



The American Panel Survey

Working Class Voters in the 2012 and 2016 Presidential Elections

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A central theme of commentary on the 2016 presidential election cycle was the special appeal of Donald Trump's candidacy to the American working class. A syndrome of lost manufacturing jobs and downward mobility, pessimism about the future of their children, rising income inequality, and declining health and life expectancy made the Trump message appealing.¹ According to this account, working class whites gave Trump a wave of support from outside the usual Republican primary electorate and, because of their policy views and social values, created strategic problems for traditional Republican candidates. The theme was not new to social scientists, but it became the theme of Trump's stump speeches and a wide range of political commentary in 2015.²

The American Panel Survey (TAPS) provides support for the proposition that 2016 differed from 2012 in the support provided by working class voters for the Republican candidate for president. Table 1 reports estimates of the effects of party identification and a set of demographic characteristics on presidential vote choice (two party) in 2012 and 2016. The variables of interest are the income category variables. Income groups are coded into six categories: Income1 (\$0-9,999), Income2 (\$10,000-29,999), Income3 (\$30,000-49,000), Income4 (\$50,000-79,999), and Income5 (\$80,000-99,999). A last category, Income6 (\$100,000 and above) is the reference category for the estimates and not shown in the estimates. Positive signs on the coefficients indicates a positive relationship between the variable and voting for the Republican candidate (Romney or Trump).

| Table 1. Estimates for Presidential Vote Choice, 2012 and 2016 | | |
|---|---------------------|----------------------|
| | 2012 – Obama/Romney | 2016 – Clinton/Trump |
| Party Identification- Republican | .70*** (.03) | .65*** (.03) |
| Ethnicity – African-Am. | -.06 (.51) | -.05 (.23) |
| Ethnicity – Hispanic-Am. | -.22*** (.05) | -.18*** (.05) |
| Gender -- Female | -.03 (.03) | -.10*** (.02) |
| Education | -.07* (.03) | -.14*** (.03) |
| Union Family | -.06 (.04) | -.16*** (.04) |
| Married | .04 (.03) | .05 (.03) |
| Age | -.03* (.01) | -.004 (.01) |
| Income1 | -.03 (.10) | 0.01 (.10) |
| Income2 | -.04 (.05) | .17*** (.05) |
| Income3 | .01 (.04) | .16*** (.04) |
| Income4 | .04 (.03) | .02 (.03) |
| Income5 | -.02 (.04) | -.09* (.04) |
| AIC | 715.4 | 1160.6 |
| Logit estimates; standard errors in parentheses; *** p < .001; ** p < .01; * p < .05; reference categories: party—Democrat/Independent; ethnicity—white, gender—male, union—non-union family, married—not married, income—incomes \$100,000 and above. Intercepts not shown. | | |

For 2012, the estimates show that Republican and white voters were strongly disproportionately likely to vote for Romney over Obama, as were less well educated and younger voters, controlling for other factors. In 2016, these factors and union membership were related to voting for Trump over Clinton.³ African-Americans, of course, voted overwhelmingly for Obama and the sign for the coefficient is in that direction, but the other

factors in the equation pick up most of the difference between African-Americans and whites. The coefficients for these variables are similar for the two elections, which indicates that, with respect to these factors, the electoral coalitions of the two parties changed little between 2012 and 2016.

The variables of special interest here are the income categories. Membership in the working class categories—Income2 and Income3 (shaded yellow)—is not related to voting for Romney and Obama in 2012. In 2016, membership in those categories is related to support for Trump over Clinton--the size of coefficients increased greatly while standard errors remained about the same.

The rise of the working class component of the Republican coalition is potentially important. For Republicans, it enhances their electoral prospects but complicates the challenge of meeting the expectations of both the new working class supporters and the traditional support of business, upper income, and religious right interests. For Democrats, it may be a serious obstacle to realizing the electoral benefits from demographic developments in the U.S. that promised to increase support for the party.

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About *The American Panel Survey*

The American Panel Survey (TAPS) is a monthly online panel survey of over 2,200 people. Panelists were recruited as a national probability sample with an addressed-based sampling frame. The survey is conducted by GfK Knowledge Networks for the Weidenbaum Center at Washington University. Individuals without Internet access were provided a laptop and internet service at the expense of the Weidenbaum Center. In a typical month, about 1,800 of the panelists complete the online survey. Analyses in this report use weights based on CPS benchmarks. Technical information about TAPS is available at taps.wustl.edu.

Notes

1. <http://www.prrri.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/PRRI-AVS-2015-Web.pdf>;
<http://www.pewtrusts.org/en/archived-projects/economic-mobility-project>;
<http://www.pnas.org/content/112/49/15078.full.pdf>.
2. Ruy Teixeira and Joel Rogers, *America's Forgotten Majority: Why the White Working Class Still Matters* (New York: Basic Books, 2001); Michael Zweig, *The Working Class Majority: America's Best Kept Secret* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000).
3. A reasonable speculation is that union membership became significant in 2016 because of the relevance of working class membership that year. Controlling for working class income, union membership became more strongly associated with reduced support for the Republican candidate.