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## Are the Republicans Now the Working-Class Party?



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Conservatives claim that Donald Trump’s electoral victories show that his Republican Party, not the Democrats, now represents the working class.

Sen. Josh Hawley [tweeted](#) on election night 2020, “We are a working-class party now. That’s the future.” Although unions only represent 10% of the working-class labor force, since 1980, Democrats have not dipped below 51%. However, as the data below shows, most working-class Whites have become Republican voters.

[Using Vanderbilt data](#), most White working-class voters voted for Republican presidential candidates in seven of the last 11 elections, from 1980 through 2020. Since Bill Clinton’s elections, only Obama’s first race has a Democrat won the majority of White working-class voters. However, Obama dramatically lost their support in his second election, with 57% of them going to Presidential candidate Mitt Romney.

### **Who are the working-class folks?**

Like most surveys, the 2021 report defines the working class as people without a college degree. However, it added that they also belong to the bottom half of the household income distribution. This eliminates those who don't finish college but still go on to earn high salaries, like Bill Gates. I've used Vanderbilt's definition where possible but note when data is based only on education level.

The Vanderbilt Project's Political Science Professors Noam Lupu and Nicholas Carnes found that **among GOP voters**, working-class Whites (using their definition) have remained at the 31% percentage level the Republicans achieved in 2012 when Mitt Romney ran against Obama.

### **Have they become Republicans?**

Lupu and Carnes take solace in saying, "Trump's term in office stalled a long-term trend of White working-class voters moving to the Republican Party." However, they did measure the **proportion** of those who voted Republican in past elections, which provides a less optimistic trend. White working-class voters' proportion going for a Republican president reached new heights with Trump's 2016 and 2020 campaigns.

Before Trump's 2016 campaign, the proportion voting for a Republican peaked at 57% when Obama ran for reelection in 2012. Trump raised it to 62% in 2016, which remained high at 59% when he lost in 2020. Lupu and Carnes have not posted any data analysis on the 2024 election.

However, an exit poll by TRT World of the 2024 election was available. It defined working-class voters as those without college degrees. In 2024, 42 % voted for Kamala Harris, while Trump took 56%, marking a six-point increase over his 2020 election against Biden.

According to Pew Research, White working-class voters, defined solely by not having a college degree, comprise 41% of all eligible voters. College-educated White adults make up just 24%. Traditionally, they tipped Republican, but in the past four elections, they have favored Democratic candidates, but not as enthusiastically as the White working-class workers favoring Republicans.

Men are the core of Republican White working-class supporters. That began with Ron Reagan's campaigns. Washington Post reported that an exit polling by ABC News found that Reagan won 54% of the votes of White males earning less than \$5,000 (working class) and 57% of those earning \$5,000 to \$10,000 (middle class).

Trump repeated that pattern in 2024 by receiving 56% of White males with no college degree and 51% earning less than \$100,000, which includes more middle-class workers.

In brief, the majority of White working-class voters have drifted to Republicans over the past forty years. Unless Democrats recapture a chunk of these voters, they could lose future elections because there are more White non-college degree -class voters than college-educated White voters.

### **Do White working-class voters turn away from the Democrats because of cultural or economic concerns?**

The pro-Democratic public opinion research center Blueprint. Their study posted on X found that the third-most cited reason voters in swing states had turned away from Harris was because “she focused more on cultural and social issues, like transgender rights, rather than helping the working class.”

A 2012 survey by the Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI) defined White Americans without a four-year college degree who hold non-salaried jobs as working class. These Americans make up roughly one-third (36%) of all Americans.

The survey showed that White working-class voters are more culturally conservative than White middle-class voters, being 150% more likely to identify as evangelical Protestants. Overall, Romney also enjoyed a 2-to-1 advantage over Obama among Protestant voters. White working-class voters stood out by 70% believing that God has granted America a special place in human history versus only 42% of college-educated White voters.

Despite this religious orientation, in 2012, their positions appeared to be much more liberal than they are assumed to be today. Only half (50%) of the White working class were opposed to allowing gay and lesbian couples to marry legally. By that same percentage, they said abortion should be legal in all or most cases.

More importantly, the survey found that “only 1-in-20 White working-class Americans say that either abortion (3%) or same-sex marriage (2%) is the most important issue to their vote. By contrast, a majority (53%) of them say the economy is their most important voting issue. The bottom line is that White working-class voters are more concerned with achieving financial security than with solving cultural grievances beyond their community.

### **Who do Americans blame for their frail financial security?**

Seven in ten (70%) of White working-class voters believe the economic system in this country unfairly favors the wealthy. They also think corporations are getting too many benefits from the government. However, they don't see corporations as the cause of their financial difficulties; they see politicians as giving them advantages over others.

Trump recognized their anger and turned it against the government, Congress, federal agencies, and courts for being weak and wasteful. Voters who felt that the established

Democratic and Republican leaders had done little to improve their lives are willing to give Trump another try.

Democrats tend to assume the White working class's economic populism is inherently conservative and broadly anti-government. They are partly correct since only 39% of the White working class thinks about the U.S. government as "our" government. Still, only 51% of the White middle class also feel that way.

White working-class Americans are a growing base within the MAGA movement, and they want solutions that meet their expectations. And that 62% favor raising the tax rate on households with incomes over \$1 million yearly. This is a policy promoted by the Democratic Party, not the Republican.

Trump sidesteps the reality of wealth disparity and taxes favoring the rich. He recognizes that polls show over half of Americans believe corporations moving American jobs overseas are very responsible for our current economic distress. His messaging identifies a simple step to quickly solve the financial stress of the working class and middle-class households: promote higher tariffs to keep our factories and businesses open.

Critical economists drag out charts showing that higher tariffs will increase inflation. However, those facts do not puncture Trump's message because they are abstract, not visual. Trump's simple image of more workers in the factory and more sales of American goods and services has an intuitive attraction. Trump is a crude bully, but he is a damn good storyteller.

But the reality is that all working-class households have seen their annual incomes shrink, while their wealth has stagnated since 2008. This has created more significant concern about their future. Sanders noted that more see themselves as living paycheck by paycheck and perhaps returning to a lower economic status.

**Donald Trump resonates as the outsider who wants to return to better days when household incomes have not stagnated.**

People will not remember that Obama increased the median household income by 12% in his second term. However, they will recall feeling better under Trump, probably because their household income had risen by 8.3% and contracted by 1.3% under Biden's first three years.

In Biden's defense, his term began as the Covid pandemic caused businesses to close and lay off workers. Nevertheless, polls show that the public generally felt better during the Trump years than during Biden's watch.

Ironically, the Bureau of Labor Statistics shows that unemployment declined for all races during Obama's and Biden's last term. With Biden, unemployment rates fell, decreasing for

Blacks and Hispanics at 5%, while Whites declined just 3.5%. Trump's administration, on the other hand, saw unemployment rates increase for minorities by 60% more than for Whites.

So, what was the result of these trends? The Democratic administration that lowered unemployment lost elections, and Trump, who ruled when unemployment increased, won. Voters do not dwell in a world of data analysis; their lives consist of listening and believing stories.

Perception shapes reality, not data. As financial security has worsened for all working families under Republican presidents, their support for Republicans has grown.

**Democrats don't organize around economic issues.**

In 2024, 60 percent of American working-class folks were "living paycheck to paycheck," as Senator Bernie Sanders said. And he could have added that one in five White working-class Americans do not have health insurance.

This data is presented in Democratic campaigns, but it is insufficient to convince the working class that Democrats prioritize solving economic problems over cultural ones. As Sanders points out, Democrats are perceived as ignoring the needs of the working class by not pushing for specific solutions.

He notes a prime example: When the Democrats controlled the Senate under Biden, they did not even introduce legislation to raise the minimum wage to a living wage of \$15 an hour, even though some 20 million people in this country are working for less than that amount.

Even though Democrats do not control either chamber of Congress, they must highlight the distinction between promoting the nation's general welfare and narrow financial interests. Consequently, if the Democrats want to represent the working-class voters truly, they should introduce specific legislation in Congress and promote it through coordinated social media campaigns to reach them in every state.

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