SCHOLARS
STRATEGY NETWORK

Does Class Matter When Americans Vote?

Jeffrey M. Stonecash, Syracuse University

When Americans go to the polls, do the privileged vote differently from the less privileged? If citizens in different social positions tend to vote more for one party than the other, this tells us that voters see Democrats and Republicans as representing distinct concerns – and it creates incentives for candidates and officeholders to take distinctive stands on issues relevant to more and less advantaged constituents. At a time when inequality is sharply increasing in the United States, the role of class differences in politics matters a lot.

But analysts and pundits disagree about whether class differences are important – and tell very different stories about how the impact of class has changed. Some say that class is less important than it used to be, because race and religious differences weigh more heavily when voters decide between Democrats and Republicans. Indeed, a few pundits go so far as to say that class has "inverted" since the time of the New Deal and World War II – making Republicans the now party of blue collar voters, while Democrats appeal to wine-drinking college elites.

A careful look at the evidence reveals that reports of the demise of working-class Democrats are greatly exaggerated.

It Depends on How "Class" is Defined

People use "class" in very different ways. Whenever someone makes a claim about class in politics, it is best to look closely at which definition is used – and to whom it is applied.

A common approach is to sort Americans by absolute educational levels – according to whether they competed high school, attended some college, completed college, and so forth. Obviously, over the past half-century, the overall level of educational attainment in the United States has gone up. So if we label the "working class" as just those who have high school diplomas or dropped out, then the "working class" shrinks over the decades. In the 1950s, more than three-quarters of white Americans attained high school diplomas or less; by the 1990s, just slightly over a third fell into that category.

Over this long span, the percent of whites with high school diplomas or less who voted for Democrats in presidential elections changed very little (from 42.6% in the 1950s to 44.5% in the 2000s, with ups and downs in-between). The percentage voting for Democrats for the House of Representatives went down (from 55.3% to 44.1%) But how meaningful are either of these trends when the share of Americans with such minimal formal education went down so drastically?

If Class Means Income, Support for the Parties Diverges

A more common-sense way to talk about class refers to how much income people earn. Income divisions have become greater in America. The 1950s and 1960s were an era of growing incomes and declining inequality – so Americans earning the most and the least were not as far apart in absolute economic terms are they are now. Since the 1970s, income inequality has steadily increased – and electoral politics has also become more polarized, with Republicans and Democrats now taking strikingly different positions on many issues, including matters like taxes, the minimum wage, and social spending on programs for the middle class and the poor. Do voters sort out by income level between Democrats and Republicans? Other big changes have also occurred since the 1950s – especially in race relations. Blacks can now vote in all parts of the country; and many non-white immigrants have arrived and earned citizenship. Does race trump income differences in the voting booth – especially since many lower earners are non-whites?

The table below contrasts individuals in the bottom versus the top thirds of the income distribution, tracking the percentage voting Democratic in presidential and House elections from the 1950s to 2000s. The left side looks at all U.S. voters and the right side includes only whites.

Democratic Voting by the Highest and Lowest Income Groups, for All U.S. Voters and White Voters, 1950s to 2000s

	ALL VOTERS				WHITE VOTERS			
	President		House		President		House	
Decade	Low	High	Low	High	Low	High	Low	High
1950s	43.4	37.9	57.1	48.6	41.9	37.1	55.6	47.8
1960s	53.4	49.1	60.7	53.7	48.5	47.2	56.8	52.1
1970s	51.5	35.6	66.1	51.3	42.6	32.8	60.9	49.1
1980s	55.3	33.3	68.0	50.7	43.3	29.6	60.0	47.7
1990s	62.9	41.3	69.0	44.3	51.8	37.0	62.9	41.3
2000s	61.8	42.7	63.3	45.2	50.6	37.2	55.3	40.7

The class story in this table is clear-cut. Whether we look at all U.S. voters, or just whites, Americans in the lower third of the income distribution are voting more Democratic in presidential elections over time – and in both presidential and House elections, the gap between low-income and high-income voters has grown, as high-income whites, especially, have moved away from the Democrats. In elections for the House of Representatives, the partisan gap between top and bottom earners has also grown, though low-income whites have fluctuated in their support for Democrats.

The Bottom Line: Class Matters

If we sort Americans by formal educational levels, the partisan gaps are not as great. But if we focus on income, class makes more of a difference in how citizens vote now than it did fifty years ago – even with all the racial changes America has experienced. At a time when Americans are becoming steadily more educated, incomes are not increasing much for most people – and income gaps are growing. High earners look to

Republicans, while Democrats are, more than ever, the party lower-income Americans want to represent their interests.

This brief draws on Jeffrey M. Stonecash, *Class and Party in American Politics* (Westview Press, 2000), with updated findings.

This brief draws on Jeffrey M. Stonecash, *Class and Party in American Politics* (Westview Press, 2000), with updated findings.