



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 since Trump entered the race.²

The working class whites narrative included elements of age and education. Central to this account is that Americans who are middle aged or somewhat older and those with less than a college education could once expect to be in union jobs that could support a middle-class lifestyle. The decline of union and manufacturing jobs undermined this "American dream" standard for less well educated Americans.

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 analysis is limited to white voters to allow us to focus on the "working class whites" thesis. The variables of interest are the income, age, and education variables. Income groups are coded into five categories with the highest category as the reference category and therefore is not shown. Age is given four categories with the lowest category (<30) as the reference category. For both income and age, the estimates reflect a

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comparison of the category with the reference category. Positive signs on the coefficients indicate a positive relationship between the variable and voting for the Republican candidate (Romney or Trump).

Table 1. Estimates for Presidential Vote Choice, White Voters, 2012 and 2016		
	2012 – Voted for Romney over Obama	2016 – Voted for Trump over Clinton
Party Identification- Republican	.63*** (.02)	.66*** (.02)
Gender -- Female	-.05* (.02)	-.05* (.02)
Education	-.09*** (.03)	-.11*** (.02)
Income < \$10,000	.09 (.06)	0.08 (.08)
Income \$10,000-\$29,999	-.11* (.04)	..03 (.04)
Income \$30,000-\$49,999	-.02 (.04)	.08* (.04)
Income \$50,000-\$79,999	.09* (.04)	.06 (.04)
Income \$80,000-\$99,999	.12** (.04)	.00 (.04)
Age 30-44	.02 (.04)	.06 (.04)
Age 45-59	.10** (.04)	.05 (.04)
Age 60+	.09* (.04)	.08* (.04)
Intercept	.26*** (.05)	.23*** (.05)
AIC	1389.9	1056.6
Logit estimates; standard errors in parentheses; *** p < .001; ** p < .01; * p < .05. Weighted by CPS for white voters in each year.		

For 2012 and 2016, the estimates show that Republicans were strongly disproportionately likely to vote for their party's candidate. Women tended to vote less frequently for the Republican candidate than men in both elections. In both elections, less well educated and younger people tended to be less supportive of the Republican candidate than more highly educated and older people, although the age effect was stronger in 2012.

In contrast, the two elections differ in the relationship between income and vote choice. In 2012, higher income was associated with a greater likelihood of voting for the Republican, as has been the case in most elections in recent decades. In 2016, this effect is washed out. Instead, a working class income in the \$30,000-\$50,000 range is associated modestly with a greater likelihood of voting for Trump over Clinton, controlling for other factors.

The rise of the working class component of the Republican coalition is potentially important—but only if the Republican advantage with group is maintained. For Republicans, working class support 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, losses among working class Americans 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 2,000 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.