Aldrich, and Rohde's quadrennial analyses of voting patterns among white manual workers and white-collar workers in support of the notion that "class differences are eroding" (Abramson, Aldrich, and Rohde 1994, 154; 2002, 115). However, this definition also seems problematic for historical analysis in light of major changes in the prevalence and social significance of "manual" and "white-collar" work and the proliferation of two-income households.<sup>10</sup>

Another possibility is to categorize people on the basis of their subjective identification as members of the "working class" or the "middle class." However, as a theoretical matter, it is unclear how such subjective identifications are related to more objective indicators of socio-

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<sup>9</sup> For example, college graduates were 8% of the adult population in 1960 but 27% in 2003, while the proportion of people without high school diplomas declined from 59% to 15% over that period (U.S. Census Bureau, *Statistical Abstract of the United States: 2004-2005*, Table No. 212).

<sup>10</sup> To their credit, Abramson, Aldrich, and Rohde (2002, 115) have acknowledged that "our argument that class-based voting has declined depends on the way we have defined social class." They have also attempted, though sometimes only partially successfully, to document the complexities involved in using crude and sometimes inconsistent occupational data to produce a consistent classification of social class over a 50-year period. An example is the following explanatory note describing the data analysis that led them to conclude that "middle-class [white] voters were more likely to vote Democratic than working-class [white] voters" in the 2000 presidential election (Abramson, Aldrich, and Rohde 2002, 113): "As the relatively small size of the working class in 2000 results largely from a redefinition in the way our measure of class is constructed, in these estimates we will assume that the sizes of the white working class and the white middle class were the same as in the 1996 NES" (Abramson, Aldrich, and Rohde 2002, 292).

economic status. Should we care whether waitresses or bank executives think of themselves as “middle class”? If they do, is that more likely to be a cause or an effect of their political views? In addition to such theoretical qualms, there is a more prosaic reason not to rely on subjective class as a measure of socio-economic status: the NES surveys employed here have not consistently included questions tapping subjective class identification.

Finally, and perhaps most straightforwardly, it is possible to use family income as a measure of socio-economic status. Of course, absolute income, like education, has increased substantially since the 1950s. Moreover, it is easy to think of specific circumstances in which a person’s current family income does not accurately reflect her economic standing.<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, 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 socio-economic status.

Categorizing people on the basis of income has the theoretical virtue of reflecting Frank’s (2004, 104) emphasis on “the material, economic sense” in which he means the term “class.” As a practical matter, family income has the additional virtue of being measured consistently in NES surveys over the past half-century. Thus, here I follow Frank’s lead – and Stonecash’s (2000) example – in categorizing voters on the basis of family income levels. More specifically, I use the terms “low-income” and “working class” interchangeably to refer to people with family incomes in the bottom third of the income distribution in each election year (in 2004, incomes

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<sup>11</sup> The most obvious complexity is that current income may be an imperfect measure of economic status for retired people. I have replicated most of the analyses presented here excluding NES respondents over the age of 65 and found no significant differences in the results.

below \$35,000).<sup>12</sup> In contrast, I use the terms “middle-income” and “high-income” to refer to people with family incomes in the middle and upper thirds of the income distribution in each election year.

I follow Abramson, Aldrich, and Rohde, Brooks, and many other writers in limiting my analysis to whites. Doing so obviously produces a distorted picture of the contemporary party system, and those distortions are especially significant for an analysis of class-related cleavages, given the strong and persistent correlation between race and income in American society.<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, the distinctiveness of white political behavior in the half-century covered by my analysis and the overwhelming focus on whites in the literature I am addressing make this limitation expedient for my present purposes.

Having settled on definitions, I turn at last to data. Figure 1 summarizes the voting behavior of low-income and high-income white voters in presidential elections since 1952.<sup>14</sup> For each election year, the figure shows the Democratic share of the two-party presidential vote

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<sup>12</sup> Obviously, the exact proportions of the sample in each income group vary somewhat from year to year due to the coarseness of the income categories employed in the NES surveys. In the 2004 survey, for example, 31.0% of the respondents reported family incomes of less than \$35,000, 25.7% reported family incomes between \$35,000 and \$70,000, and 31.1% reported family incomes in excess of \$70,000; the remaining 12.2% declined to report their income, and I have not included them in any of the three income groups.

<sup>13</sup> Averaging over the entire period covered by the NES data, whites were slightly less likely to fall in the bottom third of the income distribution (28%) than in the top third (34%). In contrast, non-whites (including Hispanics) were more than twice as likely to fall in the bottom third of the distribution (45%) as in the top third (20%).

<sup>14</sup> Due to sampling variability, non-response, and misreporting, the proportions of Democratic and Republican voters in each NES survey do not exactly reproduce the actual election result. I have reweighted the NES data for each year to match the actual two-party popular vote. Averaging over the 14

among white voters in the bottom third of the income distribution (the solid line) and in the top third of the income distribution (the dashed line).<sup>15</sup>

**\*\*\* Figure 1 \*\*\***

Figure 1 shows remarkably little evidence of class voting in presidential elections from 1952 through 1972. Averaging over this period, Democratic presidential candidates garnered 46% of the votes of whites in the bottom third of the income distribution, 47% of those in the middle third, and 42% of those in the upper third. In only one of these six elections, 1964, did the gap in Democratic support between upper-income whites and lower-income whites exceed 6%.

On the other hand, from 1976 through 2004 there is a strong and fairly consistent income gradient evident in the presidential voting behavior of white Americans. Averaging over the eight presidential elections of this period, whites in the bottom third of the income distribution cast 51% of their votes for Democrats, as compared with 44% of middle-income whites and 37% of upper-income whites. The gap in Democratic support between upper-income whites and lower-income whites thus increased from 4% in the earlier period to 14% after 1976. The 2004 election was, as it happens, quite consistent with the pattern since 1976: John Kerry received 50% of the two-party vote among whites in the lower third of the income distribution and 39% among those in the upper third of the income distribution – a difference of 11%.

It should be clear from these comparisons that economic status has become more

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presidential elections from 1952 to 2004, this adjustment increases the average Republican vote share by 0.4 percentage points.

<sup>15</sup> The Democratic vote share for the middle third of the income distribution is omitted from the figure for visual clarity, but generally falls between those for the lower and upper thirds.

important, not less important, in structuring the presidential voting behavior of white Americans over the course of the past half-century. Moreover, the general trend in support for Democratic presidential candidates among whites in the bottom third of the income distribution has been upward, not downward. Nor is this merely an artifact of anemic working-class support for Adlai Stevenson running against Dwight Eisenhower in the first two elections of this sequence; Al Gore and John Kerry did better among low-income whites in the close elections of 2000 and 2004 than John Kennedy and Hubert Humphrey did in the close elections of 1960 and 1968. Thus, while it is generally true that Democratic presidential candidates have lost support among white voters over the past half-century, those losses have been entirely (and roughly equally) concentrated in the middle- and upper-income groups, and have been partially offset by *increasing* support for Democratic candidates among low-income white voters.<sup>16</sup>

A somewhat different picture emerges when we turn from voting behavior to party identification (and thus from voters to the entire adult population). Figure 2 shows the trends in party identification for whites in the lower and upper thirds of the income distribution from 1952 through 2004. Here, too, the income gap has increased, not decreased. However, the general trend among both groups is clearly downward. Simply comparing the beginning and end points, net Democratic identification declined by 18% among low-income whites (from 22% in 1952 to 4% in 2004) and by 29% among high-income whites (from 11% to -18%).<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Fitting a linear trend to the solid line in Figure 1 produces an upward slope amounting to 6.4% (with a standard error of 2.7%) over the entire 52-year period. The corresponding slopes for middle- and high-income voters are -6.1% (with a standard error of 2.6%) and -5.3% (with a standard error of 2.1%).

<sup>17</sup> Imposing linear trends over the entire 52-year period implies declines of 17.7% (with a standard error of 2.6%) for low-income whites, 35.7% (with a standard error of 2.5%) for middle-income whites, and 31.5% (with a standard error of 2.4%) for high-income whites. Thus, net Democratic identification has

**\*\*\* Figure 2 \*\*\***

Focusing on the 18% decline in net Democratic identification among low-income whites would seem to confirm the view that “we’ve seen poorer folks move over in astonishing numbers to the G.O.P.,” as Brooks (2005) put it. However, it seems odd to attribute the Democrats’ problems to the white working class when the corresponding decline among more affluent whites is so much larger. In any case, the decline in Democratic identification among low-income whites in Figure 2 is hardly the broad national phenomenon one might expect on the basis of Frank’s book and similar accounts. That fact is evident from Figure 3, which provides a comparison of trends in party identification for low-income whites in the South and in the rest of the country.<sup>18</sup>

**\*\*\* Figure 3 \*\*\***

For the South, Figure 3 shows a substantial and fairly steady decline in net Democratic identification over the entire half-century, from 46% (a 65-19 Democratic margin) in 1952 to –6% (a 38-32 Republican margin) in 2004. However, outside the South there is no evident trend in party identification among low-income whites. Indeed, a simple comparison of beginning and end points shows that Democrats outnumbered Republicans in this group by exactly the same 10% in 2004 (a 31-21 Democratic margin) as in 1952 (a 41-31 Democratic margin).

To a good approximation, then, the decline in Democratic identification among poor whites

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eroded almost twice as fast among whites in the middle- and upper-income brackets as among those in the bottom third of the income distribution.

<sup>18</sup> I employ the U.S. Census Bureau’s regional classification; the South includes the 11 former Confederate states plus Delaware, Kentucky, Maryland, Oklahoma, West Virginia, and the District of Columbia.



over the past half-century is *entirely* attributable to the demise of the Solid South as a bastion of Democratic allegiance. In the 1950s the historical legacy of the Civil War and the contemporary reality of Jim Crow racial politics still submerged class differences among southern whites in a system of “unquestioning attachment, by overwhelming majorities, to the Democratic party nationally” (Key 1949, 11). As suburbanization, desegregation, and intensive electoral mobilization of both blacks and whites – and dramatic policy shifts by national Democratic party leaders on civil rights issues – eroded that system, the anomalous pattern of party identification in the South gradually but relentlessly gave way to a pattern not too dissimilar from the one prevailing in the rest of the country. That national pattern was, and still is, one in which low-income whites are a good deal more likely than more affluent whites to identify themselves with the Democratic Party.

### **Has the White Working Class Become More Conservative?**

Frank expresses a good deal of indignation about the radical conservatism of Republican economic policy, which he portrays as doing “incalculable, historic harm to working-class people” (6). However, he has rather little to say about the extent to which these people have actually embraced the tenets of conservative Republican ideology. One plausible interpretation of his argument is that they have reluctantly accepted economic conservatism as part of a package deal, because that has been the only effective way for them to pursue social conservatism, given the current configuration of the American party system. A different plausible interpretation is that they have become more generally conservative, either through “hostility to expanding government intervention” (Edsall and Edsall 1991, 154) or simply because “Democrats no longer speak to the people on the losing end” of the free-market system

(Frank 2004, 245).

The first of these two interpretations seems to hinge on the *weight* voters assign to social issues on one hand and economic issues on the other. If working-class white voters prefer Republican positions on social issues but not on economic issues, the Republican Party should prosper among these voters to the extent that social issues are more important than economic issues – and prosper increasingly as the relative importance of social issues increases. I turn to that possibility in the next section of this paper. First, however, I consider the possibility that low-income white voters have actually become more conservative in their policy views, either in absolute terms or by comparison with more affluent voters.

To assess whether low-income whites have indeed become more conservative I turn to three questions asked repeatedly in NES surveys since 1972. The first of these questions invites respondents to place themselves on a general liberal-conservative scale;<sup>19</sup> the second asks whether “the government should see to it that every person has a job and a good standard of living”;<sup>20</sup> the third focuses on the circumstances, if any, under which abortion should be legal.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> “We hear a lot of talk these days about liberals and conservatives. Here is a 7-point scale on which the political views that people might hold are arranged from extremely liberal to extremely conservative. Where would you place yourself on this scale, or haven’t you thought much about this?” Responses are recoded to range from 0 for “extremely conservative” to 100 for “extremely liberal.”

<sup>20</sup> “Some people feel that the government in Washington should see to it that every person has a job and a good standard of living. Others think the government should just let each person get ahead on his own. Where would you place yourself on this scale, or haven’t you thought much about this?” Responses on the 7-point scale are recoded to range from 0 for “just let each person get ahead on his own” to 100 for “see to it that every person has a job and a good standard of living.”

<sup>21</sup> “There has been some discussion about abortion during recent years. Which one of the opinions on this page best agrees with your view? 1. By law, abortion should never be permitted. 2. The law should permit abortion only in case of rape, incest, or when the woman’s life is in danger. 3. The law should permit abortion for reasons other than rape, incest, or danger to the woman’s life, but only after the need

Figures 4, 5, and 6, respectively, present opinion readings for these three issues in each year the corresponding question was included in the NES surveys.<sup>22</sup> Each figure shows average opinions for whites in the bottom third of the income distribution and, for purposes of comparison, average opinions for whites in the top third of the income distribution.<sup>23</sup>

**\*\*\* Figures 4, 5, and 6 \*\*\***

In none of these figures is there any evidence of a significant conservative shift since the early 1970s, either among low-income whites or among high-income whites. In the case of general ideology Figure 4 shows very little movement of any sort; poorer whites were slightly less conservative than affluent whites throughout this period. For the NES question about government jobs and income support Figure 5 shows a somewhat larger gap in views by income level, with poorer whites again less conservative than affluent whites, but there is again no evidence of any shift in the average opinions of either group. For abortion Figure 6 does show discernible movement, with both groups becoming more liberal (pro-choice) from the early 1970s through 1992 and more conservative (pro-life) thereafter. The net result of these shifts left both groups modestly more liberal in 2004 than they had been in the 1970s. The relative

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for the abortion has been clearly established. 4. By law, a woman should always be able to obtain an abortion as a matter of personal choice.” Responses are recoded to range from 0 for “abortion should never be permitted” to 100 for “a matter of personal choice.” The question wording employed in NES surveys before 1980 was slightly different but produced a quite similar distribution of responses when both versions were used in 1980, so I have combined responses to both versions to produce the trend lines in Figure 6.

<sup>22</sup> The abortion item was omitted from the 1974 and 2002 NES surveys. The government jobs question was also omitted in 2002.

<sup>23</sup> In each case the average opinions of middle-income whites, omitted from the figures for visual clarity, consistently fall between those of the low- and high-income groups.

positions of the two income groups remained quite stable throughout this period, with low-income whites consistently less supportive of abortion rights than more affluent whites were.

Indeed, what is most striking in these figures is the consistent moderation of low-income whites by comparison with more affluent whites. On the issue of government jobs (and, to a lesser extent, general ideology), where the balance of opinion among affluent whites has been conservative, low-income whites have been consistently less conservative. On the issue of abortion rights, where most affluent whites have been liberal, low-income whites have consistently been less liberal. In part, these patterns are an artifact of my coding of issue positions, which treats “don’t know” and “haven’t thought” responses as equivalent to middle-of-the-road positions. Since working-class whites are somewhat more likely than affluent whites to offer those responses, they are more likely to be placed at the middle of the issue scales. More importantly, however, they are also simply more likely to choose middle-of-the-road positions on these and other issues – making them unlikely candidates to appear in the vanguard of an ideological “backlash” of any sort.

In any event, it would be very hard to conclude from these data that working-class whites have become more conservative over the past 30 years. For that matter, it is hard to find much evidence of significant ideological movement in any income group on any of the three issues considered here, aside from the gradual rise and (partial) fall of support for abortion rights evident in Figure 6. If the extent of Frank’s “Great Backlash” is the pro-life movement among low-income whites since 1996 – the downward tail at the end of the long upward trend in support for abortion rights among working-class whites in Figure 6 – that seems like a remarkably modest base on which to build a new “dominant political coalition.”

In addition to looking for opinion shifts on these specific issues, I constructed summary

measures of economic and social policy views using the seven issue questions asked most frequently in NES surveys over the past 20 years.<sup>24</sup> The summary measures are based on a factor analysis of responses to these questions, with the two resulting factors rotated to produce correlated but distinct measures of economic and social issue preferences.<sup>25</sup> The results of the factor analysis are summarized in Table 1.

**\*\*\* Table 1 \*\*\***

The rotated factor loadings shown in the first two columns of Table 1 suggest a fairly clear distinction between economic and social issue questions. Views about government jobs and income maintenance loaded only on the first (economic) dimension, as did opinions about aid to minorities<sup>26</sup> and government spending and services.<sup>27</sup> Views about abortion loaded only on the

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<sup>24</sup> I employ data from the 1982, 1984, 1988, 1990, 1992, 1994, 1996, 2000, and 2004 NES surveys – the nine surveys in which all seven of these policy questions were included. The total sample size (including “don’t know” and “haven’t thought” responses recoded to neutral values, but excluding respondents who were not asked some or all of the issue questions) is 13,914.

<sup>25</sup> The eigenvalues for the first two principal factors were 1.32 and .44; the eigenvalue for the (discarded) third factor was .06. Promax rotation produced the factor loadings reported in Table 1. The correlation between the summary measures of economic and social issue preferences is .49.

<sup>26</sup> “Some people feel that the government in Washington should make every possible effort to improve the social and economic position of blacks. Others feel that the government should not make any special effort to help blacks because they should help themselves. Where would you place yourself on this scale, or haven’t you thought much about it?” Responses on the 7-point scale are recoded to range from 0 for “blacks should help themselves” to 100 for “government should help blacks.”

<sup>27</sup> “Some people think the government should provide fewer services, even in areas such as health and education, in order to reduce spending. Other people feel that it is important for the government to provide many more services even if it means an increase in spending. Where would you place yourself on this scale, or haven’t you thought much about this?” Responses on the 7-point scale are recoded to range from 0 for “government should provide many fewer services; reduce spending a lot” to 100 for “government should provide many more services; increase spending a lot.”

second (social) dimension, along with opinions about women's appropriate social role.<sup>28</sup> The general liberal/conservative ideological views charted in Figure 4 loaded moderately strongly on both the economic and social dimensions, as did opinions about defense spending.<sup>29</sup> The scoring weights shown in the final two columns of Table 1 reflect the relative weight of each question in the construction of the summary economic and social preference indices. The questions on government jobs and abortion charted in Figures 5 and 6 turn out to be the primary components of the economic and social policy indices, respectively, though in both cases other issues get substantial weight as well.

Using these economic and social policy indices to track shifts in issue preferences turns out to produce results quite similar to those presented in Figures 5 and 6. The trend in social issue preferences is virtually identical to the trend in abortion views presented in Figure 6, becoming perceptibly more liberal through the early 1990s before reverting partially, though not completely, to the level of the early 1980s. The relative positions of the three income groups were quite consistent throughout this period; lower-income whites were slightly less liberal on social issues than middle-income whites, who in turn were slightly less liberal than upper-income whites.

The differences in economic issue preferences among the income groups were somewhat

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<sup>28</sup> "Recently there has been a lot of talk about women's rights. Some people feel that women should have an equal role with men in running business, industry, and government. Others feel that women's place is in the home. Where would you place yourself on this scale, or haven't you thought much about this?" Responses on the 7-point scale are recoded to range from 0 for "women's place is in the home" to 100 for "women and men should have an equal role."

<sup>29</sup> "Some people believe that we should spend much less money for defense. Others feel that defense spending should be greatly increased. Where would you place yourself on this scale, or haven't you thought much about this?" Responses on the 7-point scale are recoded to range from 0 for "greatly increase defense spending" to 100 for "greatly decrease defense spending."

larger and in the opposite direction, with lower-income whites consistently less conservative than middle- and upper-income whites – just as they were in Figure 5. This gap appears, if anything, to have widened in 2004, with lower-income whites having become perceptibly more liberal on economic issues in 2004 than they had been in 2000 (though not more liberal than they had been in 1984 or 1992). The important point here, however, is that there is no evidence in the NES data that the white working-class has become more conservative over the past 20 years, either on economic issues or on social issues.

### **Do Working Class “Moral Values” Trump Economics?**

According to Frank (2004, 6),

backlash leaders systematically downplay the politics of economics. The movement’s basic premise is that culture outweighs economics as a matter of public concern – that *Values Matter Most*, as one backlash title has it. On those grounds it rallies citizens who would once have been reliable partisans of the New Deal to the standard of conservatism.

In the context of Frank’s broader argument, these claims may plausibly be read as implying that working-class voters attach more weight to social issues than to economic issues, or that they attach more weight to social issues than higher-income voters do, or that they attach more weight to social issues than they used to. Here, I test each of those implications in turn using the indices of economic and social policy preferences constructed from the NES data.

Table 2 reports the results of a series of probit analyses relating presidential votes to economic and social policy preferences over the period from 1984 through 2004. The three columns in the table report the results of separate analyses for white voters in the bottom, middle,

and top thirds of the income distribution. In addition to the social and economic policy indices, each analysis includes separate intercepts for each election year (not reported in the table) to capture election-specific considerations unrelated to these policy views.

**\*\*\* Table 2 \*\*\***

These are obviously bare-bones descriptive analyses, not empirical tests of comprehensive, realistic models of voting behavior. Nevertheless, the extent to which voters' choices are related to their economic policy views, on one hand, and their social policy views, on the other hand, would seem to provide a reasonable test of whether "culture outweighs economics as a matter of public concern."

The analyses presented in the first panel of Table 2 include voters in every presidential election since 1984. Thus, they provide a general indication of the relative role of social and economic issues over the half-dozen most recent presidential elections. Do working-class voters attach more weight to social issues than to economic issues? No. In fact, the probit coefficient for social issue preferences (.0213) is about 30% smaller than the coefficient for economic issue preferences (.0301).

Do working-class voters attach more weight to social issues than more affluent voters do? No. The parallel estimates reported in the second and third columns of Table 2 suggest that middle-income voters attached about 20% more weight to social issues than low-income voters did (.0256 versus .0213), while high-income voters attached about 40% more weight to social issues than low-income voters did (.0301 versus .0213).

Finally, do working-class voters attach more weight to social issues than they used to? Here the evidence is more favorable, but only marginally. The probit analyses reported in the second panel of Table 2 allow for linear trends in the weights attached to social and economic



issues by voters in each income class.<sup>30</sup> For white voters in the bottom third of the income distribution there is some slight evidence of an increasing relationship between social policy preferences and presidential votes; however, the coefficient of .0021 implies an increase of only about 10% over the 20-year period, and the estimate is far too imprecise to be trustworthy. On the other hand, there is much stronger evidence of an increase in the weight attached to economic issues by low-income voters, and even stronger evidence of a substantial increase in the strength of the relationship between social policy preferences and presidential votes among middle- and high-income white voters. Indeed, the coefficients for both these groups imply that the strength of the relationship between social policy views and presidential votes doubled or tripled between 1984 and 2004.

Finally, lest the linear trends in the second panel of Table 2 be thought to conceal an increase in the weight of social issues among low-income white voters in the most recent election cycles, the third panel of the table reports the results of parallel analyses limited to the 2004 presidential election. Here, the relationship between social issue preferences and presidential votes is weaker for low-income whites than it was over the period as a whole, less than half as strong as the corresponding relationship for economic issue preferences, less than half as strong as the social issue weight for middle-income white voters, and less than one-third as strong as the social issue weight for high-income white voters. Clearly, the most recent NES data do nothing to support the notion that low-income whites are disproportionately swayed by social issues.

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<sup>30</sup> These trends are captured by interaction terms involving a “Trend” variable running from zero in 1984 to 1 in 2004. Thus, the baseline coefficients for social and economic policy represent their impact on voting behavior in 1984, while the “Trend” coefficients represent the change in their impact over the entire 20-year period.

Nor are the discrepancies between these results and Frank's account attributable to any peculiarity in the construction of my social and economic issue indices. Repeating the analyses reported in Table 2 using the NES questions on abortion and government jobs in place of the broader social and economic policy indices produces results that are even more dramatically at odds with the notion that low-income white voters are peculiarly "vulnerable to cultural wedge issues like guns and abortion" (Frank 2004, 245). The abortion coefficient for low-income white voters is almost 40% smaller than the coefficient for government jobs over the entire period from 1984 to 2004, and almost 80% smaller in 2004. In both cases, low-income white voters attached a good deal less weight to abortion than either middle- or high-income white voters did – again, almost 40% less over the whole period and more than 80% less in 2004.<sup>31</sup>

Table 3 reports the results of parallel analyses focusing on the relationship between social and economic issue preferences and party identification. These results are even more strikingly at odds with the notion that working-class whites have been distracted from economic issues by their conservative social views. Over the entire 20-year period, social policy preferences had only about one-fourth as much weight as economic policy preferences in shaping the partisan attachments of low-income whites (.157 versus .629); in 2004, social issues had less than one-tenth as much weight as economic issues (.080 versus .872). Nor were low-income whites more attuned to social issues than more affluent whites. Over the entire period, social policy preferences had two to three times as much impact on the partisan attachments of middle- and

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<sup>31</sup> Over the entire period from 1984 to 2004 the coefficients (and their standard errors) for low-income white voters are .0069 (.0011) for abortion and .0111 (.0015) for government jobs. The corresponding abortion coefficients are .0108 (.0010) for middle-income voters and .0120 (.0010) for high-income voters. In 2004 the coefficients for low-income white voters are .0029 (.0030) for abortion and .0130 (.0038) for government jobs. The corresponding abortion coefficients for middle- and high-income white voters are .0146 (.0033), and .0180 (.0031), respectively.

high-income whites as they did on the attachments of low-income whites – and in 2004, seven to ten times as much.<sup>32</sup>

**\*\*\* Table 3 \*\*\***

It appears from these results that positions on social issues are considerably *less* relevant to the partisanship and voting behavior of working-class whites than of more affluent whites – and that this disparity has been growing, not shrinking, over the past 20 years. The “hallucinatory appeal” of “cultural wedge issues” (Frank 2004, 245), such as it is, actually seems to increase rather considerably with each step up the income scale. Meanwhile, the cultural concerns of working-class whites continue to be “far overshadowed by material concerns,” at least insofar as those concerns are reflected in their views about concrete economic issues like jobs, government spending and services, and aid to minorities.

### **Are Religious Voters Distracted from Economic Issues?**

Finally, I examine whether the role Frank (2004, 225) attributed to “the religiosity of credulous Kansas” has any discernible analog in national patterns of partisanship and voting behavior. Even if Frank is quite wrong about the class basis of the social issue cleavage in contemporary American politics – as the evidence presented in Tables 2 and 3 strongly suggests

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<sup>32</sup> Again, using the specific NES questions on abortion and government jobs in place of the broader social and economic policy indices produces similar results. For low-income white voters, the coefficient for abortion is about one-fourth as large as the coefficient for government jobs over the entire period from 1984 to 2004, and less than one-fifth as large in 2004. Both issues were more strongly related to party identification among middle- and high-income whites than among low-income whites. For 2004, the abortion coefficients (and standard errors) for the low-, middle-, and high-income groups are .047 (.062), .262 (.058), and .362 (.055), respectively.

– it may nevertheless be the case that religious organizations and values have contributed significantly to the growing political relevance of social issues among affluent white voters. Is the “flamboyant public piety” of Frank’s “grandstanding Christers” (71, 136) distracting religious white voters from a hard-headed pursuit of their economic policy views?

To test that possibility I present analyses of presidential vote choices and party identification paralleling those presented in Tables 2 and 3, but with voters categorized on the basis of religiosity rather than income. The analyses reported in Table 4 focus on the relationship between social and economic policy views and presidential votes. The results presented in the first column of the table are for white voters who attended church “a few times a year” or less (46% of all white voters). The second column shows the corresponding relationship among those who attended church at least “once or twice a month” (54% of all white voters). The third column focuses on a somewhat more selective religious group, the one-third of white voters who said religion provides “a great deal” of guidance in their day-to-day lives.

**\*\*\* Table 4 \*\*\***

The first panel of Table 4, based on white voters in all six presidential elections from 1984 to 2004, suggests that religious voters may have attached somewhat less weight to economic issues than infrequent church-goers did. However, this difference is not large, and it has become smaller over time. The second panel, in which linear time trends are added to the probit analyses, indicates that the relationship between economic issue preferences and presidential votes has remained constant over the past 20 years among infrequent church-goers, but strengthened among frequent church-goers and those who said religion provides “a great deal” of guidance in their day-to-day lives. The results from 2004, presented in the third panel of Table 4, are consistent with that trend: the coefficients for economic policy views are no smaller for

frequent church-goers and highly religious voters than for infrequent church-goers.

Table 5 provides parallel analyses of the relationship between social and economic issue positions and party identification among infrequent and frequent church-goers. Here, the data suggest that frequent church-goers actually attached slightly *more* weight to economic issues than infrequent church-goers did, both over the entire 20-year period (in the first panel of the table) and in 2004 (in the third panel of the table). Thus, these data provide even less support than the data presented in Table 4 for the notion that religious voters have been “distracted” from economic issues.

**\*\*\* Table 5 \*\*\***

On the other hand, there is solid evidence in both Table 4 and Table 5 of an increasingly close alignment between the social issues positions of frequent church-goers and highly religious people and their partisanship and voting behavior. For frequent church-goers the strength of these relationships roughly doubled between 1984 and 2004; for people whose religious beliefs provide “a great deal” of guidance in their day-to-day lives the increases are smaller but still substantial. These trends seem to provide some significant support for Frank’s account of the shifting bases of partisan conflict in the contemporary United States. However, it is worth noting that roughly similar increases in the apparent weight of social issues appear among infrequent church-goers in both tables. Thus, there is no reason to suppose that these shifts have much specifically to do with religious convictions or practices.

Moreover, even with these substantial increases in the political significance of social issues, economic issues appear to be much *more* significant, regardless of whether we focus on infrequent church-goers, frequent church-goers, or highly religious people. For example, in 2004, economic issues weighed about 50% more heavily than social issues in the presidential

voting behavior of both frequent church-goers and highly religious people – and about twice as heavily in the party identifications of both groups. Even after a substantial increase in the apparent significance of social issues, the partisan attachments and voting behavior of frequent church-goers and highly religious people, like those of less religious people, are much more strongly related to their views about economic issues than to their views about social issues.

### **A “Mysterious Inversion” Inverted**

“As a formula for holding together a dominant political coalition,” Frank wrote (2004, 8), “the backlash seems so improbable and so self-contradictory that liberal observers often have trouble believing it is actually happening.” If that is true, it is striking how little evidence of such skepticism appears in the enthusiastic critical responses of liberal observers to Frank’s book. But what makes those enthusiastic responses doubly ironic is that the backlash *isn’t* actually happening – at least, not in anything like the way Frank portrays.

The analyses presented here contradicts Frank’s (2004, 19) account of a “mysterious inversion of American politics” on virtually every score. Working-class whites have not become more Republican in their presidential voting behavior. They have become less Democratic in their party identification over the past forty years, but at a considerably slower rate than middle- and upper-income whites. Nor have they become more conservative (except on abortion since 1996 – and even with that shift they remain noticeably more pro-choice than they were in the 1970s). Nor do they seem to attach special weight to cultural issues like abortion, either by comparison with traditional economic issues or by comparison with more affluent white voters.

Democrats have good reason to be concerned about the trends in party identification presented in Figure 2. The solid Democratic plurality in partisan attachments inherited from the

New Deal era has eroded steadily and substantially over the past half-century. However, it is easy to overlook how much of that erosion is attributable to the demise of the artificially Solid South of the Jim Crow era – a development that should hardly be bemoaned by progressive observers. Indeed, in the case of low-income whites the erosion is *entirely* confined to the South. Moreover, the result is not (certainly not yet) the new “dominant political coalition” conjured up by Frank and other liberal hand-wringers. Rather, the current partisan balance between Democrats and Republicans is remarkably even, both with respect to party identification and with respect to voting behavior.

Having lost two successive presidential elections, albeit by extremely close margins, some Democrats seem inclined to believe that their party must be reinvented for the new millennium. Indeed, according to one prominent political reporter, “The big conversation going on in Democratic Washington at the moment, at dinner parties and luncheons and think-tank symposia, revolves around how to save the party” (Bai 2005, 62). The prescriptions focus on ideology, infrastructure, linguistic strategy, and more.<sup>33</sup> However, a surprisingly large fraction seem to be predicated on the notion that “Democrats need to give a more prominent voice to Middle American, wheat-hugging, gun-shooting, Spanish-speaking, beer-guzzling, Bible-toting centrists” (Kristof 2004b) in an effort to inoculate the party against the “hallucinatory appeal” among working-class whites of “cultural wedge issues like guns and abortion” (Frank 2004, 245).

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<sup>33</sup> For an early (pre-2004 election) entry see Perlstein (2004). Since the election, even the *New York Times Book Review* has gotten into the act, with a roundtable of magazine editors billed as “leading voices for liberalism today” discussing “Can the Democrats become a majority party again?” (Gewen 2005). An example of the fatuous political analysis on offer (from *New Republic* editor Peter Beinart): “One cannot forget the central fact that the Democratic Party has lost every election since the 9/11 era, in which national security has been predominant. That is an enormous, enormous problem.”

My analysis implies no particular political strategy for Democrats (or, for that matter, for Republicans). Perhaps more gun shooting and beer guzzling would be all to the good; I don't know. However, if the basis for that diagnosis is a belief that Democratic support has eroded more among working-class whites than among affluent whites, the belief is simply false. And if the proffered political cure is grounded in a belief that working-class whites are especially sensitive to cultural issues, that belief is also false. Insofar as the data presented here suggest anything about how to appeal to working-class whites, they suggest that bread-and-butter economic issues are likely to be more potent than social issues. At least, that has been the case over the past 20 years, and especially in 2004.

On the other hand, if the idea is to appeal to a large class of white voters who have become noticeably less Democratic over the past half-century, the place to find them is in the middle and upper reaches of the income distribution. These affluent whites are more liberal on social issues than working-class whites are, and if anything they have become increasingly liberal on social issues over the past 30 years. Moreover, their views about social issues are more closely connected to partisanship and voting behavior than those of working-class whites – and they have become much more closely connected since the 1980s. Those facts suggest that “recruiting affluent, white-collar professionals who are liberal on social issues” may not be such a “criminally stupid strategy” on the part of Democratic leaders (Frank 2004, 243). Indeed, it may be a testament to the success of that strategy that affluent white voters have not become even more markedly Republican, despite the fact that they (still) attach at least as much weight to economic issues as to social issues.

Of course, the trick for Democrats, given the current configuration of the American party system, is to appeal to affluent voters who are liberal on social issues without alienating the core



Democratic constituency of working-class voters drawn to the party primarily by economic issues. Likewise, the trick for Republicans is to appeal to working-class voters who are relatively conservative on social issues without alienating the core Republican constituency of affluent voters drawn to the party primarily by economic issues. Neither party will have an easy time of it, since economic issues continue to be at the heart of the American party system, as they have for most of the past 150 years.<sup>34</sup> Nevertheless, in a messy and closely contested majoritarian system, neither party can afford to stand pat – or to be fastidious about where it finds its support.

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<sup>34</sup> At the elite level, Poole and Rosenthal (1997) provided a good deal of evidence suggesting that economic issues have defined the primary dimension of conflict in Congress over most of this period; the major historical exception is the Civil War era. There is also evidence of a second, racial dimension of conflict through the middle third of the 20th century, when significant numbers of southern segregationists and northern liberals coexisted in the Democratic Party's congressional delegation. While there is no comparable evidence on the bases of mass partisanship and voting behavior before the era of systematic survey research, it does not seem unlikely that economic issues have been of primary importance at that level as well – with similar exceptions for the Civil War era and for the South in the Jim Crow era.

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**Table 1: Factor Analysis of Issue Preferences**

Based on data from 1982, 1984, 1988, 1990, 1992, 1994, 1996, 2000, and 2004 NES surveys. N=13,914.

	<b>Rotated (Promax) Factor Loadings</b>			<b>Scoring Weights</b>	
	<b>Factor 1</b>	<b>Factor 2</b>	<b>Uniqueness</b>	<b>Economic</b>	<b>Social</b>
<b>Government Jobs</b>	.735	-.124	.513	.311	.008
<b>Aid to Minorities</b>	.590	-.049	.672	.201	.032
<b>Government Spending</b>	.462	.020	.779	.157	.055
<b>(Anti-) Defense Spending</b>	.217	.198	.881	.082	.113
<b>Liberal Ideology</b>	.364	.325	.671	.215	.292
<b>Women's Role</b>	-.011	.470	.783	.031	.205
<b>Abortion (Pro-choice)</b>	-.157	.670	.607	.004	.295

Economic policy index: mean = 46.9; standard deviation = 16.9.

Social policy index: mean = 57.2; standard deviation = 17.4.

Correlation between economic and social policy indices = .49.

**Table 2: Social and Economic Issue Preferences and Presidential Votes by Income Class, 1984-2004 (Whites Only)**

Probit coefficients (with standard errors in parentheses).  
Separate intercepts for each income class in each election year not shown.

	<b>Low Income</b>	<b>Middle Income</b>	<b>High Income</b>
<b>1984-2004</b>			
<b>Social Policy Index (0 to 100)</b>	.0213 (.0031)	.0256 (.0027)	.0301 (.0029)
<b>Economic Policy Index (0 to 100)</b>	.0301 (.0036)	.0410 (.0031)	.0467 (.0033)
<b>N</b>	976	1,519	1,783
<b>1984-2004 (with Time Trend)</b>			
<b>Social Policy Index (0 to 100)</b>	.0202 (.0050)	.0167 (.0042)	.0150 (.0047)
<b>Social Policy × Trend</b>	.0021 (.0085)	.0222 (.0081)	.0341 (.0087)
<b>Economic Policy Index (0 to 100)</b>	.0238 (.0060)	.0328 (.0049)	.0531 (.0056)
<b>Economic Policy × Trend</b>	.0125 (.0098)	.0186 (.0089)	-.0148 (.0096)
<b>N</b>	976	1,519	1,783
<b>2004 Only</b>			
<b>Social Policy Index (0 to 100)</b>	.0158 (.0082)	.0349 (.0096)	.0533 (.0105)
<b>Economic Policy Index (0 to 100)</b>	.0383 (.0093)	.0580 (.0101)	.0408 (.0103)
<b>N</b>	160	185	208

**Table 3: Social and Economic Issue Preferences and Party Identification by Income Class, 1984-2004 (Whites Only)**

Regression coefficients (with standard errors in parentheses).  
Separate intercepts for each income class in each election year not shown.

	<b>Low Income</b>	<b>Middle Income</b>	<b>High Income</b>
<b>1984-2004</b>			
<b>Social Policy Index (0 to 100)</b>	.157 (.042)	.396 (.037)	.469 (.035)
<b>Economic Policy Index (0 to 100)</b>	.629 (.046)	.694 (.041)	.841 (.038)
<b>N</b>	2,461	2,962	3,086
<b>1984-2004 (with Time Trend)</b>			
<b>Social Policy Index (0 to 100)</b>	.107 (.077)	.254 (.067)	.308 (.063)
<b>Social Policy × Trend</b>	.099 (.143)	.320 (.129)	.342 (.118)
<b>Economic Policy Index (0 to 100)</b>	.492 (.086)	.684 (.074)	.805 (.069)
<b>Economic Policy × Trend</b>	.279 (.155)	-.001 (.136)	.049 (.128)
<b>N</b>	2,461	2,962	3,086
<b>2004 Only</b>			
<b>Social Policy Index (0 to 100)</b>	.080 (.149)	.570 (.129)	.770 (.112)
<b>Economic Policy Index (0 to 100)</b>	.872 (.156)	.686 (.130)	.779 (.120)
<b>N</b>	233	221	238

**Table 4: Social and Economic Issue Preferences and Presidential Votes by Religiosity, 1984-2004 (Whites Only)**

Probit coefficients (with standard errors in parentheses).  
Separate intercepts for each group in each election year not shown.

Infrequent church-goers attended “never” or “a few times a year.” Frequent church-goers attended at least “once or twice a month.” Highly religious people said religion provides “a great deal” of guidance in their day-to-day living.

	<b>Infrequent Church-Goers</b>	<b>Frequent Church-Goers</b>	<b>Highly Religious</b>
<b>1984-2004</b>			
<b>Social Policy Index (0 to 100)</b>	.0227 (.0026)	.0224 (.0021)	.0264 (.0025)
<b>Economic Policy Index (0 to 100)</b>	.0451 (.0026)	.0388 (.0025)	.0323 (.0029)
<b>N</b>	2,165	2,510	1,659
<b>1984-2004 (with Time Trend)</b>			
<b>Social Policy Index (0 to 100)</b>	.0175 (.0041)	.0152 (.0034)	.0200 (.0041)
<b>Social Policy × Trend</b>	.0115 (.0072)	.0156 (.0060)	.0148 (.0076)
<b>Economic Policy Index (0 to 100)</b>	.0440 (.0042)	.0348 (.0041)	.0286 (.0046)
<b>Economic Policy × Trend</b>	.0017 (.0071)	.0080 (.0072)	.0080 (.0082)
<b>N</b>	2,165	2,510	1,659
<b>2004 Only</b>			
<b>Social Policy Index (0 to 100)</b>	.0227 (.0074)	.0314 (.0065)	.0317 (.0087)
<b>Economic Policy Index (0 to 100)</b>	.0467 (.0070)	.0486 (.0078)	.0460 (.0096)
<b>N</b>	294	316	196

**Table 5: Social and Economic Issue Preferences and Party Identification by Religiosity, 1984-2004 (Whites Only)**

Probit coefficients (with standard errors in parentheses).  
 Separate intercepts for each group in each election year not shown.

Infrequent church-goers attended “never” or “a few times a year.” Frequent church-goers attended at least “once or twice a month.” Highly religious people said religion provides “a great deal” of guidance in their day-to-day living.

	<b>Infrequent Church-Goers</b>	<b>Frequent Church-Goers</b>	<b>Highly Religious</b>
<b>1984-2004</b>			
<b>Social Policy Index (0 to 100)</b>	.257 (.031)	.313 (.031)	.339 (.036)
<b>Economic Policy Index (0 to 100)</b>	.764 (.030)	.840 (.035)	.755 (.040)
<b>N</b>	4,860	4,519	3,435
<b>1984-2004 (with Time Trend)</b>			
<b>Social Policy Index (0 to 100)</b>	.168 (.055)	.205 (.058)	.260 (.062)
<b>Social Policy × Trend</b>	.202 (.105)	.220 (.104)	.176 (.118)
<b>Economic Policy Index (0 to 100)</b>	.726 (.053)	.772 (.065)	.656 (.068)
<b>Economic Policy × Trend</b>	.069 (.097)	.130 (.117)	.217 (.129)
<b>N</b>	4,860	4,519	3,435
<b>2004 Only</b>			
<b>Social Policy Index (0 to 100)</b>	.381 (.115)	.412 (.100)	.386 (.127)
<b>Economic Policy Index (0 to 100)</b>	.786 (.098)	.912 (.112)	.999 (.138)
<b>N</b>	392	382	253



Figure 1: White Presidential Vote  
by Income Class, 1952-2004

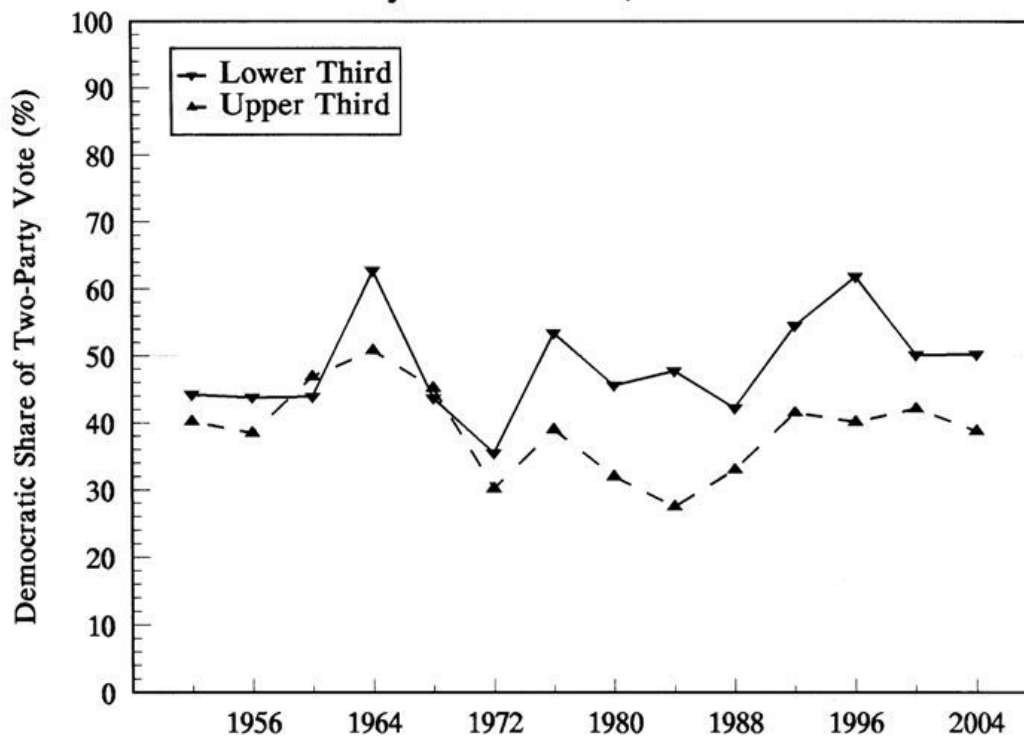


Figure 2: Party Identification  
by Income Class, 1952-2004 (Whites Only)

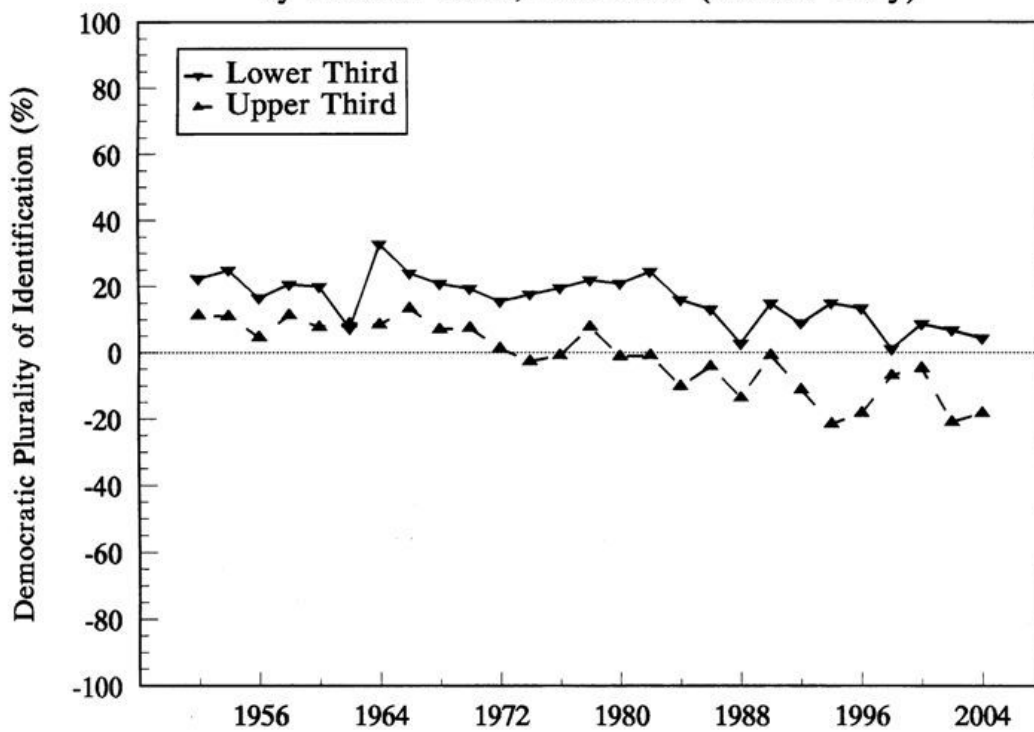


Figure 3: Party Identification by Region, 1952-2004 (Low Income Whites Only)

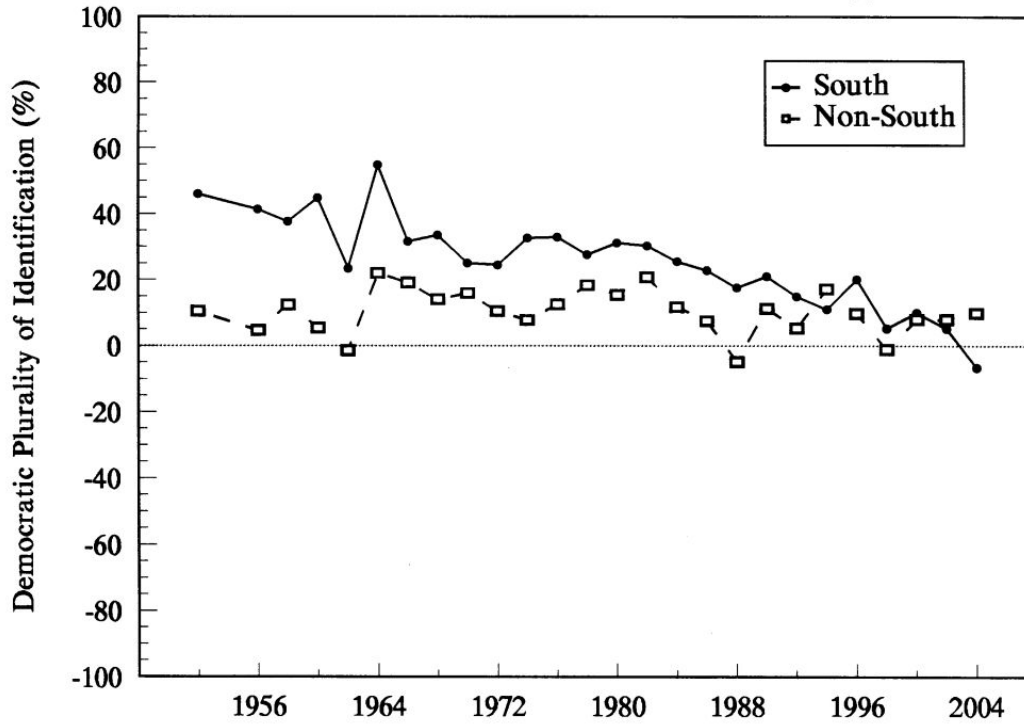


Figure 4: Ideological Liberalism by Income Class, 1972-2004 (Whites Only)

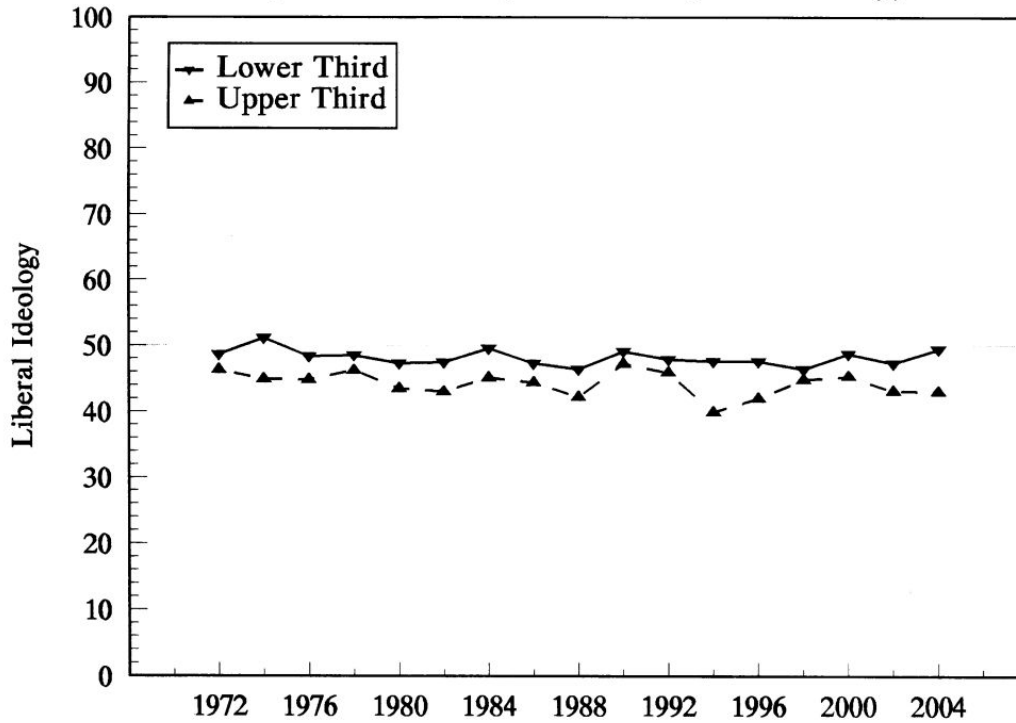


Figure 5: Support for Government Jobs by Income Class, 1972-2004 (Whites Only)

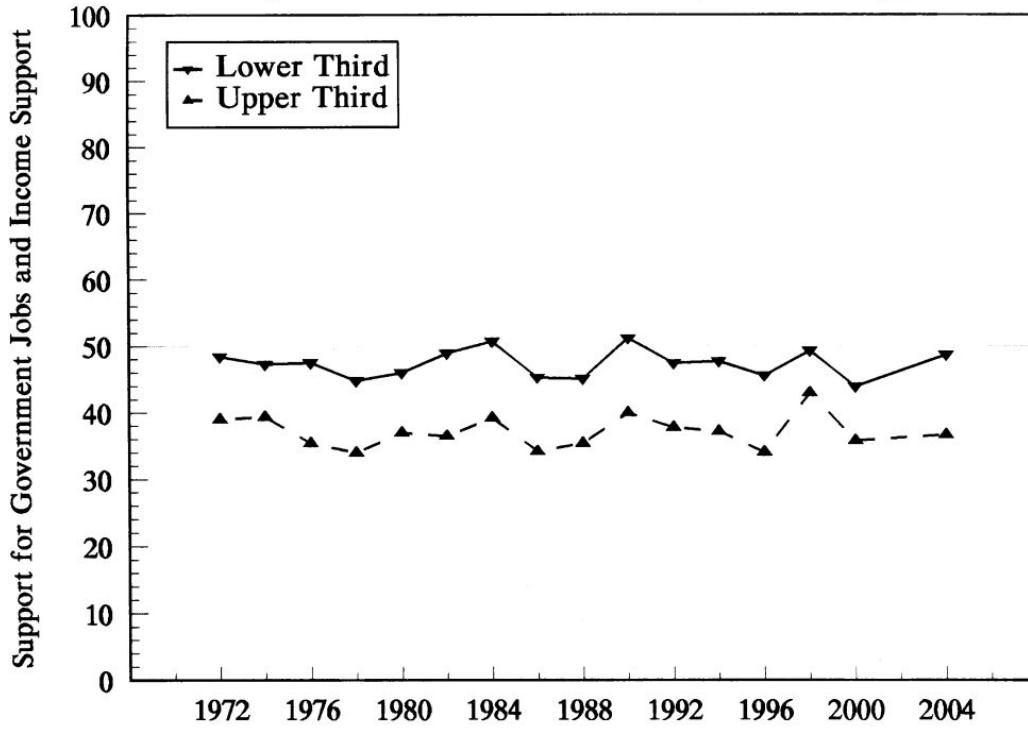


Figure 6: Support for Abortion Rights by Income Class, 1972-2004 (Whites Only)

