

# The Democrats and Working-Class Whites

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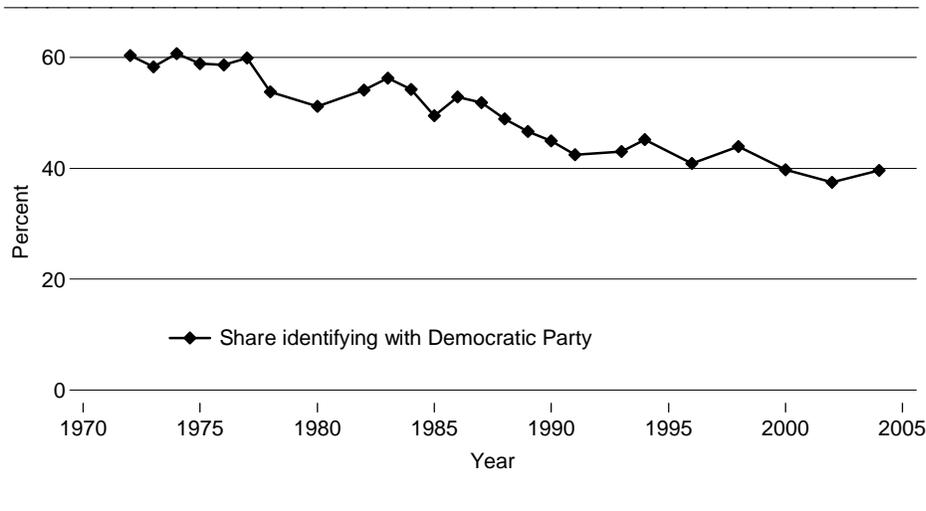
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We explore defection of working-class whites from the Democratic party since the mid 1970s. Identification with the Democrats among this group fell by twenty percentage points in the late 1970s and the 1980s and has not changed since then. We consider the impact of compositional shifts and issues on this development and find that the latter played a far more important role. Working-class whites who turned away from the Democrats appear to have done so in part because their views shifted to the right on some issues, in part because they perceived the Democrats as shifting to their left on some issues, in part because some issues on which they were never aligned with the party's positions increased in importance to them, and in part because they lost confidence in the Democrats' ability to deliver on key issues. We conclude that material issues were a more important cause of the decline in Democratic identification than social/cultural ones. The lack of change in Democratic identification among working-class whites since the early 1990s appears to have been due to an increase in the importance of social/cultural issues and to a cohort effect.

Identification with the Democratic party among working-class whites has declined significantly since the mid 1970s. Figure 1 shows this using data from the General Social Survey (GSS). Democratic identification fell from 60% in the mid 1970s to 40% in the early 1990s and has remained at that level since.

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Figure 1. Identification with the Democratic Party among Working-Class Whites, 1972-2004



Note: Authors' calculations using General Social Survey (GSS) data.

This development is of both scientific and political interest. It has long been a staple view among political sociologists and political scientists that class position is a key determinant of party preference (Lipset et al. 1954; Lipset and Rockan 1967; Manza and Brooks 1999; Stonecash 2000, 2006; Goldthorpe 2001; Weakliem 2001; McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2006; Hout and Moodie 2007). A defection from the Democrats among the white working class would suggest a weakening of this tendency in the United States. With respect to politics, the issue has implications for Democratic and Republican party electoral strategy. Calculated using our preferred definition of the white working class (discussed below), this group accounts for 35-45% of American adults. Their share of actual voters tends to be slightly lower due to higher voting rates among the middle and upper classes, yet they nevertheless constitute a bloc of substantial size.

We are scarcely the first to note this decline. It has been the subject of various analyses since the late 1980s (Dionne 1991; Edsall 1992; Stonecash 2000; Teixeira and Rogers 2000; Frank 2004; Bartels 2006). However, the considerable attention devoted to the issue has failed to produce much in the way of agreement about either the descriptive fact or the explanation.

We attempt to answer two questions: (1) Is the apparent defection from the Democrats among working-class whites real? (2) What caused the defection? Was it caused primarily by compositional shifts or substantive issues? If the latter, was the principal culprit material issues or social/cultural ones?

We rely mainly on data from the GSS, a nationally-representative survey of American adults conducted annually or biannually since 1972. Sample sizes during these years ranged from just over 1,000 to nearly 3,000.

We follow prior studies in focusing on whites, rather than all races. Between 1972 and 2004 Democratic identification among working-class whites dropped by twenty percentage points, starting at 60% and ending at 40%. The GSS has a very limited race/ethnicity variable, with only three categories: white, black, and other. We cannot assess trends in the "other" category, as the number of working-class observations for this group is too small in many years. In contrast to whites, Democratic identification among working-class African Americans began at 90% and ended at 82% (see the appendix). It thus declined by a much smaller amount despite starting at a considerably higher level. And there has been no change at all among African Americans since 1977, when the decline among whites began.

### **Is the Decline Real?**

Is the apparent defection from the Democrats among working-class whites genuine? Or is it a function of our measurement choices?

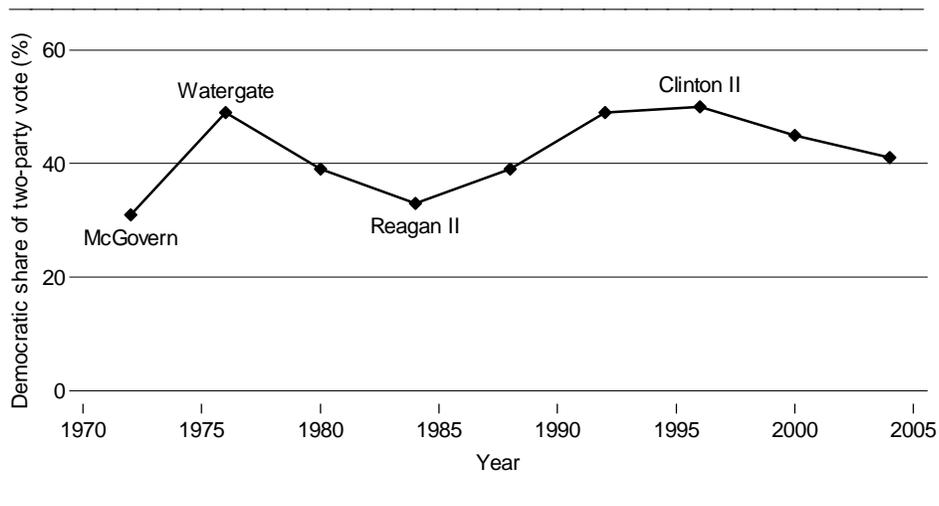
#### *Sensitive to Measure of Party Preference?*

Our interest is in party preference. Most studies of party preference examine vote choice in presidential elections (e.g., Manza and Brooks 1999; Stonecash 2000, 2006; Clark and Lipset 2001; Gelman et al. 2005; Bartels 2006). Voting is, arguably, what ultimately matters with respect to political behavior. And vote choice in presidential elections certainly is more useful than in congressional, state, and local elections, since the latter depends to a considerable extent on idiosyncratic state and local issues. Yet there are drawbacks to studying presidential voting.

One is that it occurs only once every four years. This makes it more difficult to identify the timing, and thus the causes, of trends. A second is that voter choice in U.S. presidential elections tends to be heavily influenced by the particular candidates the parties nominate for the general election. This leads to substantial fluctuation in measured party preferences that may have little to do with actual preferences. Consider the data in figure 2, which represent the Democratic party share of the two-party presidential election vote (that is, leaving out votes for third party candidates such as George Wallace and Ross Perot) among whites with fewer than twelve years of schooling. The Democratic share was extremely low in 1972, reflecting dissatisfaction with George McGovern's candidacy. The high Democratic share in 1976 undoubtedly reflected Watergate. The low share in 1984 and the high share in 1996 likely reflected to a nontrivial degree the popularity of incumbents Ronald Reagan and Bill Clinton. Data on general party identification are much less heavily influenced by the particularities of candidates and election timing. A third potential problem with focusing on voting is reliability. Jeff Manza and Clem Brooks (1999, p. 185) note that there is considerable

over-reporting of voting in the standard data source, the National Election Studies (NES). About 75% of respondents tend to say they voted, when the actual share is closer to 50%. Finally, it is worth noting that in recent decades party identification has been a much stronger predictor of voting behavior in presidential elections than was true in the 1950s and 1960s (Bartels 2000).

Figure 2. Democratic Party Share of Two-Party Presidential Vote among Working-Class Whites

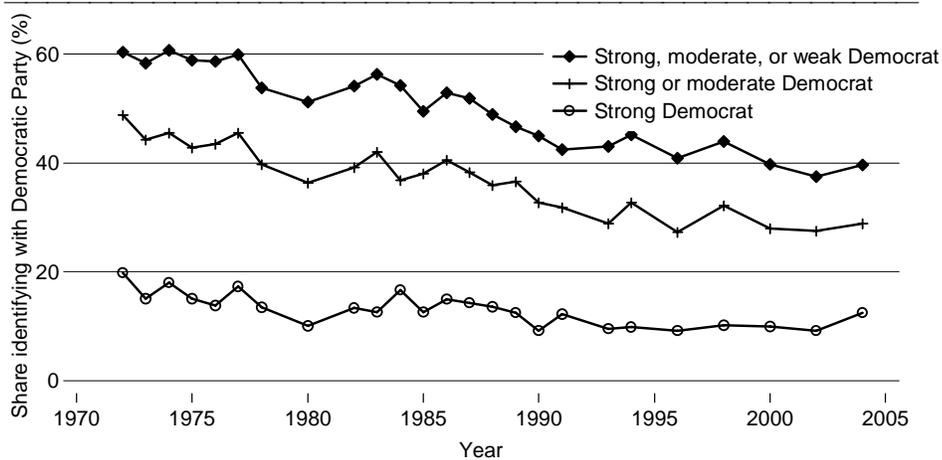


Note: Calculations by Larry Bartels (2006, figure 1) from National Election Studies (NES) data. Working class is defined as less than twelve years of schooling.

We measure party preference using party identification (sometimes referred to as party affiliation). As Jeffrey Stonecash (2000, p. 113) notes, "Party identification is generally regarded as more enduring than voting in any particular election" (see also Petrocik 1981; McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2006, ch. 3). The GSS question is "Generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as a Republican, Democrat, Independent, or what?" (The GSS variable is "partyid.") Response options are strong Republican, not very strong Republican, independent close to Republican, independent, independent close to Democrat, not very strong Democrat, strong Democrat. We focus on the share identifying with the Democratic party, which we measure as the share choosing strong Democrat, not very strong Democrat, or independent close to Democrat.

Is the decline suggested in figure 1 sensitive to this measure of Democratic identification? Figure 3 shows the over-time trends using this measure and two more restrictive ones. One includes only those choosing not very strong Democrat or strong Democrat; the other includes only those choosing strong Democrat. Although the level of Democratic identification is of course lower using the more restrictive codings, the trends are effectively identical.

Figure 3. Sensitivity to Alternative Measures of Democratic Identification



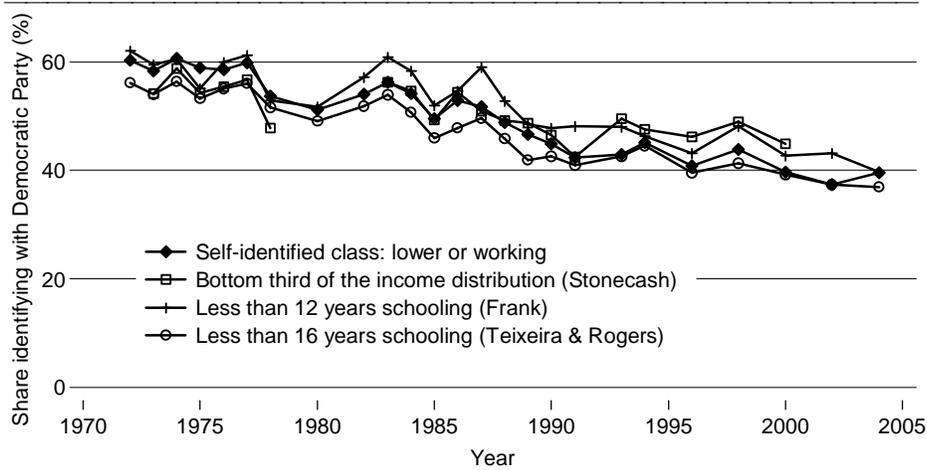
Note: Authors' calculations using GSS data. Working class is defined as self-identified lower or working class.

***Sensitive to Measure of Working Class?***

How should we define the working class? There is no objectively correct definition. The principal options are four: (1) subjective class identification; (2) education; (3) income; (4) occupation. Figure 1 above uses a subjective self-identification measure: those responding lower or working (the other options are middle and upper).

Figure 4 shows Democratic identification using this measure along with three others — one based on income and two based on education. In the GSS it is impossible to generate an income-based measure that is consistent over time. The GSS income question utilizes categories, and the distribution among the categories changes substantially over time due to rising incomes. We have tried to replicate the bottom-third-of-the-income-distribution measure used by Jeffrey Stonecash (2000) and others (Fiorina et al. 2005) as best we can, but there are several years — 1980, 1982, 2002, and 2004 — for which it is not possible. The less-than-a-high-school-degree measure is a relatively narrow one preferred by Thomas Frank, whose book *What's the Matter with Kansas?* (Frank 2004) has been influential in recent debate on this issue, and used by Larry Bartels (2006) in his empirical assessment of Frank's hypothesis. The less-than-a-four-year-college-degree definition is a more expansive one used by Ruy Teixeira and Joel Rogers in their 2000 book *The Forgotten Majority*.

Figure 4. Sensitivity to Alternative Measures of the Working Class



Note: Authors' calculations using GSS data.

There are some differences in the trends. In particular, the income measure suggests a smaller decline. But overall these three alternative measures tell a story similar to that yielded by the self-identification measure of working class.

In our analyses we use the self-identification measure (the GSS variable is "class"). The share of GSS whites self-identifying in the four response categories has been remarkably stable over time: around 4% lower class, 45% working class, 48% middle class, and 3% upper class. This definition yields a white working class larger than that defined by having less than 12 years of schooling or being in the bottom third of the income distribution and smaller than that defined by having less than 16 years of schooling.

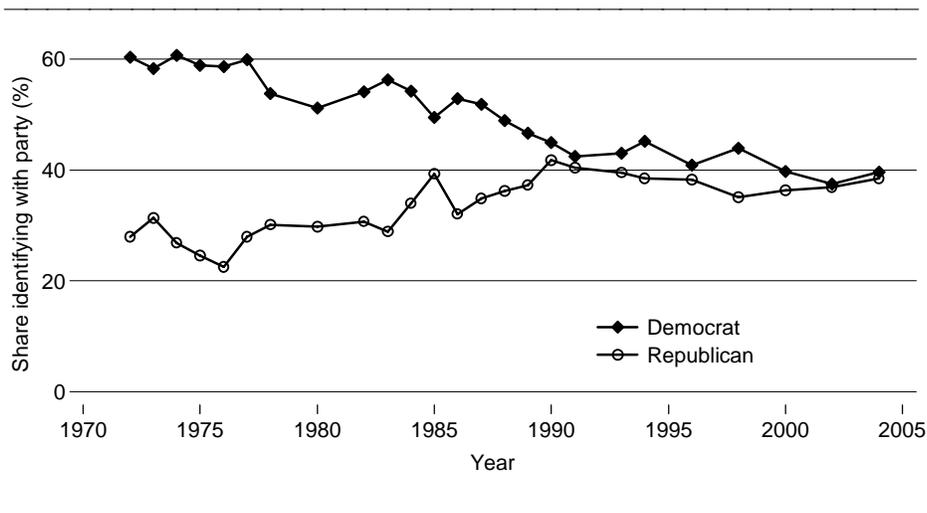
***A Function of General Party Disaffiliation?***

Does the drop in Democratic identification among working-class whites simply reflect a general decline in party identification? Perhaps an increasingly large share of Americans, including working-class whites, view themselves as "independents" rather than as wedded to a particular party.

Figure 5 suggests that while general party disaffiliation may account for part of the decline in Democratic identification among working-class whites, it is not the main story. Identification with the Republican party among working-class whites — defined in a parallel way, as strong Republican, not very strong Republican, independent close to Republican — increased substantially during the same years that Democratic identification was falling. The decline in Democratic identification was about twenty percentage points, while the rise in Republican identification was about twelve percentage points. About two-fifths of those defecting

from the Democrats thus became "independents." Some of these may have considered themselves truly independent, while others may have simply felt themselves no longer committed to the Democrats but not (yet) committed to the Republicans. In any event, party disaffiliation accounts at most for only part of the drop in Democratic identification among the white working class.

Figure 5. Democratic and Republican Party Identification among Working-Class Whites



Note: Authors' calculations using GSS data. Working class is defined as self-identified lower or working class.

### *A Function of Southern Realignment?*

Was the decline in Democratic identification among working-class whites merely a product of party realignment in the south? Because of the Civil War and its legacy, the south was safely Democratic until the mid-1960s. When the Democrats took the side of equal rights for African Americans with passage of the Civil Rights Act in 1964, that began to change (Petrocik 1981; Black and Black 1987, 2007; Edsall 1992). Several southern states voted for Barry Goldwater in the 1964 presidential election, and a number voted for George Wallace or Richard Nixon in 1968 and 1972. The change in voting behavior for congressional, state, and local elections trailed in timing somewhat, but it has occurred nonetheless (Schaller 2006; Shafer and Johnston 2006).

Quoting a campaign manager for a southern governor, Thomas Schaller (2006, p. 5) has argued that voter choice in the south follows a unique logic: "Voters go through a two-step process. The first is a credentialing filter, which asks if a candidate shares their values. The second is on issues.' It's extraordinarily difficult for Democratic candidates to differentiate themselves sufficiently on economic policies to compensate for the built-in advantages Republicans enjoy

on social issues." In an analysis of National Election Studies data on voting in presidential elections from 1952 to 2004, Larry Bartels (2006) found that the decline in voting for Democratic candidates among white working-class voters (defined as those with less than a high school degree) was strictly confined to the south. On the other hand, several recent studies have found that the effect of income on party choice in voting is as strong or stronger in the south than elsewhere (Gelman et al. 2005; Shafer and Johnston 2006). That is, low income voters are no less likely to vote Democratic in the south than they are in other regions.

To examine trends in Democratic party identification by region, we divide the states into three groups:

*South:* Alabama, Arkansas, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, Washington DC, West Virginia

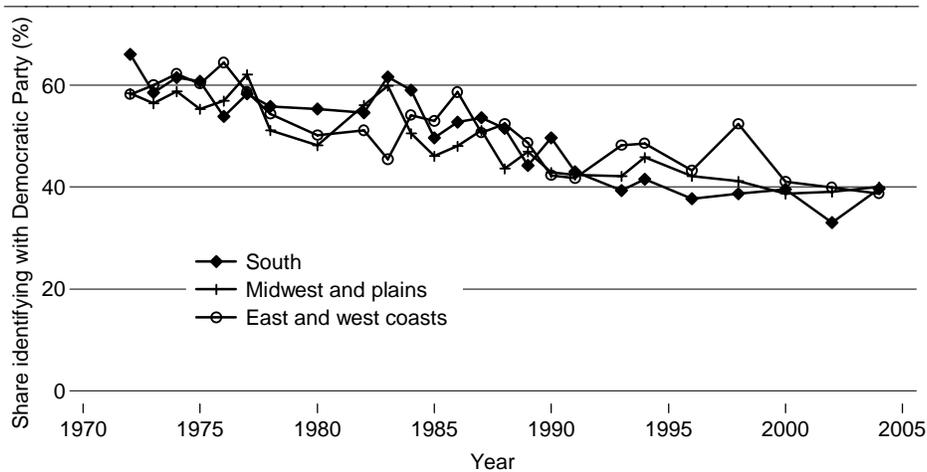
*Midwest and plains:* Arizona, Colorado, Idaho, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Montana, Nebraska, Nevada, New Mexico, North Dakota, Ohio, South Dakota, Utah, Wisconsin, Wyoming

*East and west coasts:* Alaska, California, Connecticut, Hawaii, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Vermont, Washington

The "east and west coasts" group contains mainly Democratic ("blue") states in New England, the mid-Atlantic, and on the west coast. The "midwest and plains" group includes some Republican ("red") states and a number of states in which neither party currently dominates. Almost all of the states in the "south" group are conservative and have been solidly Republican in recent elections. Roughly a third of white working-class respondents are located in each of these three groups.

Figure 6 shows trends in Democratic party identification among working-class whites in each of the three groups. Strikingly, both the level of Democratic identification and — more important for our purposes — the trend over time were very similar across the three. In contrast to Bartels' finding, then, the GSS data on party identification suggest that the fall since the mid 1970s in white working-class support for the Democrats has occurred throughout the country, rather than solely in the south.

Figure 6. Democratic Identification among Working-Class Whites in the South, Midwest and Plains, and the East and West Coasts



Note: Authors' calculations using GSS data. Working class is defined as self-identified lower or working class.

***Is the Decline Real? Summary***

The General Social Survey data suggest a genuine decline of substantial magnitude in Democratic identification among working-class whites since the mid 1970s.

**Why the Decline?**

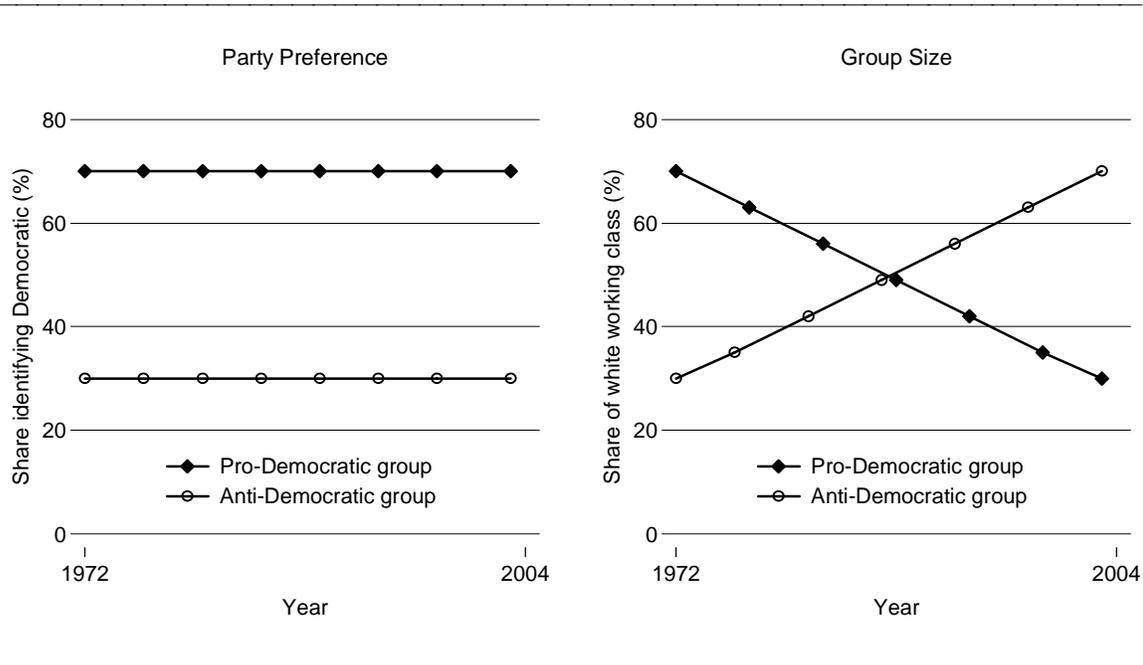
We consider two types of explanatory factors: (1) compositional shifts; (2) issues. Though we have not mentioned it thus far, there is an important point to note about the timing of the decline in Democratic identification among working-class whites. Figure 1 suggests that the defection was not steady and uninterrupted, but rather was concentrated in two periods: 1977 to 1980 and 1987 to 1991. Any explanation of the decline needs to account for this.

***Compositional Shifts***

We begin by considering compositional effects. In this type of story, the key factor is not a shift in party positions, in working-class whites' views, or in the importance individuals attach to particular issues. Instead, it is a shift in the composition of the white working-class population away from segments that are more likely to identify with the Democrats.

Figure 7 provides a stylized illustration of such a shift. For simplicity, it assumes there are two segments of the white working class: one more pro-Democratic, the other more anti-Democratic. The first chart in the figure shows that the share of each group that identifies with the Democrats remains constant over time. The second chart shows that the composition of the white working class shifts over time, with the pro-Democratic segment declining in size and the anti-Democratic segment increasing in size.

Figure 7. Illustration of a Compositional Shift Producing a Decline in Democratic Identification



We consider five potential sources of compositional effect: unionization, urban/rural location, religiosity, gender, and affluence. It turns out that in each case Democratic identification did not hold constant among the more and less pro-Democratic segment(s). Instead, it declined for all segments. This suggests that compositional effects were at best only a small part of the story.

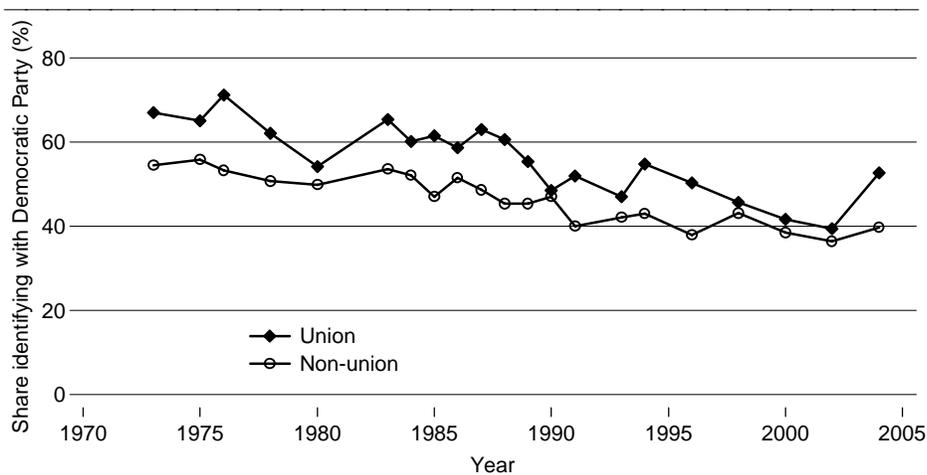
#### Unionization

Unions organize workers politically and typically encourage them to favor the Democrats. The period since the mid-1970s has been one of uninterrupted union decline; unionization has fallen sharply and consistently. The share of white working-class GSS respondents who either are a union member or whose spouse is a union member dropped from 26% in 1975 to 12% in 2004. (This fairly

closely tracks the figures on union membership as a share of the labor force.) Perhaps, then, the decline in Democratic identification among working-class whites is a product of a fall in the share of working-class whites who are union members.

Figure 8 indicates that this is not the case. Rather than Democratic identification among the two segments (union and non-union) remaining constant (as in the first chart in figure 7), both declined. Indeed, Democratic identification among union members fell more sharply than among non-unionists.

Figure 8. Democratic Identification among Union and Non-Union Working-Class Whites



Note: Authors' calculations using GSS data. Working class is defined as self-identified lower or working class.

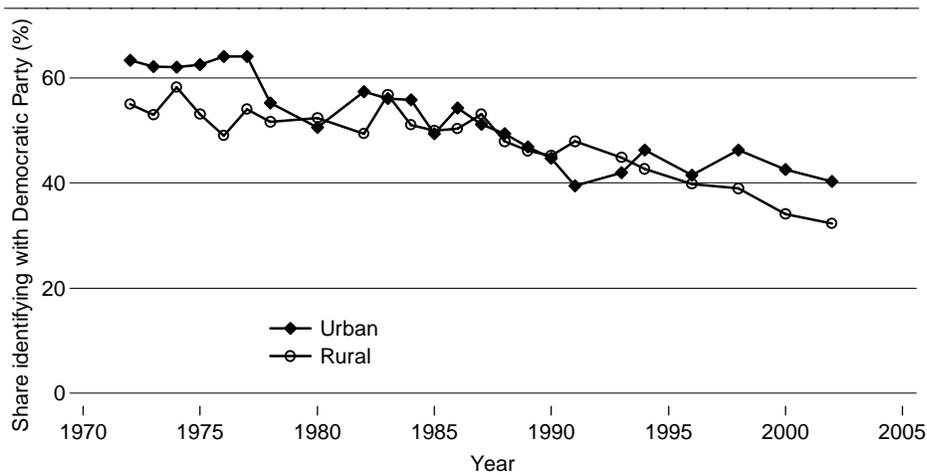
### Urban/Rural Location

A common contemporary view of the reason why Americans on the low end of the educational and income distributions do not favor the Democrats is that their attitudes and values are relatively conservative. Thomas Frank (2006, ch. 1) suggests that stereotypical working-class conservative characteristics include humility, reverence, courteousness, kindness, cheerfulness, loyalty, and patriotism. In one view, these are characteristics of rural America — of the "heartland" — and they contrast sharply with those of professionals in urban areas (Brooks 2001). Another argument suggests that working-class Americans in rural areas are more likely to be homeowners and self-employed and to attach significance to individualism and self-reliance. This is said to incline them "to adopt the self-image of the independent entrepreneur and property owner rather than that of the laborer in need of state regulation and protection" (Gimpel and Karnes 2006). Another posits that because rural areas tend to be relatively homogenous in terms of

income, low-income rural dwellers do not perceive their economic position as especially low and hence are less inclined to side with the party favoring more redistribution (Vigdor 2006). Might the decline in Democratic identification among working-class whites be a product of increases in the size of the rural population?

The GSS has a variable ("xnorcsize") representing the size of the place in which the respondent resides. Using this variable, we define urban as a city with a population of at least 50,000 or a suburb of such a city. Rural includes everything else — small city, town, village, open country. A basic problem for this compositional hypothesis is that there has been no increase in the share of working-class whites living in rural areas. Furthermore, figure 9 shows that while the *level* of Democratic identification was a bit lower in rural areas at the beginning and end of the period, the *trends* over time were very similar. Preference for the Democrats among working-class whites dropped by approximately twenty percentage points in both rural and urban areas.

Figure 9. Democratic Identification among Working-Class Whites in Urban and Rural Areas



Note: Authors' calculations using GSS data. Working class is defined as self-identified lower or working class.

### Religiosity

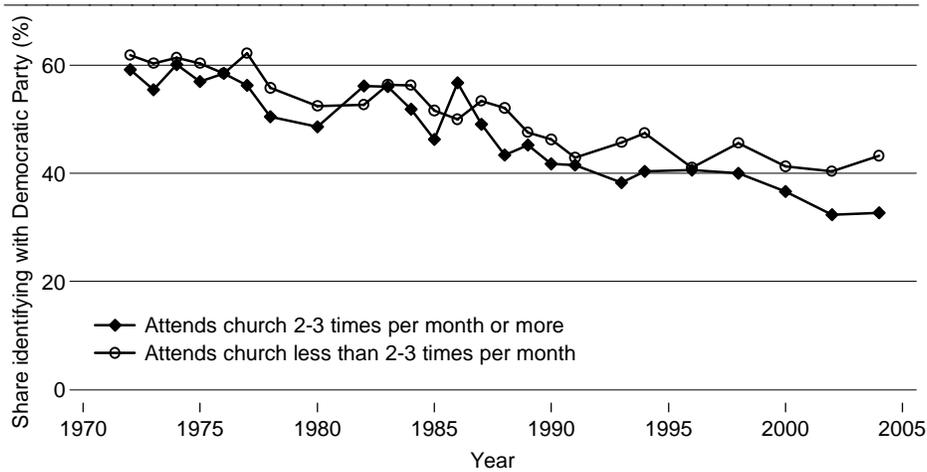
An issue commonly thought to decisively favor Republicans is religion. Is the decline in Democratic identification among working-class whites due to the fact that the religious are less Democratic and their share has increased over time?

In the GSS there are several variables that may be helpful in tapping religiosity. But only two have been asked since the survey's inception in 1972. One asks whether the respondent believes in an afterlife. The response choices are yes and

no. The other asks how often the respondent attends religious services. There are nine response choices, ranging from never to more than once per week. We use the attendance question, because the multiple response categories allow us to assess the sensitivity of findings to alternative operationalizations of "more" and "less" religious.

Figure 10 shows trends in Democratic party identification among those reporting that they attend religious services 2-3 times per week or more and those reporting that they attend less frequently (from never to once per month). The drop in Democratic affiliation was a bit sharper among those attending church more frequently, but the difference between the two groups is small. There is no indication of a sharp religiosity effect on white working-class defection.

Figure 10. Democratic Identification among More and Less Religious Working-Class Whites



Note: Authors' calculations using GSS data. Working class is defined as self-identified lower or working class.

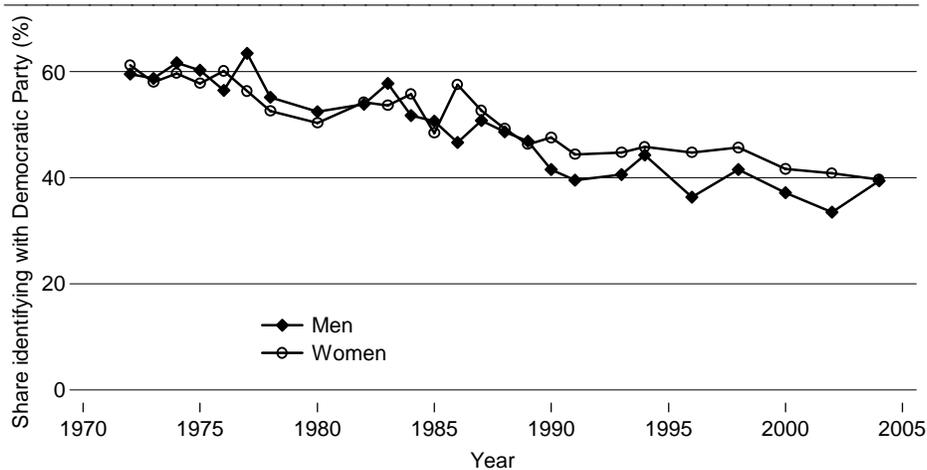
### Gender

A common conception is that the working-class whites who have turned against the Democrats are mostly men. They are assembly-line or construction workers who fear that African Americans or Hispanics will take their jobs. They are low-level supervisors who blame Democrats for the affirmative action program that caused them to get passed up for promotion. They are hunters who fear the Democrats will take away their guns. They are military types who have served — or have a brother or uncle who has — and who think the Democrats will cut spending on national defense. They are husbands with traditionalist gender views who blame the Democrats for their wife insisting they pitch in more with the housework and child care. They are fathers worried that a criminal not in jail because

of liberal rules that protect defendants will assault their daughter. They are anti-abortion crusaders. Or they are "average Joes" who sneer at "latte-sipping *New York Times*-reading liberal elites" trying to tell them how to run their life.

Figure 11 suggests that despite the resonance of these images, the decline in white working-class identification with the Democrats has been no less pronounced among women. There were a few years in the 1990s — 1996 in particular — in which there was a noticeable gender gap in white working-class Democratic affiliation. But as of 2004 the level of Democratic identification was exactly the same among white working-class women and men, and for both it had declined by exactly the same amount — about twenty percentage points — since the mid-1970s.

Figure 11. Democratic Identification among Working-Class White Men and Women

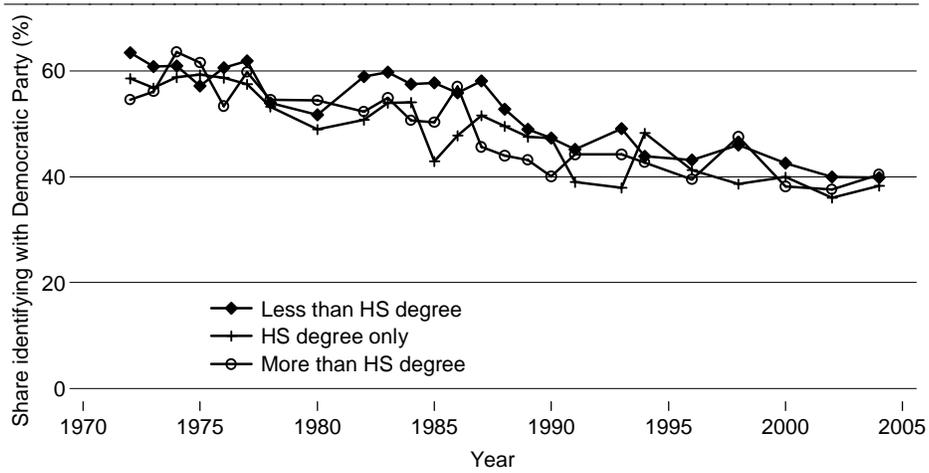


Note: Authors' calculations using GSS data. Working class is defined as self-identified lower or working class.

### Affluence

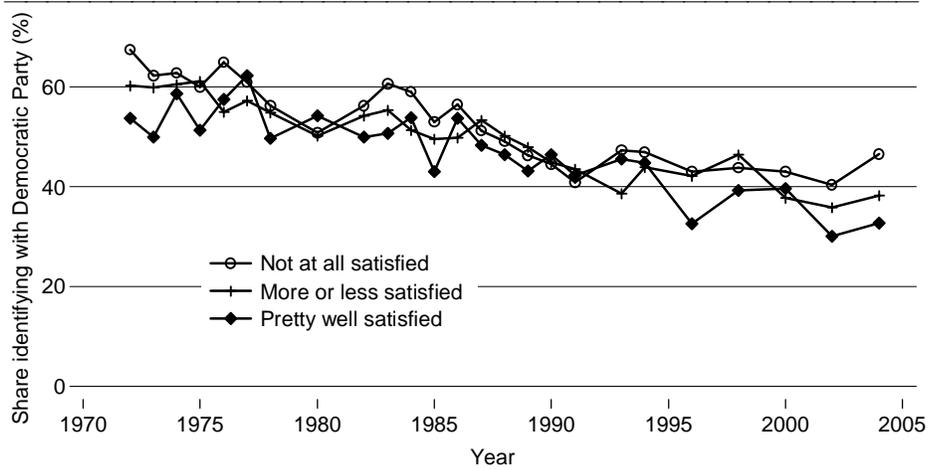
In analyses of presidential-election voting, Jeffrey Stonecash (2000) and Larry Bartels (2006, pp. 208-09) find that movement away from the Democrats among the white working class since the early 1970s has occurred mainly among those with higher incomes. Unfortunately, it is impossible to code income in a consistent way over time in the GSS; the GSS income question uses income categories, and inflation and changes in average income levels alter the distribution across these categories — substantially so over a lengthy period of time.

Figure 12. Democratic Identification among Lower-, Middle-, and Upper-Educated Working-Class Whites



Note: Authors' calculations using GSS data. Working class is defined as self-identified lower or working class.

Figure 13. Democratic Identification among Less and More Financially Satisfied Working-Class Whites



Note: Authors' calculations using GSS data. Working class is defined as self-identified lower or working class.

Education correlates strongly with income. We divide the self-identified working class into three groups based on education: those with 0 to 11 years of schooling, those with exactly 12 years (high school degree), and those with more than 12 years. Each of these groups accounts for about one-third of working-class whites. Figure 12 suggests considerable similarity in the trends for these three groups. In contrast to the findings of Stonecash and Bartels, there is no within-class skew in the degree of movement away from the Democrats.

The GSS also has a variable that asks people how satisfied they are with their current financial situation. Figure 13 shows trends in identification with the Democrats among working-class whites responding "not at all satisfied," "more or less satisfied," and "pretty well satisfied." Here too there is no evidence of an affluence effect.

#### Compositional Shifts: Summary

There is no indication that any of the potential compositional effects we have considered played a role in the decline in Democratic identification among working-class whites.

#### *Issues*

A second potential source of the decline is issues. It could be that working-class whites' views and the Democratic party's positions diverged, or that certain issues on which there had always been a sizeable gap increased in importance to working-class whites, or that working-class whites lost confidence in the Democrats' ability to fulfill their pledges. We attempt to distinguish between these patterns. We also attempt to gauge the relative impact of material issues and social/cultural issues. This is a key point of contention in recent debates (Wattenberg 1995; Edsall 2003; Frank 2004; Bartels 2006).

#### Possible Paths

There are four paths through which material and/or social/cultural issues might have contributed to the decline:

1. *Shift in working-class whites' views away from the Democratic party.* Conventional wisdom holds that there has been a shift to the right in American attitudes and beliefs over the past generation. If this is true for working-class whites, it may have produced a growing divergence between their views and those of the party.

2. *Shift in the Democratic party's positions away from working-class whites.* A general version of this notion is suggested by Adam Przeworski and John Sprague (1987). The working class is unlikely to account for a large enough share of the electorate to enable a party to win elections by appealing to it alone. Hence, it must appeal to other groups. In so doing, however, the party's attrac-

tiveness as a representative of the material interests of the working class is likely to diminish, which leads to reduced working-class support.

In his 1992 book *Chain Reaction*, Thomas Edsall argues that working-class whites began to turn away from the Democratic party in response to Democrats' support for the Civil Rights Act in 1964. Initially the defection occurred mainly in the south. But with the onset of affirmative action and public school desegregation via busing beginning in the early 1970s, both of which were supported by many Democrats, whites outside the south turned away as well.

An alternative version of this story holds that working-class whites defected because the Democratic party shifted to the *right* on economic issues, due to increased dependence on campaign contributions from corporations and wealthy individuals or to a conviction in the wake of Ronald Reagan's electoral success that the country had moved right on taxes, the welfare state, and related matters. Variants of this view are argued by Thomas Ferguson and Joel Rogers in *Right Turn* (1986) and by Thomas Frank in *What's the Matter with Kansas?* (2004).

3. *Shift in importance of certain issues to working-class whites.* A third possibility is that one or more issues on which there had always been disparity between white working-class views and Democratic party positions increased in importance. The "postmaterialist" hypothesis advanced by Ronald Inglehart (1977; Inglehart and Abramson 1994) is the best-known general version of this notion. It suggests that as a society grows increasingly wealthy, issues other than those connected to material self-interest become more important to citizens. There is no clear working-class interest in being pro-choice or pro-life on abortion or in favoring or opposing equal rights for homosexuals. Hence, as material issues fade in centrality, working-class identification with the party that better serves its material interests is likely to decline.

4. *Shift in working-class whites' confidence in the Democrats' ability to deliver on important issues.* A fourth possibility is that a growing share of working-class whites lost confidence in the ability of the Democrats to "deliver the goods" on important issues. In *The Forgotten Majority*, Teixeira and Rogers (2000, p. 57) argue that the key development was stagnant wages and incomes beginning in the 1970s: "Among those whites for whom the post-1973 economic world has generally been hard, the Democratic party has lost its appeal.... There's very little mystery here, but no small amount of rationality. These voters had become stalled on the economic escalator to the middle class, and 'activist' Democrats weren't doing anything about it." Joblessness is another potentially important issue. Since the 1930s most Americans had rightly believed that the Democrats were both more committed than the Republicans to low unemployment and better able to deliver on that commitment. The high level of unemployment coupled with high inflation under a Democratic president and Congress in the mid-to-late 1970s may have sharply eroded working-class confidence in the party's competence in this sphere.

### Analytical Strategy

How can we assess whether, and to what extent, the decline in Democratic support among working-class whites has occurred via these paths? We rely mainly on public opinion data from the General Social Survey. We also consider some indirect evidence, including changes in the Democratic party's positions on issues and significant developments on key issues. We focus on the two periods in which identification with the Democrats among working-class whites seems to have declined: 1977-80 and 1987-91.

Table 1 illustrates three types of over-time shift that can produce a fall in Democratic identification. Each suggests a particular path to defection from the Democrats.

Suppose 100 working-class whites are surveyed. For simplicity, assume there are only two response choices on the issue and only two parties. In year 1, 60 of the working-class whites identify with the Democratic party and 40 identify with the Republicans. Sixty choose the more liberal response on the issue, and 40 choose the more conservative response. Among those choosing the liberal response, two-thirds identify with the Democrats (40 of 60) and one-third with the Republicans. Among those choosing the conservative response, half (20 of 40) identify as Democrat and half as Republican.

The table shows three alternative scenarios for year 2. In the first of these (the second panel in the table), a number of working-class whites shift to the more conservative response on the issue. Among those choosing the liberal response, the proportion preferring the Democrats has not changed; it remains two-thirds (20 of 30). The same is true among those choosing the more conservative response; it remains one-half (35 of 70). But the conservative shift in views on the issue produces a decline in Democratic identification: 55 of the 100 working-class whites now prefer the Democrats, versus 60 in year 1.

In the second year-2 scenario (the third panel in the table), the shares of working-class whites choosing the more liberal and conservative responses are the same as in year 1. What has changed now is that more of those choosing the conservative response identify as Republican: 25 of 40, versus 20 of 40 in year 1. Either the Democrats have moved in a liberal direction on the issue or the party was always more liberal than these people but the importance of the issue to them has increased. Here too the result is a decline in Democratic identification, again from 60 to 55.

In the third year-2 scenario (the fourth panel in the table), the shift is a reduced propensity of those choosing the liberal response on the issue to identify as Democratic. This could stem from a drop in confidence these working-class whites have in the Democrats' ability to deliver on the issue. Once again the result is a decline in Democratic identification, from 60 to 55.

Table 1. Illustration of Evidence for Various Paths to Reduced Democratic Identification

Year 1			
	Conservative	Liberal	Total
Democrat	20	40	60
Republican	20	20	40
<i>Total</i>	40	60	100

Year 2: Conservative shift in working-class whites' views on the issue			
	Conservative	Liberal	Total
Democrat	35	20	55
Republican	35	10	45
<i>Total</i>	70	30	100

Year 2: Liberal shift in Democratic party's position on the issue or increase in importance of the issue to conservative working-class whites			
	Conservative	Liberal	Total
Democrat	15	40	55
Republican	25	20	45
<i>Total</i>	40	60	100

Year 2: Reduction in liberal working-class whites' confidence in Democrats' ability to deliver on the issue			
	Conservative	Liberal	Total
Democrat	20	35	55
Republican	20	25	45
<i>Total</i>	40	60	100

Issue Items in the GSS

The GSS has a large array of questions probing views on economic and social/cultural issues. Table 2 lists the issues and questions we explore. We separate the issues into three groups: those that are clearly related to the material interests of working-class whites, those that may be perceived as either material or social/cultural, and those that seem clearly social/cultural. We conceptualize "material" as broader than "economic" and thus include foreign policy (military spending) and crime in this group.

Table 2. GSS Indicators of Working-Class Whites' Views on Material and Social/Cultural Issues

## Material

## Taxes

*Level of income taxes.* Question: "Do you consider the amount of federal income tax which you have to pay as too high, about right, or too low?" Our coding: 0 = too high; 1 = about right or too low. N: 9,396. GSS variable name: TAX.

## "Big government"

*Level of government intervention.* Question: "Some people think that the government in Washington is trying to do too many things that should be left to individuals and private businesses. Others disagree and think that the government should do even more to solve our country's problems. Still others have opinions somewhere in between. Where would you place yourself on this scale, or haven't you made up your mind on this?" Scale from 1 ("I strongly agree that the government is doing too much") to 3 ("I agree with both answers") to 5 ("I strongly agree that the government should do more"). Our coding: 0 = 1, 2; 1 = 3, 4, 5. N: 7,893. GSS variable name: HELPNOT.

*Confidence in the presidency.* Question: "I am going to name some institutions in this country. As far as the people running these institutions are concerned, would you say you have a great deal of confidence, only some confidence, or hardly any confidence at all in them? Executive branch of the federal government." Our coding: 0 = hardly any; 1 = only some or a great deal. N: 12,041. GSS variable name: CONFED.

*Confidence in Congress.* Question: "I am going to name some institutions in this country. As far as the people running these institutions are concerned, would you say you have a great deal of confidence, only some confidence, or hardly any confidence at all in them? Congress." Our coding: 0 = hardly any; 1 = only some or a great deal. N: 12,056. GSS variable name: CONLEGIS.

## Foreign policy

*Level of government spending on the military and defense.* Question: "We are faced with many problems in this country, none of which can be solved easily or inexpensively. I'm going to name some of these problems, and for each one I'd like you to tell me whether you think we're spending too much money on it, too little money, or about the right amount. Are we spending too much money, too little money, or about the right amount on the military, armaments and defense." Our coding: 0 = too little; 1 = about right or too much. N: 10,352. GSS variable name: NATARMS.

## Crime

*Level of government spending on halting crime.* Question: "We are faced with many problems in this country, none of which can be solved easily or inexpensively. I'm going to name some of these problems, and for each one I'd like you to tell me whether you think we're spending too much money on it, too little money, or about the right amount. Are we spending too much money, too little money, or about the right amount on halting the rising crime rate." Our coding: 0 = too little; 1 = about right or too much. N: 10,424. GSS variable name: NATCRIME.

*Capital punishment.* Question: "Do you favor or oppose the death penalty for persons convicted of murder?" Our coding: 0 = favor; 1 = oppose. N: 14,683. GSS variable name: CAPPUN.

## Possibly Material, Possibly Social/Cultural

## Race

*Government spending on improving conditions of blacks.* Question: "We are faced with many problems in this country, none of which can be solved easily or inexpensively. I'm going to name some of these problems, and for each one I'd like you to tell me whether you think we're spending too much money on it, too little money, or about the right amount. Are we spending too much money, too little money, or about the right amount on improving the conditions of Blacks." Our coding: 0 = too much; 1 = about right or too little. N: 9,845. GSS variable name: NATRACE.

*Special treatment for blacks.* Question: Some people think that Blacks have been discriminated against for so long that the government has a special obligation to help improve their living standards. Others believe that the government should not be giving special treatment to Blacks.

Where would you place yourself on this scale, or haven't you made up your mind on this?" Scale from 1 ("I strongly agree that government shouldn't give special treatment") to 3 ("I agree with both answers") to 5 ("I strongly agree the government is obligated to help blacks"). Our coding: 0 = 1, 2; 1 = 3, 4, 5. N: 8,246. GSS variable name: HELPBLK.

*Racial residential segregation.* Question: White people have a right to keep Blacks out of their neighborhoods if they want to, and Blacks should respect that right. Our coding: 0 = agree strongly or agree slightly; 1 = disagree slightly or disagree strongly. N: 7,871. GSS variable name: RACSEG.

Poverty/Welfare

*Government responsibility to help the poor.* Question: "Some people think that the government in Washington should do everything possible to improve the standard of living of all poor Americans. Other people think it is not the government's responsibility, and that each person should take care of himself. Where would you place yourself on this scale, or haven't you have up your mind on this?" Scale from to 1 ("I strongly agree that people should take care of themselves") to 3 ("I agree with both answers") to 5 ("I strongly agree the government should improve living standards"). Our coding: 0 = 1, 2; 1 = 3, 4, 5. N: 8,107. GSS variable name: HELPPOR.

*Government action to reduce inequality.* Question: "Some people think that the government in Washington ought to reduce the income differences between the rich and the poor, perhaps by raising the taxes of wealthy families or by giving income assistance to the poor. Others think that the government should not concern itself with reducing this income difference between the rich and the poor." Scale from to 1 ("Government should not concern itself with income differences") to 7 ("Government should do something to reduce income differences between rich and poor"). Our coding: 0 = 1-3; 1 = 4-7. N: 8,107. GSS variable name: EQWLTH.

*Level of government spending on welfare.* Question: "Are we spending too much money, too little money, or about the right amount on welfare?" Our coding: 0 = too much; 1 = about right or too little. N: 10,446. GSS variable name: NATFARE.

Gender roles

*Women and paid work I.* Question: "Do you approve or disapprove of a married woman earning money in business or industry if she has a husband capable of supporting her?" Our coding: 0 = disapprove; 1 = approve. N: 9,503. GSS variable name: FEWORK.

*Women and paid work II.* Question: "Please tell me whether you strongly agree, agree, disagree, or strongly disagree. A preschool child is likely to suffer if his or her mother works." Our coding: 0 = strongly agree or agree; 1 = disagree or strongly disagree. N: 7,417. GSS variable name: FEPRESCH.

*Women and politics.* Question: "Do you agree or disagree with this statement? Women should take care of running their homes and leave running the country up to men." Our coding: 0 = disagree; 1 = agree. N: 8,733. GSS variable name: FEHOME.

Environment

*Level of government spending on the environment.* Question: "Are we spending too much money, too little money, or about the right amount on improving and protecting the environment." Our coding: 0 = too much; 1 = about right or too little. N: 10,346. GSS variable name: NATENVIR.

Social/Cultural

Abortion

*Abortion legal if woman does not want any more children.* Question: "Please tell me whether or not you think it should be possible for a pregnant woman to obtain a *legal* abortion if she is married and does not want any more children?" Our coding: 0 = no; 1 = yes. N: 12,665. GSS variable name: ABNOMORE.

*Abortion legal if woman does not want to marry the man.* Question: "Please tell me whether or not you think it should be possible for a pregnant woman to obtain a *legal* abortion if she is not married and does not want to marry the man?" Our coding: 0 = no; 1 = yes. N: 12,618. GSS variable name: ABSINGLE.

*Abortion legal if woman's health is seriously endangered.* Question: "Please tell me whether or not you think it should be possible for a pregnant woman to obtain a *legal* abortion if the woman's own health is seriously endangered by the pregnancy?" Our coding: 0 = no; 1 = yes. N: 12,777. GSS variable name: ABHLTH.

#### Homosexuality

*Homosexuality wrong.* Question: "What about sexual relations between two adults of the same sex — do you think it is always wrong, almost always wrong, wrong only sometimes, or not wrong at all?" Our coding: 0 = always wrong or almost always wrong; 1 = wrong only sometimes or not wrong at all. N: 10,319. GSS variable name: HOMOSEX.

#### Guns

*Gun permit requirement.* Question: "Would you favor or oppose a law which would require a person to obtain a police permit before he or she could buy a gun?" Our coding: 0 = oppose; 1 = favor. N: 11,923. GSS variable name: GUNLAW.

#### Drugs

*Marijuana legalization.* Question: "Do you think the use of marijuana should be made legal or not?" Our coding: 0 = no; 1 = yes. N: 10,252. GSS variable name: GRASS.

### Shift in Working-Class Whites' Views Away from the Democratic Party

Our interest in this section is in changes in working-class whites' views that correspond in timing with the two periods of decline indicated in figure 1: 1977-80 and 1987-91. Here in the text we show trends in white working-class views on issues where the timing corresponds. Trends on other issues are shown in the appendix. For each issue we show the share of white working-class respondents choosing the conservative response(s).

The analyses here are bivariate; we are looking for correspondence in timing between a presumed cause (change in working-class whites' views on an issue) and an outcome (decline in Democratic identification among working-class whites). In principal we could use time-series regression to conduct multivariate analyses. We do not do so for two reasons. First, the decline in Democratic identification is not linear over time; it occurs almost entirely in the two just-noted periods. And the causes of the declines in these two periods may differ — e.g., race in one, crime in another. This leaves us with too few years (observations) relative to the number of potential causes (independent variables). Second, what matters is not only white working-class views on these issues but also the relative importance people attach to each. We have no straightforward way of weighting the issues by importance, and without such weighting the potential for biased estimates is fairly severe. Hence, we stick with bivariate analyses.

We begin with issues that are clearly material. GSS items that effectively tap material self-interest among working-class whites include questions about income taxes, government intervention and confidence in government, foreign policy (military spending), and crime. It would be helpful to have additional questions about ensuring low unemployment, providing jobs, improving wages or

incomes, providing a safety net, and related matters. The GSS does have questions that address some of these issues, but none has been included regularly enough to permit over-time analysis.

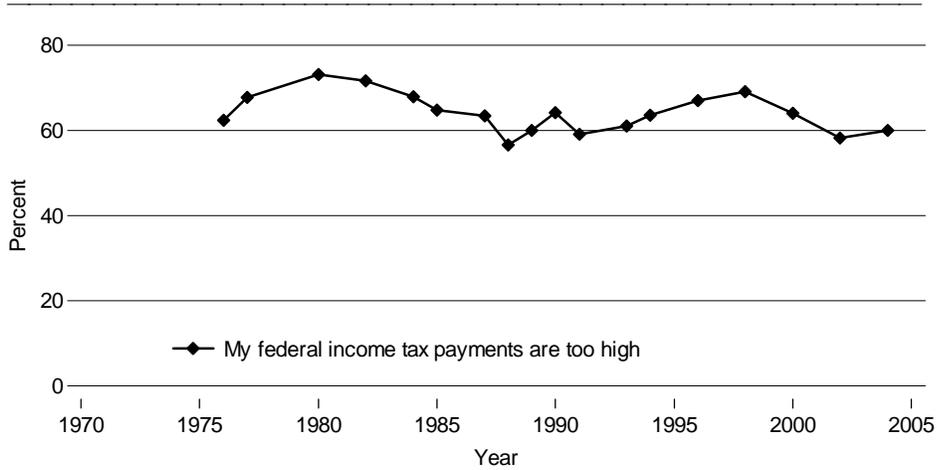
The tax item in the GSS asks respondents whether they feel their income tax payments are too high, about right, or too low. Figure 14 shows the share of working-class whites responding "too high." The tax question was first asked in 1976. Between that year and 1980 the share of white working-class respondents saying their income tax payments were too high jumped from 62% to 73%. This could well have contributed to the 1977-80 decline in Democratic identification among working-class whites.

In the mid-to-late 1970s conservative academics, think tanks, and policy makers worked hard to convince Americans that heavy-handed government intervention by an overextended and incompetent government was responsible for stagflation and various other economic ills (Ferguson and Rogers 1986; Vogel 1989; Kenworthy 1995, ch. 1). Figure 15 shows that lack of confidence in the presidency and Congress jumped sharply among working-class whites between 1977 and 1980. This was a period when Democrats held the White House and a majority in both houses of Congress. The GSS also asks a question about whether government is trying to do too many things that should be left to individuals and private business. Although the question was asked only once in the 1970s, it appears that there may have been a rise in white working-class agreement with this notion in the latter part of the decade. During these years there seems to have been growing (albeit still minority) sympathy among working-class whites with Ronald Reagan's view, expressed in his 1981 inaugural address, that "Government is not the solution to our problem; government is the problem."

In the area of foreign policy there was a sharp change in working-class whites' attitudes that corresponds to the decline in Democratic identification. As figure 16 shows, the share saying the government is spending "too little" on the military jumped from 20% in 1975 to 60% in 1980. By the mid-1980s the share had returned to the level of the early 1970s. But since the Reagan administration dramatically increased military spending in the early 1980s, this does not necessarily indicate a decline in white working-class support for a high level of defense expenditure.

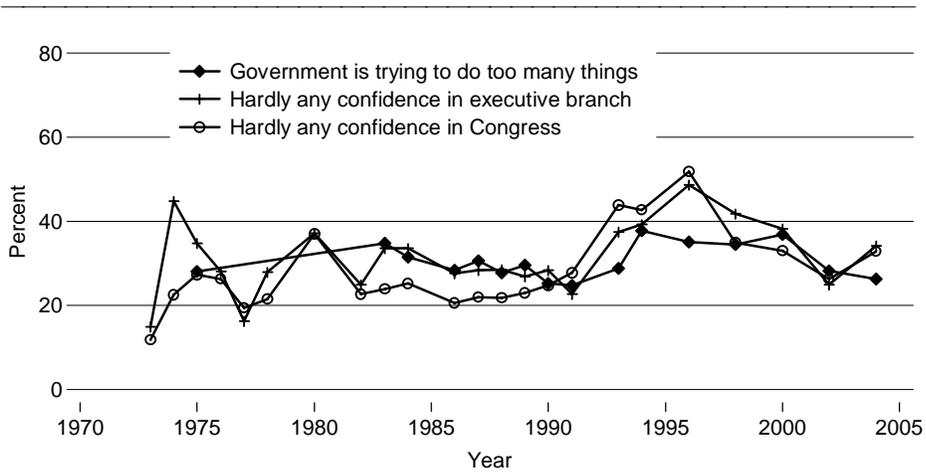
There is little indication that changes in working-class whites' views on social/cultural issues played a key role in causing the declines in Democratic identification in the late 1970s and the late 1980s. The four clearly social/cultural issues for which we have helpful GSS data are abortion, homosexuality, guns, and drugs. There was little or no shift on any of these issues that corresponds in direction, magnitude, and timing with the decline in Democratic identification (see the appendix).

Figure 14. Working-Class Whites' Views on Taxes



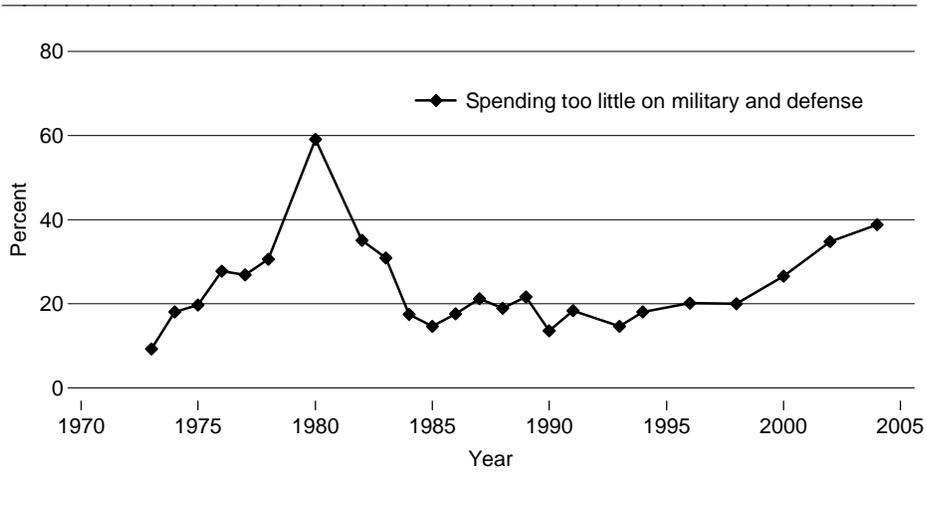
Note: The rise in the late 1970s is statistically significant at the .05 level. Authors' calculations using GSS data. For definitions and coding details, see table 2. Working class is defined as self-identified lower or working class.

Figure 15. Working-Class Whites' Views on "Big Government"



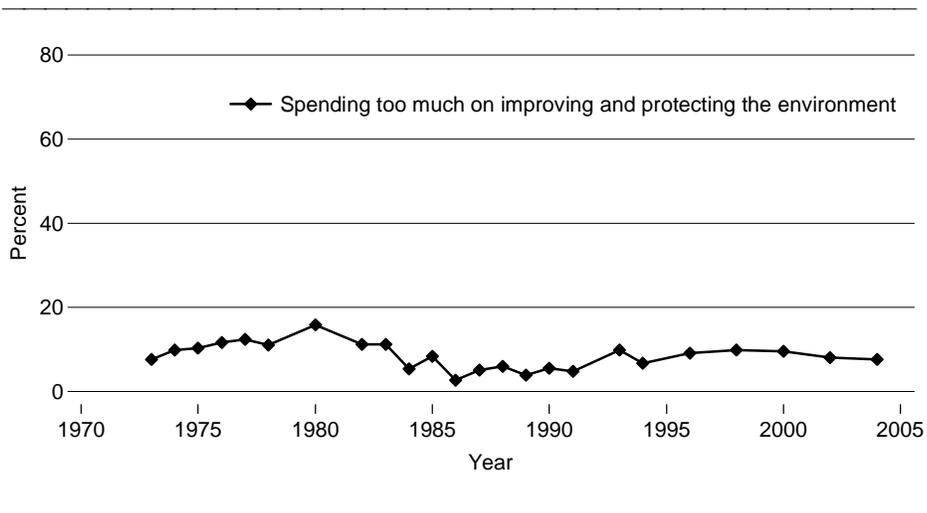
Note: For all three indicators the rise in the late 1970s is statistically significant at the .05 level or better. Authors' calculations using GSS data. For definitions and coding details, see table 2. Working class is defined as self-identified lower or working class.

Figure 16. Working-Class Whites Views on Foreign Policy



Note: The rise in the late 1970s is statistically significant at the .01 level. Authors' calculations using GSS data. For definitions and coding details, see table 2. Working class is defined as self-identified lower or working class.

Figure 17. Working-Class Whites Views on the Environment



Note: The rise in the late 1970s is statistically significant at the .05 level. Authors' calculations using GSS data. For definitions and coding details, see table 2. Working class is defined as self-identified lower or working class.

What about issues that are neither clearly material nor clearly social/cultural? These include race, poverty/welfare, gender roles, and the environment. Figure 17 shows that the share of white working-class respondents saying the government was spending too much money on improving and protecting the environment increased from 8% to 16% between 1973 and 1980. In contrast — and perhaps surprising given the emphasis placed on these issues in accounts such as Edsall's (1992) — there is no indication of a conservative white working-class shift on race, poverty/welfare, or gender roles in the late 1970s or in the 1980s (appendix).

Figure 1 suggests that the fall in Democratic identification between 1987 and 1991 was of roughly the same magnitude as that between 1977 and 1980 — approximately ten percentage points. But in contrast to the late 1970s, we find no evidence that shifts in white working-class views were responsible for the late-1980s decline in Democratic party identification. According to the GSS data, this was a period of little or no change in either direction (conservative or liberal) on any issue (material, social/cultural, or other) among working-class whites.

To sum up: The GSS data suggest significant rightward shifts in working-class whites' views on several issues in the mid-to-late 1970s. These are principally material issues rather than social/cultural ones. These shifts may help to account for the decline in white working-class Democratic identification in the late 1970s. By contrast, shifts in working-class whites' views appear to be of little help in understanding the decline in the late 1980s.

#### Shift in the Democrat Party's Positions Away from Working-Class Whites and/or Shift in the Importance of Certain Issues to Working-Class Whites

Were there changes in the Democratic party's positions on key issues that might have prompted white working-class defection?

We first need to decide on an indicator of party positions. One possibility is the platform of the candidate nominated for the general presidential election. But that candidate may reflect only one among several segments of views within the party. Perhaps more important, if the candidate loses the presidential election, his or her positions may be quickly repudiated. Another possibility is the official party platform, which is adopted once every four years at the presidential nomination convention. However, these views may not be representative over the full four years of their lifespan. In addition, there is little evidence that many in the public pay attention to the content of these documents. We pursue a less formal approach, highlighting major changes in government policy and/or apparent Democratic party positions that are likely to have been relatively visible to the American public. We focus on years prior to and during the decline in Democratic identification: the early 1970s through the late 1980s.

On material issues there are several developments to note. In the early 1970s a Democratic Congress indexed Social Security benefits to wages. This resulted in a significant increase in benefit levels, though it is not clear how visible the policy change was at the time, nor how much credit was given to the Democrats for the change. In the late 1970s, in a context of relatively high unemployment, the Democratic-controlled Congress debated a "full employment" bill that would have required the government to ensure that all Americans who wanted a job could get one. The bill eventually was passed in 1979, but in a watered-down form. Finally, in 1981 the Democratic-controlled House of Representatives passed sizeable but heavily regressive tax cuts proposed by the Reagan administration.

On foreign policy, the Democrats' nomination of George McGovern as their candidate for the 1972 presidential election allowed Republicans to label the party "dovish" on foreign policy. In 1975 the last American military forces left Vietnam, signaling an end to the war and a widely-perceived defeat for the United States. Although Jimmy Carter was relatively far from McGovern's views on foreign policy and actually increased defense spending during his term as president, his administration's emphasis on human rights as a key foreign policy concern is likely to have been interpreted by some Americans as deemphasizing national safety. In 1979 the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan and popular revolutions overthrew U.S.-backed regimes in Iran and Nicaragua, with the former resulting in American personnel being held hostage. Coming on the heels of the Vietnam debacle, these developments may have led a growing number of Americans, including working-class whites, to sense that the United States had lost some measure of control over the world beyond its borders.

On crime, the Supreme Court's *Furman v. Georgia* decision in 1972 imposed a temporary halt on use of the death penalty, on the grounds that it had tended to be applied in a racially discriminatory fashion. It was reinstated in 1978.

On issues that could be considered either material or social/cultural there were various shifts and developments. On race, affirmative action in hiring was expanded and became visible in the early 1970s. In 1978, the U.S. Supreme Court's decision in the *Bakke* case upheld use of affirmative action but disallowed its implementation via quotas except in special circumstances. Court-ordered busing of children to achieve racial integration in public schools occurred in a northern city for the first time in 1972. This was followed by similar rulings in other cities. On gender roles, the proposed Equal Rights Amendment was discussed and debated throughout the first half of the 1970s before eventually failing. In the early 1970s a number of policy changes were made to promote greater environmental care. The Environmental Protection Agency was created (1970), and the Clean Air Act Extension (1970) and Clean Water Act (1972) were passed.

On social/cultural issues, the most important development was the Supreme Court's 1973 *Roe v. Wade* decision legalizing abortion. Also, in 1972 a Congressional commission proposed decriminalizing marijuana, and some Democrats pushed for such a change during the 1970s.

On each of these issues, the development and the Democratic party's implicit or explicit position with respect to it were likely to have been interpreted by the American public as representing a movement to the left. Thus, even if there were no change in white working-class attitudes on these issues, the perceived gap between individuals' views and the party's positions may well have widened for more than a few.

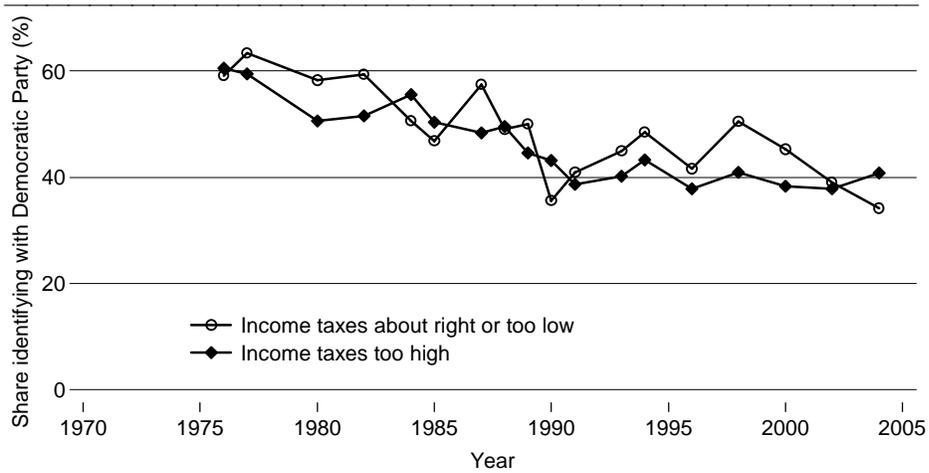
What about in the late 1980s? For the most part, this period was quite different from the 1970s. The Democratic party spent most of it reacting to Reagan administration initiatives and attempting to safeguard earlier gains in economic and social policy. It could be that some working-class whites felt the party was shifting to the right on issues of material concern (Ferguson and Rogers 1986; Frank 2004). Yet that seems unlikely to account for the decline in Democratic party identification during the late 1980s, as the decline in Democratic identification in those years was fully mirrored by a rise in Republican — rather than independent or "other" — identification (figure 5 above). Seemingly, then, shifts in the Democrats' positions on issues are not what account for the late 1980s decline in white working-class allegiance.

Another potential source of the decline in Democratic party identification among working-class whites is that certain issues on which there already was nontrivial disjunction between working-class whites' views and party positions became more important. How can we assess the importance people attach to particular issues? One way is directly, via survey questions that ask respondents to rate the importance of various issues to them. Unfortunately, the GSS does not include any such questions. The Gallup Poll has regularly asked such questions, but we cannot effectively isolate working-class whites in those polls.

We instead examine over-time trends in differences in Democratic party identification between those choosing the more conservative response(s) and those choosing the more liberal response(s) on various issue items. An increase in the importance of an issue is indicated by the share of those choosing the more conservative response(s) who identify Democratic declining and the difference with those choosing the more liberal response(s) rising (see the third panel in table 1).

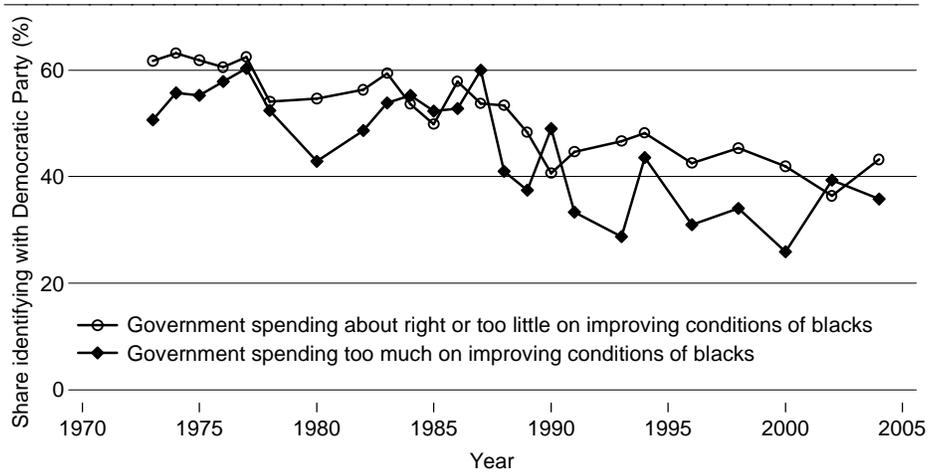
As suggested in table 1, this indicator will also capture a shift to the left in Democratic party positions where the views of working-class whites have not changed. That is why we combine analysis of these two paths in this subsection.

Figure 18. Democratic Identification among Working-Class Whites Choosing the Liberal and Conservative Responses on Taxes



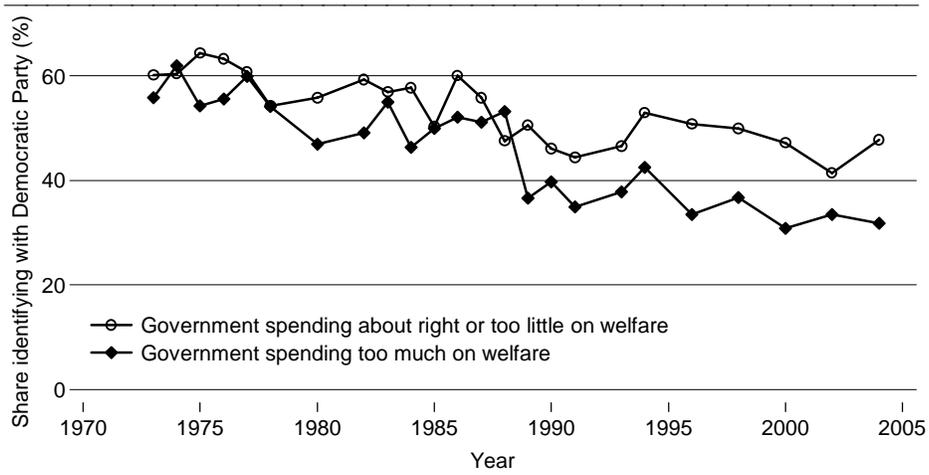
Note: The difference between the two groups is statistically significant at the .05 level in 1980. Authors' calculations using GSS data. For definitions and coding details, see table 2. Working class is defined as self-identified lower or working class.

Figure 19. Democratic Identification among Working-Class Whites Choosing the Liberal and Conservative Responses on Race



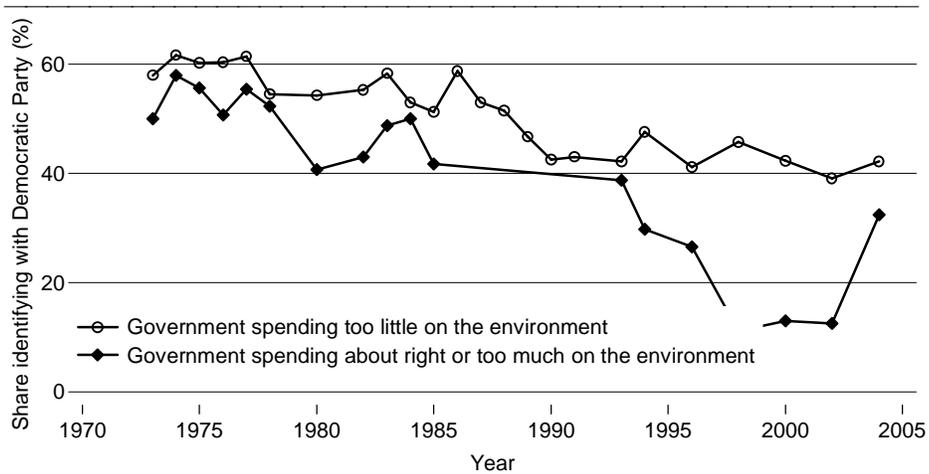
Note: The difference between the two groups is statistically significant at the .01 level in 1980 and at the .10 level in 1988, 1989, and 1991. Authors' calculations using GSS data. For definitions and coding details, see table 2. Working class is defined as self-identified lower or working class.

Figure 20. Democratic Identification among Working-Class Whites Choosing the Liberal and Conservative Responses on Poverty/Welfare



Note: The difference between the two groups is statistically significant at the .05 level in 1980 and at the .10 level in 1989 and 1991. Authors' calculations using GSS data. For definitions and coding details, see table 2. Working class is defined as self-identified lower or working class.

Figure 21. Democratic Identification among Working-Class Whites Choosing the Liberal and Conservative Responses on the Environment



Note: The difference between the two groups is statistically significant at the .01 level in 1980. Authors' calculations using GSS data. For definitions and coding details, see table 2. Working class is defined as self-identified lower or working class.

Ideally, these analyses would be multivariate. This would help us to most cleanly isolate the relevance of each particular issue. However, two facets of the GSS prevent this. The first is that many of the most useful issue questions have been asked irregularly over time. Thus, it is not possible to control for a consistent set of issues for more than a small number of years. We could get around this by focusing on a very small set of issues, but that would considerably reduce the comprehensiveness of the analysis. The second is that toward the late 1980s the GSS began expanding the number of questions but asking various sets of questions of only certain portions of the sample, in order to keep the survey length manageable for each respondent. As a result, even when multiple questions of interest to us are asked in the same year, there often are no respondents that were asked all of the questions. For these reasons our analyses are bivariate.

Note that the trend in Democratic identification among those choosing the more liberal response in these figures can be treated as a baseline. If support for the Democrats among working-class whites is declining for other reasons, this share will decline. Of interest here is whether the share among those choosing the more conservative response declines by a larger amount.

As in the previous section, we present data only for issues where there is evidence of a shift in party position or in the issue's importance. Data for other issues are included in the appendix. Figures 18 through 21 show that in the late 1970s the issues for which we find supportive evidence are taxes, race, poverty/welfare, and the environment. In the late 1980s, race and poverty/welfare are potential candidates. Again there is no indication that social/cultural issues played a role in the decline in white working-class Democratic identification.

#### Shift in Working-Class Whites' Confidence in the Democrats' Ability to Deliver on Important Issues

The fourth of the possible issue-related paths to decline in Democratic identification among working-class whites is loss of confidence in the party's ability to effectively "deliver the goods" on important issues. Figures 22 through 25 show trends in inflation-adjusted family incomes at the 20th, 40th, and 60th percentiles of the income distribution, the unemployment and inflation rates, the interest rate on a home mortgage loan, and the murder rate, respectively.

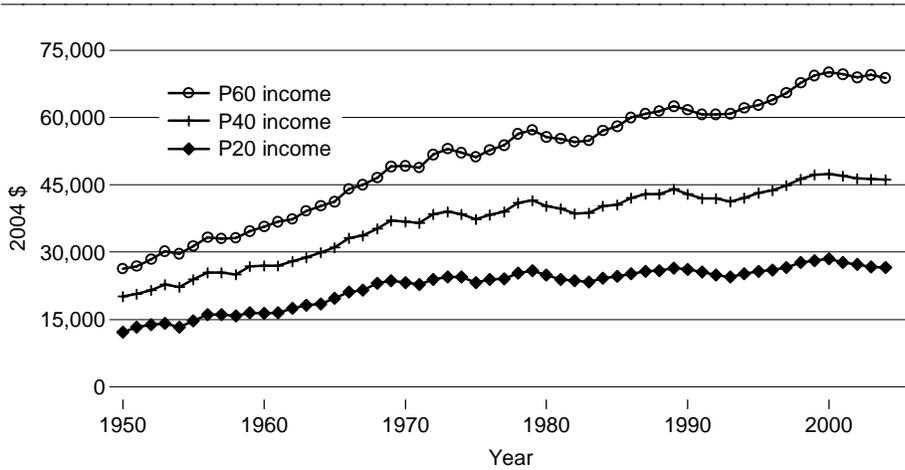
Several of these indicators suggest a probable perceived stagnation or decline in material well-being among working-class whites during the late 1970s — a period in which the Democrats held the presidency and both houses of Congress. A key feature of the post-1973 economic landscape in the United States has been the dramatic slowdown in growth of earnings and incomes in the bottom half of the distribution. This is clear from figure 22, which includes data back to 1950. Whether the slowdown was noticeable to working-class families in the late 1970s is not clear. Nonetheless, it is likely that many such families perceived that period as one of hard times. As figure 23 shows, the unemployment rate was rela-

tively high, albeit declining through the mid-to-late 1970s business cycle. This was coupled, for the first time in living memory, with high inflation. Prior to the late 1970s unemployment and inflation had tended to move in opposite directions. As a result of the high inflation, the interest rate on a home mortgage loan jumped sharply, as figure 24 indicates. This put a home purchase out of reach for a larger share of working-class families. Finally, Figure 25 shows that the homicide rate rose steadily and sharply between the mid 1960s and the mid 1970s. It then fell slightly for two years before rising again. It reached its highest level in 1980.

Even if a growing share of working-class whites lost confidence in the Democrats' ability to manage the economy, why would they turn to the Republicans? Here a key is likely to lie in the alternative view of government's role that Republicans, especially Ronald Reagan, began to offer in the late 1970s. Had Republicans stuck with the Keynesian macroeconomic management formula that the Nixon administration had embraced, they might not have been able to persuade disaffected working-class whites that they were offering a genuine alternative to the Democrats. But Reagan did advocate a sharply different approach: minimize government intervention in order to let markets, and capitalism, work. In addition to presenting a clear contrast to the Democrats' strategy, this platform had two other virtues in terms of attracting working-class whites who no longer blindly assumed that the Democrats were more effective at managing the economy. First, it was simple. Second, it provided a greater-good justification for the tax cuts that many working-class whites desired on material self-interest grounds.

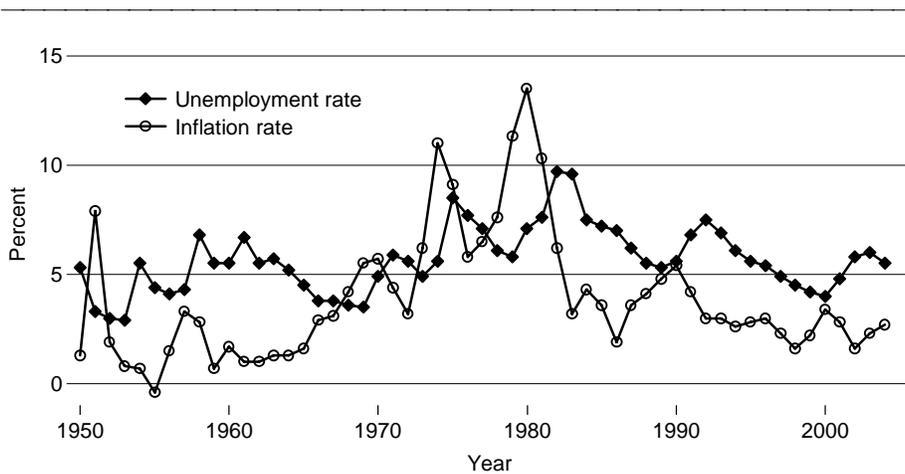
What about the other period of decline in white working-class Democratic identification — the late 1980s? Real incomes for much of the working class were still stagnant, though they did rise somewhat during the business cycle upturn from 1983 to 1990. A key development is that by the late 1980s both inflation and unemployment were down to around 5% or less. And mortgage interest rates had dropped to roughly their mid-1970s level. The fact that these improvements occurred under a conservative Republican administration may have reinforced the skepticism some working-class whites developed during the late 1970s about the Democrats' superiority with respect to the performance of the economy. The Reagan administration also reduced taxes — not by much for most working-class Americans, but perhaps enough to generate additional support among those increasingly inclined to see no difference between the parties in terms of their ability to deliver the goods on material issues.

Figure 22. Family Incomes at the 20th, 40th, and 60th Percentiles of the Income Distribution



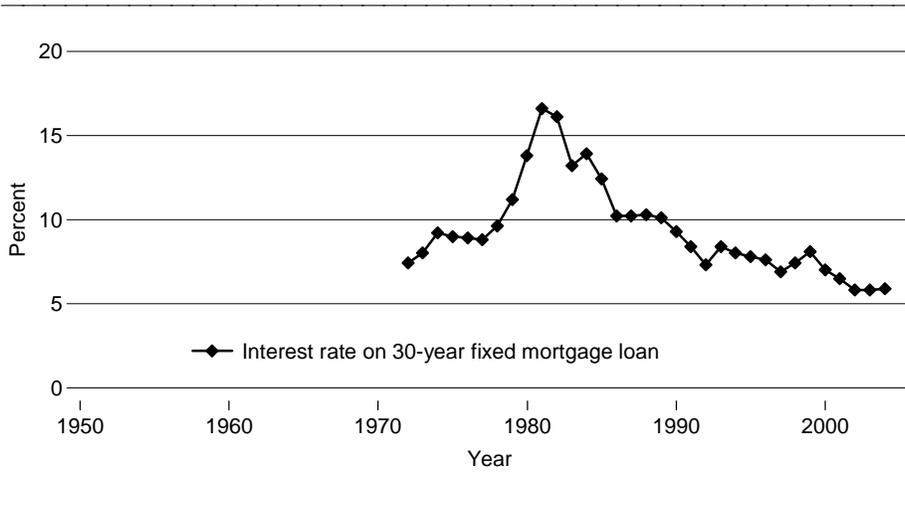
Note: Adjusted for inflation using the CPI-U-RS. Source: U.S. Census Bureau, [www.census.gov/hhes/www/income/histinc/f01w.htm](http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/income/histinc/f01w.htm).

Figure 23. Unemployment and Inflation



Note: Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Figure 24. Interest Rate for Home Mortgage Loan



Note: Source: U.S. Federal Reserve.

Figure 25. Homicides



Note: Source: FBI Uniform Crime Reports.

Could we tell a similar story about working-class whites' loss of confidence in the Democrats' ability to deliver on social/cultural issues? We do not think so. The crucial problem is timing. In the mid-to-late 1970s the economy deteriorated dramatically and several significant foreign policy events occurred (especially in 1979). There were no similar sudden and sizeable developments related to abortion, homosexuality, guns, or drugs. The legalization of abortion is a plausible candidate, but it is not clear why we would observe a sharp loss in confidence in Democrats' handling of this issue several years after the 1973 decision.

### ***What, Then, Caused the Decline?***

Let's begin with timing. The GSS data start in 1972. Thus, we are not able to assess or analyze any decline in white working-class Democratic identification that may have occurred in prior years. Edsall (1992) suggests an extensive defection among working-class whites in the south after 1964. Bartels (2006), by contrast, finds little indication of a downward trend in white working-class presidential voting prior to the 1970s.

In the years for which we have data, the decline appears to have been condensed and intermittent. Specifically, it appears to have occurred almost entirely in the years 1977 to 1980 and 1987 to 1991. Yet the GSS public opinion data and the other information we have examined seem to offer little help in explaining the late 1980s decline. This suggests to us that what appears to be two separate periods of decline actually was *a single period of decline that was temporarily interrupted*. In this story, the decline abated briefly in the early 1980s due to the deep 1981-83 recession, which featured extremely high unemployment, and perhaps also due to uncertainty about exactly how conservative the Reagan administration would turn out to be. It resumed in the late 1980s as the economy improved and the more radical elements of the Reagan agenda had not come to pass. It surely received a boost with the crumbling of the Soviet Union and its satellite governments beginning in 1989. In other words, the declines of the late 1970s and the late 1980s were not separate. They were two ends of a single process that was interrupted temporarily in the early 1980s.

The data suggest a causal story centered on *material issues*. There is no indication that compositional shifts or social/cultural issues were key to the defection from the Democrats among working-class whites. In the late 1970s we observe sharp increases in the share of working-class whites who felt taxes were too high, who believed government was trying to do too many things, who had hardly any confidence in the (Democratic-controlled) executive branch and the Congress, and who felt the government was spending too little on the military (figures 14-16). We also observe an increase in the gap in Democratic identification between those choosing the liberal response and those choosing the conservative response on taxes (figure 18). This indicates either that a larger share of working-class whites felt the party had moved left on this issue or (more likely in our view) that

the issue increased in importance to some working-class whites. Perhaps most significant, during this period we observe a decline in Democratic identification among working-class whites choosing the liberal response on virtually every issue (figures 18-21 and appendix). This suggests that something other than a shift in white working-class views or party positions or the importance of certain issues was occurring. We hypothesize that a growing share of working-class whites lost confidence in the Democrats' ability to deliver the goods on key material issues and that were attracted by Ronald Reagan's simple and sharply contrasting strategy for managing the economy.

Consider the various components of material well-being that are likely to have been of concern to a working-class individual or family during this period. Aspects of material well-being on which the Democrats might have been viewed as preferable include:

*Job security via a lower unemployment rate.* But as unemployment remained relatively high during the economic expansion of the late 1970s, there was growing reason to question this.

*Rising wages via support for unions and/or increases in the statutory minimum wage.* Figure 22 shows that family incomes began to stagnate in the mid 1970s. Slightly later, the same occurred with wages (not shown here). Union membership had been declining since the mid 1950s, mainly under Democratic Congresses and some Democratic presidents, and that decline accelerated in the late 1970s. The statutory minimum wage was increased virtually every year in the late 1970s, but it nevertheless failed to keep pace with inflation.

*Protection against risk of income loss.* Much of what we think of as the "welfare state" is actually a set of public insurance programs. Individuals (and employers) contribute in the form of payroll tax payments (and other types of taxes), and those who become unemployed, disabled, or elderly receive benefits. With the exception of health insurance and sickness compensation, the key programs in the United States were put in place in the 1930s. Through the 1960s and 1970s Democrats tended to favor more generous provisions for unemployment compensation — easier eligibility rules, higher benefits, longer duration. Yet a significant increase in the generosity of the Social Security program for the elderly, the annual indexing of benefit levels to average wage levels, was instituted under a Republican president in the early 1970s. By the 1970s, "welfare" — what in most rich countries is called social assistance and in the United States is comprised mainly of TANF (formerly AFDC) and Food Stamps — was likely to have been viewed by many in the working class as of limited relevance to their material well-being.

*Health insurance.* Many working-class whites had health insurance via their employer, and the poorest had it through Medicaid. For those in between — employed but without employer-subsidized health insurance — the Democrats might reasonably have been presumed to be more likely to push for expanded coverage. However, congressional Democrats blocked an early-1970s proposal for expanded coverage on the grounds that it did not go far enough.

*Better schools.* The 1970s were a period in which the Sputnik-generated (1959) alarm about America's potential technological inferiority had declined in the aftermath of the 1969 moon landing. And they preceded the *A Nation at Risk*-spawned (1983) concern about the public school system reducing the country's economic competitiveness.

*Better public transportation.* This may have been relevant for the small share of working-class whites who lacked a car, but probably not for most.

*Better environmental protection.* Concern about the environment as a material issue — polluted water, excessive smog — became significant in the 1970s. But to the extent government regulations imposed sizeable costs on businesses, some workers understandably worried that efforts to improve the public good could potentially cost them their jobs. As figure 17 shows, the share of working-class whites saying government was spending too much on improving and protecting the environment increased in the late 1970s.

There are other aspects of material well-being on which working-class whites during these years might well have viewed the Republicans as preferable:

*Job security via less competition from racial/ethnic minorities and women.* Some working-class whites perceived the chief threat to their job as being not a monetary policy devoted to low inflation or an austere fiscal policy, but rather an enlarged supply of competitors for their position due to antidiscrimination law and affirmative action programs. Rightly or wrongly, this perception, when coupled with the relatively high late seventies' unemployment rate under the Democrats, may have contributed to a growing view that one's job would be better safeguarded by the Republicans.

*Rising real wages via lower inflation.* If prices rise more rapidly than paychecks, real earnings fall and living standards decline. The inflation rate had increased temporarily in the late 1960s and mid 1970s under Republican administrations, but in the late 1970s it jumped to a historically unprecedented level (figure 23). The drop in purchasing power for ordinary Americans was sharp. It would have been reasonable to wonder whether, despite their more supportive positions on unions and the minimum wage, the Democrats truly were better than the Republicans at securing rising living standards.

*Higher incomes via tax cuts.* With earnings stagnant and the Democrats offering no clear, compelling plan for addressing the problem, it is hardly unreasonable to find the promise of a tax cut appealing.

*Safety.* The murder rate rose steadily and sharply between the mid 1960s and the mid 1970s, more than doubling during that ten-year period (figure 25). In mid 1970s the increase halted temporarily, but it resumed again in the last few years of the decade. To the extent murder and other types of violent crime were perceived as increasing and the Democrats were seen as "softer" on crime, they may well have lost ground among working-class whites who viewed physical safety as a key aspect of their material well-being. Less immediate but potentially just as relevant may have been fear of foreign (communist) attack, which is likely to have increased in the years following the U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam in 1975. The dramatic late-1970s jump in the share of working-class whites saying military spending was too low supports this conjecture (figure 16).

*Better school quality for one's children via elimination of busing.* For some working-class whites in the 1970s, the chief concern about school quality is likely to have been not the level of spending, the qualifications of teachers, or the content of the curriculum, but rather the quality of students. Court-ordered busing to achieve racial desegregation of public schools began outside the south in 1972. For white working-class parents who could not afford private school tuition, the worry that their children might be forcibly bused across town to a weaker school or that the teaching at their neighborhood school would be dumbed-down to accommodate the needs of less-well-prepared students bused in from other areas may have outweighed any advantage the Democrats had on other aspects of the education issue.

Given these considerations, it seems quite plausible that some working-class whites whose primary consideration with respect to party allegiance was material self-interest and who were reasonably well-informed and calculative might have decided to switch from the Democrats to the Republicans at some point in the late 1970s or the 1980s.

### ***Why No Recovery in the 1990s?***

If we are correct that it was largely material issues that drove the white working-class defection from the Democrats in the late 1970s and in the 1980s, what accounts for the lack of recovery during the 1990s and early 2000s? There was a deep recession under a Republican president in the early 1990s, a long economic boom with rising wages and incomes throughout the distribution and low unemployment and inflation under a Democratic president in the rest of the 1990s, then another recession followed by a jobless recovery under a Republican ad-

ministration in the early 2000s. Moreover, the Soviet threat evaporated at the end of the 1980s and the murder rate declined sharply through the 1990s. Given these developments, why did Democratic identification among working-class whites remain stuck at around 40% during the 1990s and early 2000s? Why didn't it rise?

One possibility is that social/culture issues increased in importance among working-class whites. While some among the white working-class may have returned to the Democrats on material grounds, this may have been offset by defection among those who saw the party as increasingly to their left on social/cultural issues or for whom such issues became more important in determining party preference. Figures 26 through 29 show Democratic identification among those choosing the liberal response(s) and those choosing the conservative response(s) on GSS questions about abortion, homosexuality, guns, and drugs. On none of these social/culture issues is there evidence of a growing divide during the late 1970s or the 1980s. But on all four there *is* an increasing gap in the 1990s.

A second possibility is that the lack of recovery in Democratic identification in the 1990s is a compositional effect of cohort. Figure 30 shows trends in Democratic identification among three cohorts of working-class whites. The cohorts are defined by the year in which the respondent turned age twenty. This is roughly when a person's initial party preference is likely to be formed. All else equal, initial preference will tend to influence later preference (Stoker and Jennings 2006). The first cohort group consists of those who turned twenty during the Roosevelt or Truman administrations — i.e., prior to 1952. The second includes those who turned twenty in the years 1952 to 1975. We refer to these as the Eisenhower-through-Ford group. The third consists of those who turned twenty after 1975. In practice, this includes respondents who turned twenty during the Carter, Reagan, or Bush I administrations; there are not enough GSS respondents who reached age twenty during the Clinton or Bush II administrations to yield reliable estimates of party identification.

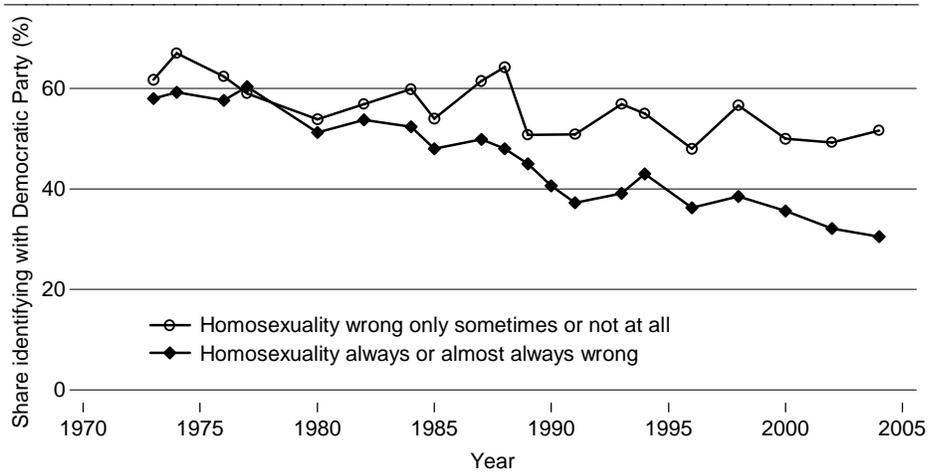
The three groups differ strikingly in their patterns of Democratic identification. Among the Roosevelt-Truman group there is only a slight fall in Democratic identification over time. Among the Eisenhower-through-Ford group, the trend mimics that among all working-class whites (figure 1). Among the younger group, who came of age politically after the mid-1970s, Democratic identification has never been particularly strong, hovering at or slightly above 40% throughout. Arguably, working-class whites in this younger group were heavily influenced by the confusion during their formative political years about which party better served working-class material interests. Part of the reason why Democrats have been unable to recover ground among working-class whites since the early 1990s, despite some significantly favorable developments, is that the solidly-Democratic older cohort has gradually been replaced by the much-less-Democratic younger cohort.

Figure 26. Democratic Identification among Working-Class Whites Choosing the Liberal and Conservative Responses on Abortion



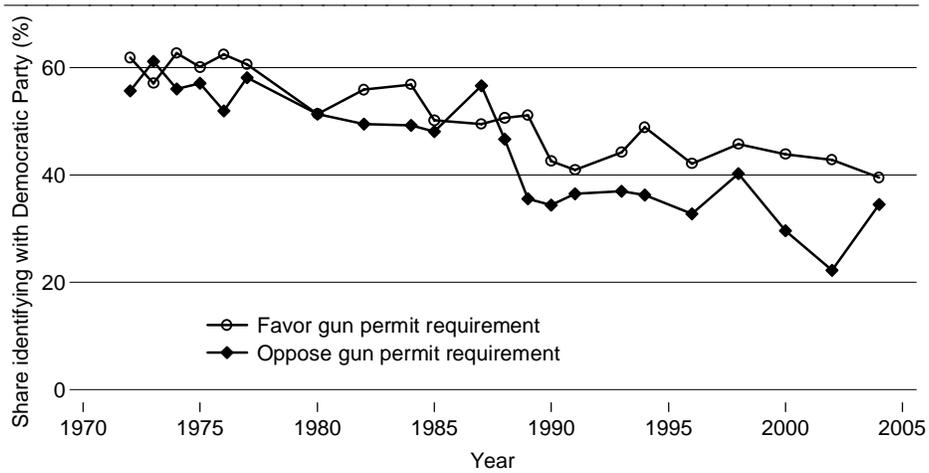
Note: The difference between the two groups is statistically significant at the .05 level or better in every year from 1993 forward. Authors' calculations using GSS data. For definitions and coding details, see table 2. Working class is defined as self-identified lower or working class.

Figure 27. Democratic Identification among Working-Class Whites Choosing the Liberal and Conservative Responses on Homosexuality



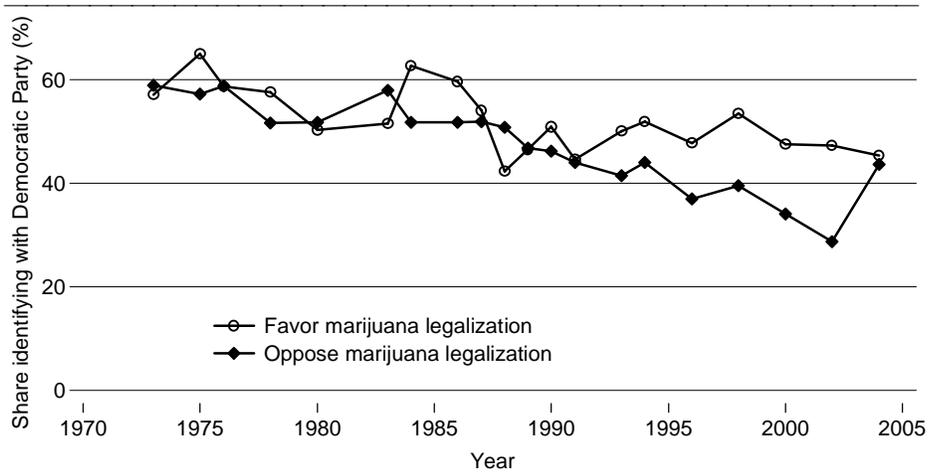
Note: The difference between the two groups is statistically significant at the .05 level or better in every year from 1991 forward. Authors' calculations using GSS data. For definitions and coding details, see table 2. Working class is defined as self-identified lower or working class.

Figure 28. Democratic Identification among Working-Class Whites Choosing the Liberal and Conservative Responses on Guns



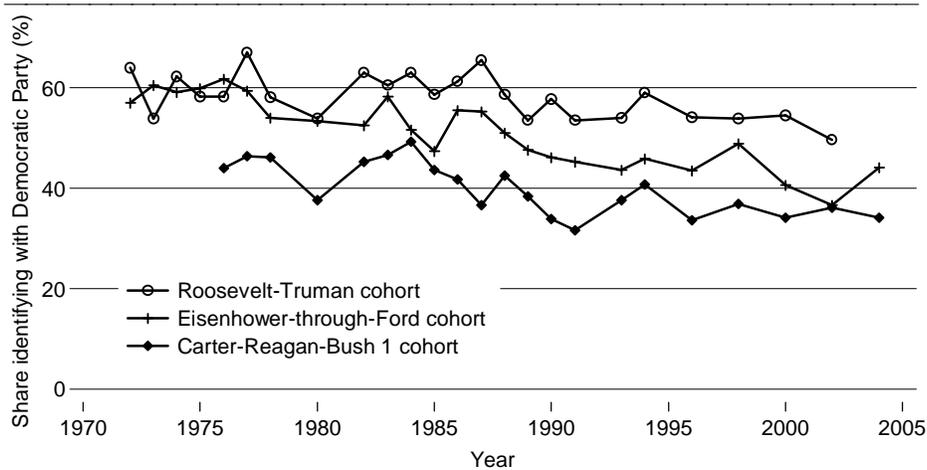
Note: The difference between the two groups is statistically significant at the .05 level or better in every year from 1994 forward, except 1998 and 2004. Authors' calculations using GSS data. For definitions and coding details, see table 2. Working class is defined as self-identified lower or working class.

Figure 29. Democratic Identification among Working-Class Whites Choosing the Liberal and Conservative Responses on Drugs



Note: The difference between the two groups is statistically significant at the .10 level or better in every year from 1993 forward, except 2004. Authors' calculations using GSS data. For definitions and coding details, see table 2. Working class is defined as self-identified lower or working class.

Figure 30. Democratic Identification among Working-Class Whites by Cohort



Note: Authors' calculations using GSS data. Working class is defined as self-identified lower or working class.

We should emphasize that the cohort patterns in figure 30 cannot account for the decline in Democratic identification that occurred in the late 1970s and the 1980s. The younger group was too small a proportion of American adults to have had much of an effect in those years.

## Conclusion

Our aim in this paper is to shed new light on the questions of whether and why working-class whites have turned away from the Democratic party. Party identification is only one measure of political preference, our reliance on the GSS limits our analysis to the period since 1972, and the data we are able to analyze are by no means perfect. Still, we believe our analyses do advance understanding of trends in white working-class party preference. Our main findings are as follows.

Between 1977 and 1991 Democratic identification among working-class whites fell by approximately twenty percentage points, from 60% to 40%. This decline is not sensitive to measurement choice with respect to party identification or the working class, it was not mainly a function of general party disaffiliation, and it was not confined to the south. Since the early 1990s there has been no further decline but also no recovery in white working-class Democratic allegiance.

Class has long been viewed as one of the key determinants of party preference. For the group on which we have focused here, whites who self-identify as

working class, that is clearly less true now than it was a generation ago. Most revealing are the patterns in figure 5, which show that since the early 1990s working-class whites have been as likely to identify Republican as Democrat.

We conclude that the decline in Democratic identification was driven largely by changes in white working-class views on certain issues, by (real or perceived) shifts in party positions, by changes in the importance of certain issues to working-class whites, and perhaps most importantly by changes in working-class whites' confidence in the Democrats' ability to deliver the goods on particular issues. The key issues were material ones. Beginning in the mid-to-late 1970s there was increasing reason for working-class whites to question whether the Democrats were still better than the Republicans at promoting their material well-being. The resulting defection from the Democrats was interrupted in the early 1980s, due likely to the severity of the economic recession and to concern about how conservative the Reagan administration would turn out to be. It then resumed in the late 1980s as the economy improved and Reagan's changes proved not terribly radical.

Since the early 1990s economic and other material developments have been relatively favorable to the Democrats, yet there has been no recovery in Democratic identification among working-class whites. This appears to be partly a product of increasing importance of social/cultural issues for some working-class whites and partly a function of replacement of an older solidly-Democratic cohort by a younger considerably-less-Democratic cohort.

Various observers have noted the difficulty Democrats face in addressing the apparent rise in concern about social/cultural issues among working-class whites (e.g., Judis and Teixeira 2002). If the party moves to the right on one or more of these issues in order get closer to white working-class views, it risks alienating professionals, who increasingly prefer the Democrats precisely because of the party's liberal positions on those issues. A now-common argument is that the Democrats would benefit electorally from an economic platform that more directly and effectively serves working-class material interests (Faux 1996; Teixeira and Rogers 2000; Frank 2004; Greenberg 2004; Hacker 2006). The pattern for the youngest cohort in figure 30 suggests that while this might be a wise course of action, the challenge the party faces in winning back a majority of working-class whites is sizeable.

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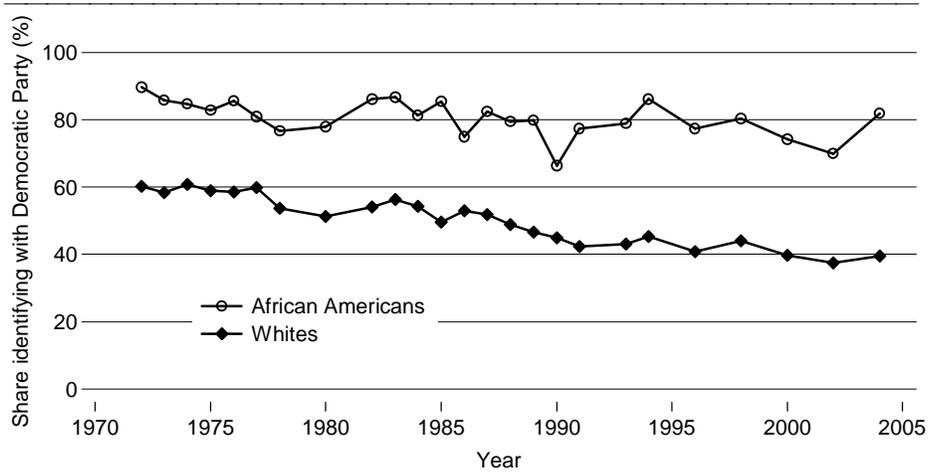
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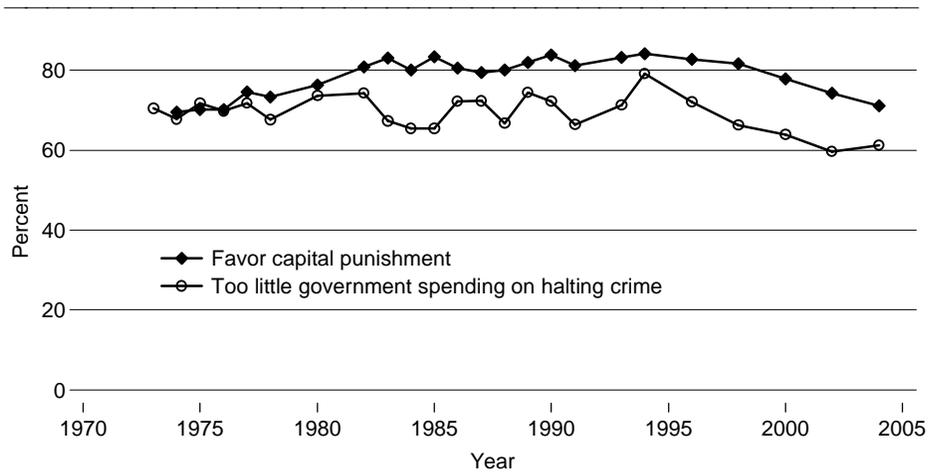
## Appendix

Figure A1. Democratic Identification among Working-Class Whites and Working-Class African Americans



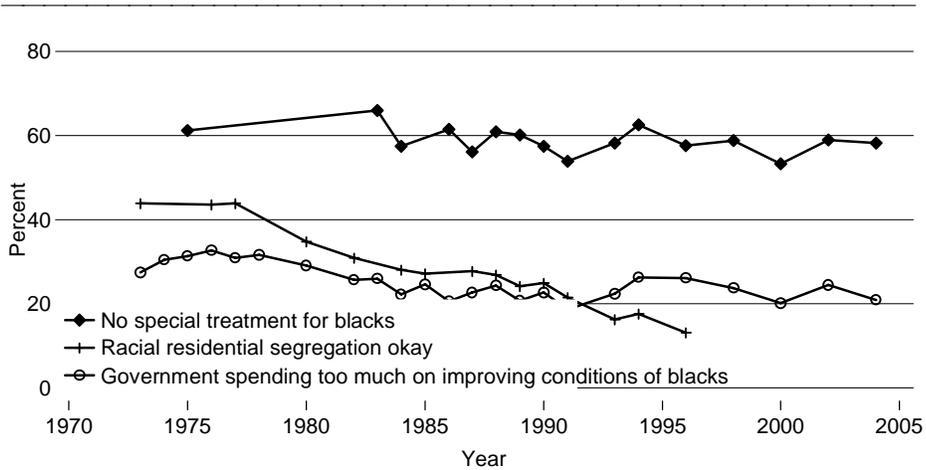
Note: Authors' calculations using GSS data. Working class is defined as self-identified lower or working class.

Figure A2. Working-Class Whites' Views on Crime



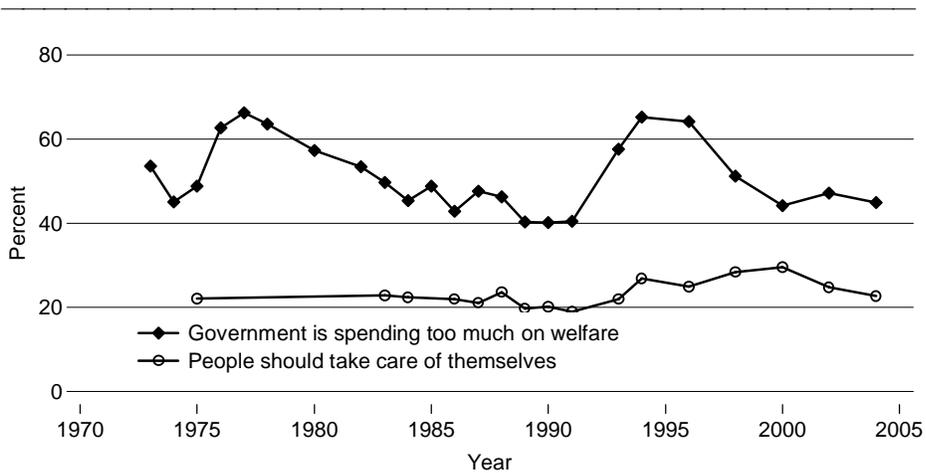
Note: Authors' calculations using GSS data. For definitions and coding details, see table 2. Working class is defined as self-identified lower or working class.

Figure A3. Working-Class Whites' Views on Race



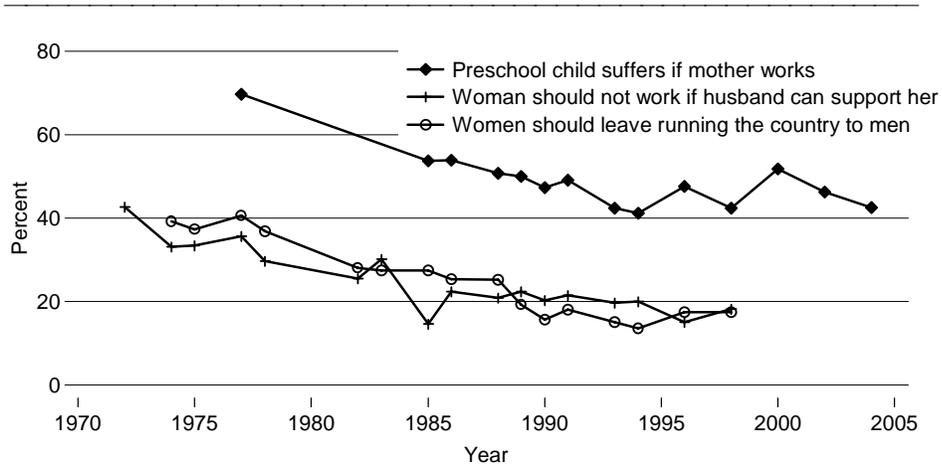
Note: Authors' calculations using GSS data. For definitions and coding details, see table 2. Percentage for "no special treatment for blacks" is for those coded 4 or 5. Working class is defined as self-identified lower or working class.

Figure A4. Working-Class Whites' Views on Poverty/Welfare



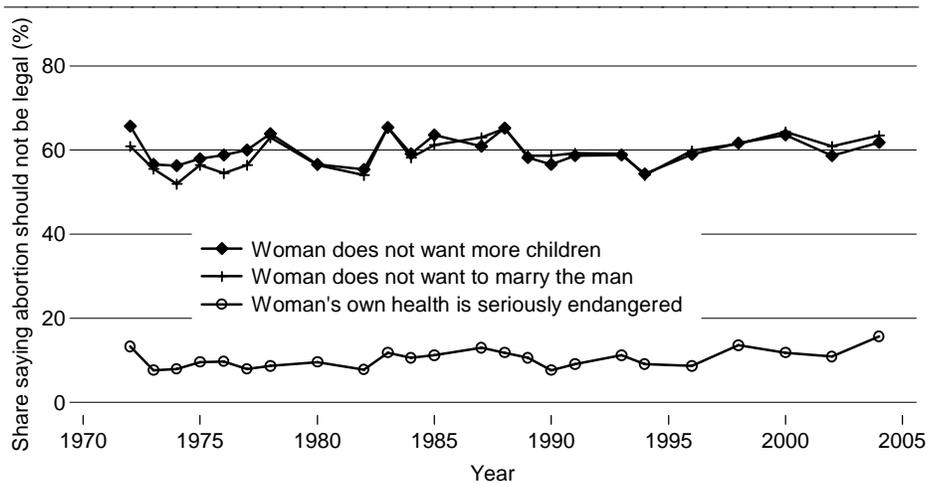
Note: Authors' calculations using GSS data. For definitions and coding details, see table 2. Percentage for "people should take care of themselves" is for those coded 4 or 5. Working class is defined as self-identified lower or working class.

Figure A5. Working-Class Whites' Views on Gender Roles



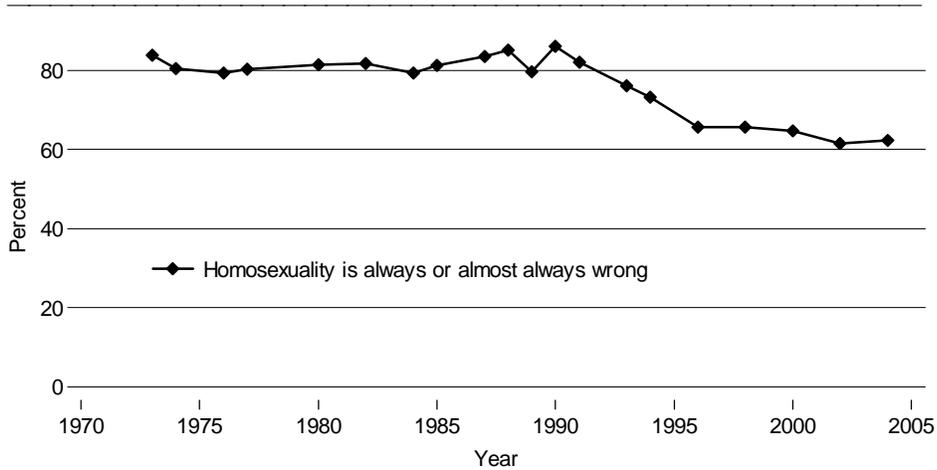
Note: Authors' calculations using GSS data. For definitions and coding details, see table 2. Working class is defined as self-identified lower or working class.

Figure A6. Working-Class Whites' Views on Abortion



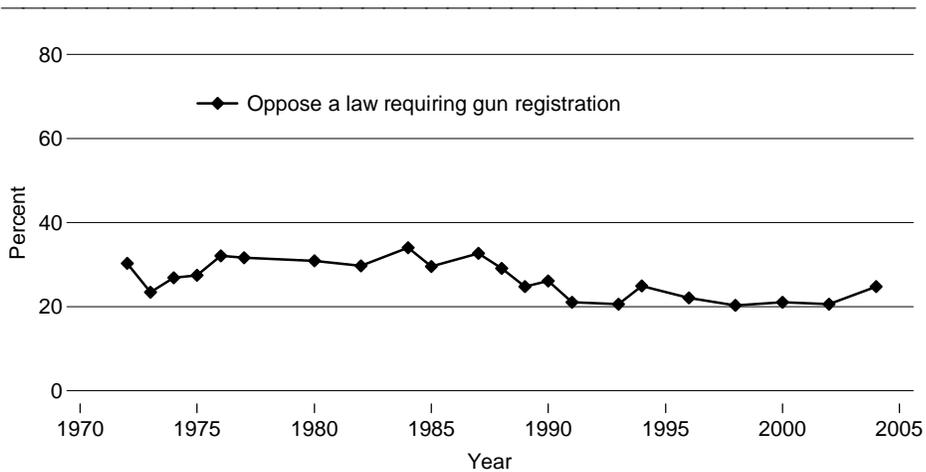
Note: Authors' calculations using GSS data. For definitions and coding details, see table 2. Working class is defined as self-identified lower or working class.

Figure A7. Working-Class Whites' Views on Homosexuality



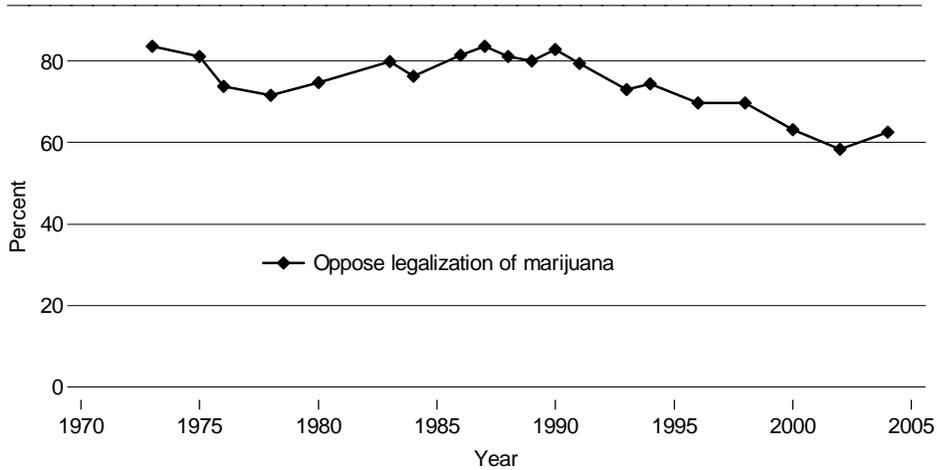
Note: Authors' calculations using GSS data. For definitions and coding details, see table 2. Working class is defined as self-identified lower or working class.

Figure A8. Working-Class Whites' Views on Guns



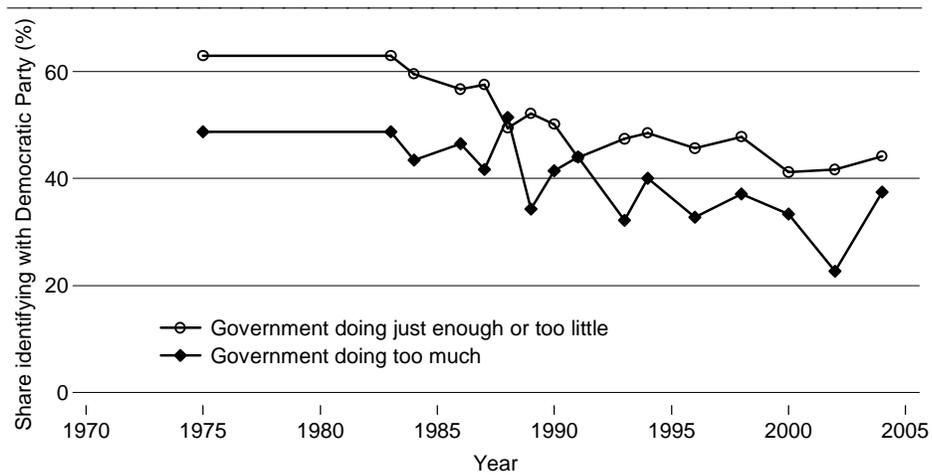
Note: Authors' calculations using GSS data. For definitions and coding details, see table 2. Working class is defined as self-identified lower or working class.

Figure A9. Working-Class Whites' Views on Drugs



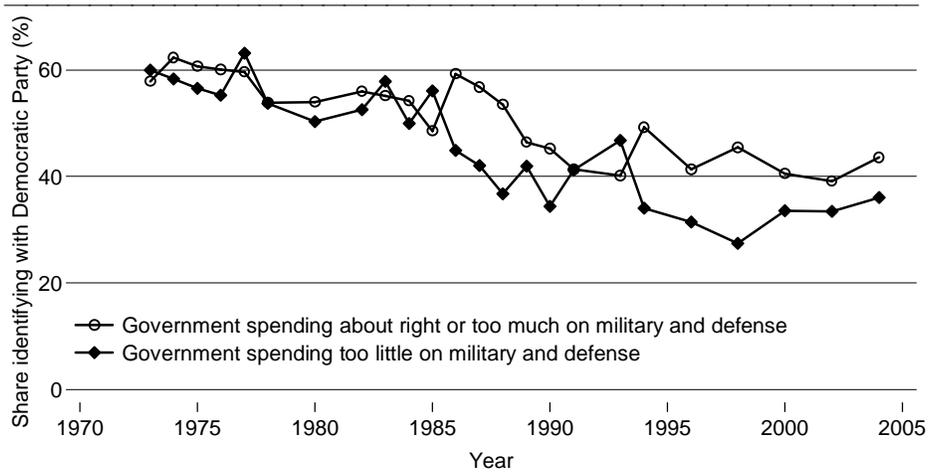
Note: Authors' calculations using GSS data. For definitions and coding details, see table 2. Working class is defined as self-identified lower or working class.

Figure A10. Democratic Identification among Working-Class Whites Choosing the Liberal and Conservative Responses on "Big Government"



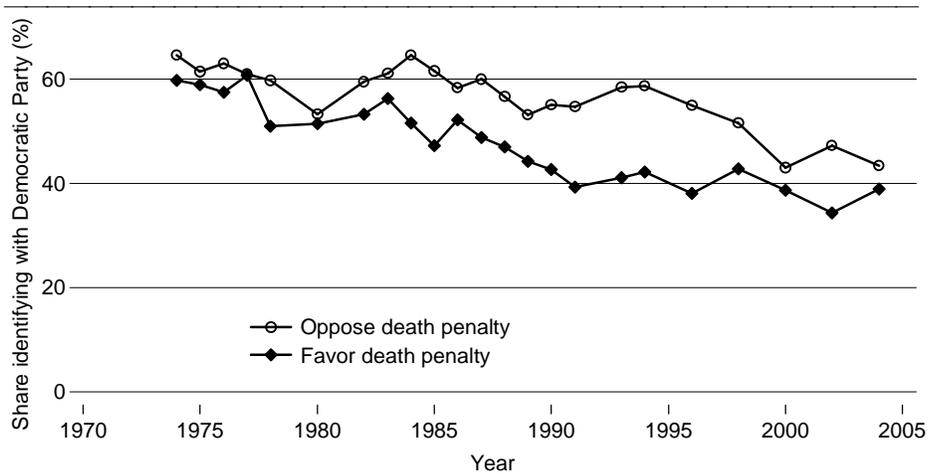
Note: Authors' calculations using GSS data. For definitions and coding details, see table 2. Working class is defined as self-identified lower or working class.

Figure A11. Democratic Identification among Working-Class Whites Choosing the Liberal and Conservative Responses on Foreign Policy



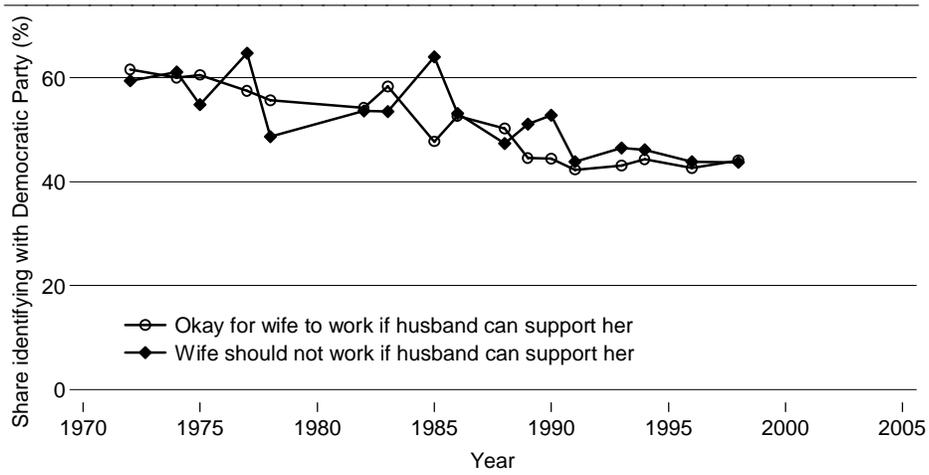
Note: Authors' calculations using GSS data. For definitions and coding details, see table 2. Working class is defined as self-identified lower or working class.

Figure A12. Democratic Identification among Working-Class Whites Choosing the Liberal and Conservative Responses on Crime



Note: Authors' calculations using GSS data. For definitions and coding details, see table 2. Working class is defined as self-identified lower or working class.

Figure A13. Democratic Identification among Working-Class Whites Choosing the Liberal and Conservative Responses on Gender Roles



Note: Authors' calculations using GSS data. For definitions and coding details, see table 2. Working class is defined as self-identified lower or working class.