

## *Review*

# **What's the Matter with *What's the Matter with Kansas?*\***

Larry M. Bartels

*Department of Politics and Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs,  
Princeton University; bartels@princeton.edu*

---

### ABSTRACT

Thomas Frank's *What's the Matter with Kansas?* asserts that the Republican Party has forged a new "dominant political coalition" by attracting working-class white voters on the basis of "class animus" and "cultural wedge issues like guns and abortion." My analysis confirms that white voters without college degrees have become significantly less Democratic; however, the contours of that shift bear little resemblance to Frank's account. First, the trend is almost entirely confined to the South, where Democratic support was artificially inflated by the one-party system of the Jim Crow era of legalized racial segregation. (Outside the South, support for Democratic presidential candidates among whites without college degrees has fallen by a total of one percentage point over the past half-century.) Second, there is no evidence that "culture outweighs economics as a matter of public concern" among Frank's working-class white voters. The apparent political significance of social issues has increased substantially over the past 20 years, but more among better-educated white voters than among those without college degrees. In both groups, economic issues continue to be most important. Finally, contrary to Frank's account, most of his white working-class voters see themselves as closer to the Democratic Party on social issues like abortion and gender roles but closer to the Republican Party on economic issues.

---

\* This is a much-revised version of a paper originally presented at the 2005 meeting of the American Political Science Association in Washington DC. I am grateful to the many friends, colleagues, and complete strangers who provided reactions to that version, and especially to Thomas Frank for a lively and detailed critique. Marc Hetherington, Keith Krehbiel, Katherine Newman, Jeffrey Stonecash, and John Zaller provided helpful comments on the penultimate draft. The research

Thomas Frank's *What's the Matter with Kansas?* provides a colorful and passionate account of the emergence of a new "dominant political coalition" uniting "business and blue-collar" in an increasingly conservative Republican Party (2004, 8). In Frank's telling, "conservatives won the heart of America" by convincing Kansans and other people of modest means to vote against their own economic interests in a vain effort to defend traditional cultural values against radical bicoastal elites. The result is "a populist uprising that only benefits the people it is supposed to be targeting" (2004, 109). As for the working-class cultural conservatives who provide the crucial votes,

All they have to show for their Republican loyalty are lower wages, more dangerous jobs, dirtier air, a new overlord class that comports itself like King Farouk – and, of course, a crap culture whose moral free fall continues, without significant interference from the grandstanding Christs whom they send triumphantly back to Washington every couple of years. (136)

Of course, the notion that American politics has been transformed by the defection from the Democratic ranks of working-class conservatives is not new. As long ago as Richard Nixon's first year in the White House, Kevin Phillips (1969) published an attention-getting blueprint for constructing *The Emerging Republican Majority* along neopopulist conservative lines. Ladd and Hadley (1975, 240, 232) proclaimed "an inversion of the old class relationship in voting" due to "the transformations of conflict characteristic of postindustrialism." Huckfeldt and Kohfeld (1989, 84) argued that "race served to splinter the Democratic coalition" because the policy commitments of the Civil Rights era provoked "[r]acial hostility, particularly on the part of lower-status whites." And Edsall and Edsall (1991, 154) argued that "Working-class whites and corporate CEOs, once adversaries at the bargaining table, found common ideological ground in their shared hostility to expanding government intervention."

What Frank's "stew of memoir, journalism and essay" (Brownstein 2004) adds to these works, aside from a good deal of fascinating local color, is a more pointed account of the cultural discontent fueling the "Great Backlash" – and an impassioned denunciation of "a working-class movement that has done incalculable, historic harm to working-class people" by enticing them to vote on the basis of "cultural wedge issues like guns and abortion and the rest whose hallucinatory appeal would ordinarily be far overshadowed by material concerns" (Frank 2004, 6, 245).

The supposedly decisive role of "values voters" in the 2004 election seems to reinforce both the empirical force and the political significance of Frank's analysis. While academics derided the exit poll finding that "moral values" were the most important issue in the campaign, journalists and pundits seized on the notion that working-class cultural conservatives swung the election to the Republicans. Indeed, in a piece written even before the votes were counted, *New York Times* columnist Nicholas Kristof (2004a) wrote that Kerry supporters "should be feeling wretched about the millions of farmers, factory workers, and waitresses who ended up voting – utterly against their own interests – for Republican candidates." Kristof praised *What's the Matter With Kansas?* as "the best political book of the year," citing approvingly Frank's assertion that "Democratic leaders

---

reported here was generously supported by grants from the Russell Sage Foundation and the Carnegie Corporation of New York's Carnegie Scholars program.

have been so eager to win over suburban professionals that they have lost touch with blue-collar America.”

But have they? My aim here is to subject Frank's thesis to systematic empirical examination. I do not propose to question Frank's account of what has happened on the ground in Kansas. Insofar as he reports on actual political events, they mostly involve the efforts of social conservatives to wrest control of the state's Republican Party apparatus from its traditional, somewhat more moderate conservative leadership. This is a significant political story with parallels in many parts of the country (Cohen forthcoming). But it is a story about internecine conflict among Republican Party activists, not a story about how “Democratic leaders . . . have lost touch with blue-collar America” – and certainly not a story about “How Conservatives Won the Heart of America,” as the subtitle of Frank's book would suggest.

Some of Frank's conservative activists – like Tim Golba, “a line worker at a soda pop bottling plant” who is “toiling selflessly every day of the year” on behalf of conservative causes (Frank 2004, 166–169) – are colorful examples of authentic working-class conservatism. Others – like Senator Sam Brownback, the “hero” of modern Kansas conservatism and “a member of one of the wealthiest families in the state” (Frank 2004, 30) – are something else altogether. In any event, with all due respect to Kansas Republicans, it seems safe to assume that the widespread favorable attention Frank's book has generated owes less to Tim Golba or Sam Brownback than to the “millions of farmers, factory workers, and waitresses” across the country who are supposed to have been drawn to the Republican Party's new “dominant political coalition” on the basis of cultural conservatism and “class animus.”

Those millions of voters are the focus of my analysis here. Using national survey data on political attitudes and behavior collected over the past half-century by the American National Election Studies (NES), I attempt to assess whether Frank's account of “What's the Matter with Kansas” provides a reliable key to understanding broader trends in contemporary American electoral politics, as Frank and many of his readers seem to have assumed. Perhaps, as Frank (2004, 19) himself wrote about a different strand of punditry, “It's pretty much a waste of time . . . to catalog the contradictions and tautologies and huge, honking errors blowing round in a media flurry like this.” Be that as it may, the significance of his subject matter and the evident resonance of his account with the convictions, suspicions, and fears of many other political observers and enthusiastic readers seem to me to make Frank's claims eminently worthy of critical scrutiny.

## WHO IS FRANK WRITING ABOUT?

Frank begins his book by pointing to George W. Bush's puzzling success in the 2000 election in “[t]he poorest county in America.” This result puzzles him, he writes, because “it is the Democrats that are the party of workers, of the poor, of the weak and the victimized” (2004, 1). What “tragically inverted form of class consciousness” could bring these people to make common cause with the “assortment of millionaires and lawyers and Harvard grads” pushing the Republican economic agenda of tax cuts, deregulation, free trade, and corporate welfare (2004, 259, 196)?

According to Frank (2004, 102), outsiders observing the political conflicts roiling contemporary Kansas tend to attribute them to “a squabble between fundamentalists and mainline Protestants, or a fight between the ignorant and the educated, or even to the Cons’ relative newness to modern, big-city ways. But above all it is a class war.” Again, two pages later, it is “a class difference. . . . I mean this in the material, economic sense, not in the tastes-and-values way our punditry defines class” (2004, 104).

In an earlier version of this review I interpreted those passages as suggesting that the people Frank had in mind were people with low incomes. Thus, I proposed to “follow Frank’s lead” (and the earlier statistical work of Stonecash 2000) by categorizing voters on the basis of economic status, using the terms “low-income” and “working-class” interchangeably to refer to people with incomes in the bottom third of the income distribution in each election year. (In 2004, those were people with family incomes below \$35,000.) I showed that, contrary to Frank’s assertions, white voters in this group had not become less Democratic in their voting behavior or less conservative in their views about economic or social issues. Nor could I find any evidence that they cared more about social and cultural issues than about bread-and-butter economic issues.

As it turns out, that isn’t what Frank meant at all. Indeed, in a critique of my earlier paper, he calls this definition “A *primary error*. . . a mistake so basic that it effectively negates his entire effort” (Frank 2005, 2). Mostly, the evidence of error seems to be that this definition does not confirm the significance of working-class conservatism demonstrated in “book after book” by sociologists and historians, poll results, fretting by Democratic strategists, and gloating by conservative newspaper columnists.

Frank’s solution to this dilemma is to redefine the conflict at the core of his book not in material economic terms, after all, but precisely as “a fight between the ignorant and the educated.” “[T]here is an easy way to truly ‘follow Frank’s lead,’” he now writes (2005, 6): “use educational attainment as a proxy for class.” The sole textual basis he offers for this alternative definition is a passing reference in his book to the fact that people living in the “hard-core right-wing parts” of Johnson County “are probably less likely to have college degrees” (2004, 104). Earlier in the same paragraph he wrote more definitely that those areas have “lower per capita incomes,” and later in the same paragraph he contrasted them with “more affluent suburbs.” Nevertheless, we are now led to understand that income is irrelevant and that the lack of a college degree is the key desideratum for membership in Frank’s version of the working class.

The textual interpretation seems strained, but since it is Frank’s book I am inclined to accord him the benefit of the doubt. Thus, the analyses presented here “truly ‘follow Frank’s lead’” by focusing on the political attitudes and behavior of white voters without college degrees.

While it seems fruitless to quibble about who is really in the working class, it is important to be clear about what we are talking about. The potential for confusion is illustrated in a 2005 *New York Times* column by David Brooks entitled “Meet the Poor Republicans.” Brooks writes that “we’ve seen poorer folks move over in astonishing numbers to the G.O.P.” In support of this assertion Brooks notes that “George W. Bush won the white working class by 23 percentage points in this past [2004] election.” The 23-point margin refers to white voters without college degrees – precisely the definition of the

white working class now proposed by Frank.<sup>1</sup> But are these really “poorer folks”? Poorer than Brooks and Frank, yes. Poor by the standards of ordinary Americans, not really.

Even in 2004, after decades of increasingly widespread college education, the economic circumstances of whites without college degrees were not much different from those of America as a whole. Among those who voted, 40% had family incomes in excess of \$60,000; and when offered the choice, more than half actually called themselves “middle class” rather than “working class.” Meanwhile, among working-class white voters who could even remotely be considered “poor” – those with incomes in the bottom third of the national income distribution – George W. Bush’s margin of victory in 2004 was not 23 percentage points but less than two percentage points.

Over the entire half-century covered by my analysis the mismatch between Frank’s definition and his concern for “the poor,” “the weak,” and “the victimized” (2004, 1) is even more striking: white voters without college degrees were actually more likely to have incomes in the top third of the income distribution than in the middle third, much less the bottom third. However, Frank himself now seems curiously uninterested in such material economic distinctions, or in the political behavior of the unlucky members of his working class who are not earning middle-class or upper-middle-class incomes. His only reaction to the finding that tens of millions of white voters in the bottom third of the income distribution have become significantly *more* Democratic over the past half-century is to dismiss as “well-known to poll-readers everywhere [the fact] that society’s very poorest members tend to vote Democratic” (2005, 3). Apparently Frank has little interest in meeting the poor Democrats.

#### HAS THE WHITE WORKING CLASS ABANDONED THE DEMOCRATIC PARTY?

Frank portrays a broad shift in the political loyalties of traditionally Democratic working-class voters as crucial to the development of the Republican Party’s new “dominant political coalition” (2004, 8). He depicts “sturdy blue-collar patriots,” “small farmers,” “devoted family men,” and “working-class guys in midwestern cities” all contributing their share to this “panorama of madness and delusion” (2004, 10). In his critique of my earlier paper he adds that “Working-class conservatism . . . is an important, if not the pre-eminent reason for the continuing electoral weakness of the Democratic Party” (2005, 2).

Figure 1 charts the voting behavior of Frank’s white working class in presidential elections over the past half-century, using survey data from the American National Election Studies.<sup>2</sup> The solid line in the figure shows the Democratic share of the two-party vote in each election. There are obviously considerable fluctuations in Democratic support from

<sup>1</sup> Brooks’s figure is based on data from the Edison/Mitofsky 2004 exit poll. The comparable margin in the 2004 NES survey is only slightly smaller, 19.7%.

<sup>2</sup> Data and documentation are available from the NES website, <http://www.umich.edu/~nes>. I have weighted the NES data to make each year’s sample match the corresponding Census Bureau figures with respect to age, race, and sex, as well as the actual aggregate turnout and partisan division of the major-party popular vote in each presidential election.

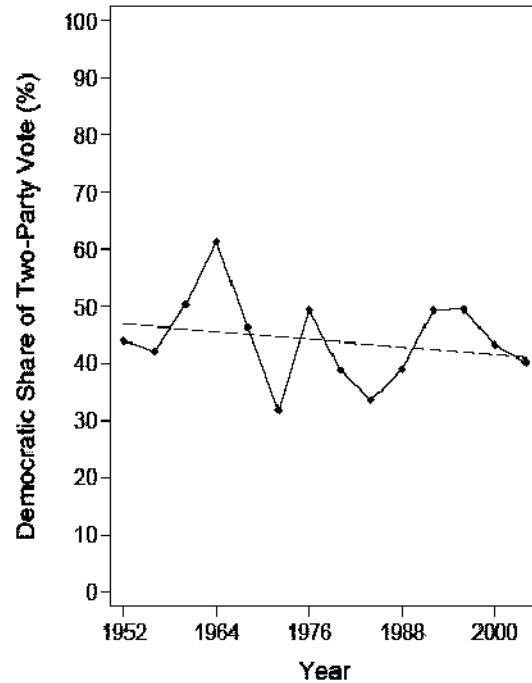
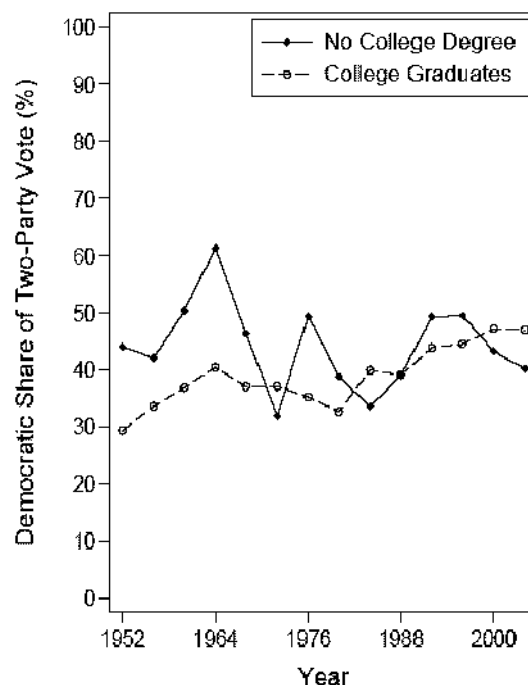


Figure 1. Democratic presidential vote (whites without college degrees).

one election to the next as recessions, wars, and good and bad candidates come and go; thus, it would be a mistake to attach too much significance to gains or losses in any single election. An important advantage of the NES data is that they allow us to distinguish these short-term shifts from longer-term trends.

The dotted line in Figure 1 summarizes the long-term trend in Democratic support over the past 14 presidential elections among white voters without college degrees. That trend is clearly downward; the cumulative decline in Democratic support amounts to almost six percentage points. In this respect the data are completely consistent with Frank's account. However, a look beneath the surface of Figure 1 suggests three crucial qualifications.

First, even this gradual decline in Democratic support depends critically on the assumption, implicit throughout Frank's account but never stated, that he is writing about the *white* working class. The distinctiveness of white political behavior in contemporary America and the overwhelming focus on whites in the recent literature on class politics and voting behavior makes this limitation expedient. Nevertheless, it is worth bearing in mind that ignoring non-whites produces a distorted picture of the broader political situation. Indeed, including non-whites without college degrees in the analysis would be sufficient to reverse the overall trend in Figure 1, producing a two-point *increase* in Democratic support among the working class as a whole over the past half-century.

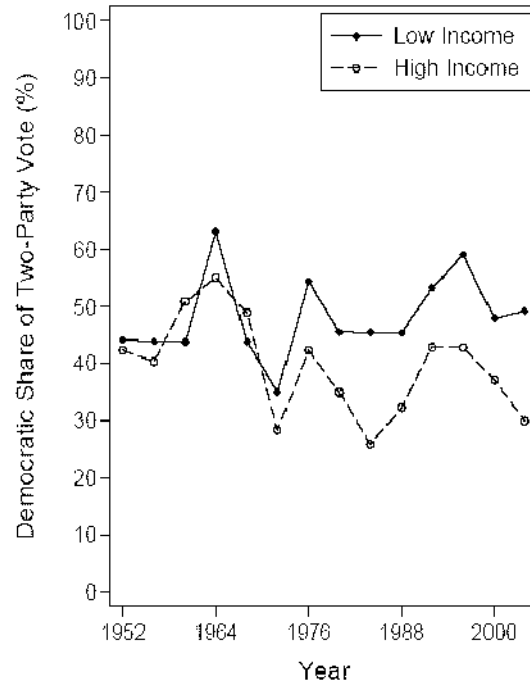


**Figure 2.** Democratic presidential vote by educational attainment (whites only).

Second, although Frank's account may lead readers to imagine that the class distinctions reflected in having or not having a college degree have become more significant in recent elections, a comparison of the voting behavior of whites with and without college degrees suggests the opposite. That comparison is presented in Figure 2. Clearly, the overall pattern is one of convergence rather than divergence. Through the first half of the period there was a fairly large and consistent difference in voting behavior between white college graduates and other white voters. (The average difference in Democratic support between the two groups was ten percentage points, and the only difference smaller than eight percentage points was in the Republican landslide of 1972.) Since 1980, however, there has been no consistent difference in voting behavior between whites with college degrees and whites without college degrees. From this perspective, class (as now defined by Frank) has become much *less* politically relevant over the past half-century.

On the other hand, class "in the material, economic sense" has become much *more* politically relevant over the same period. That fact should be evident from Figure 3, which compares the voting behavior of the poorer and more affluent segments of Frank's white working class.<sup>3</sup> Here, the general pattern is the opposite of the one in Figure 2. While the

<sup>3</sup> The low-income group includes people with family incomes in the bottom third of the national income distribution in each election year. The high-income group includes people with family incomes in the top third of the national income distribution (\$70,000 or more in 2004).



**Figure 3.** Democratic presidential vote by income level (non-college whites).

electoral significance of educational attainment has declined substantially over the past half-century, the electoral significance of income differences has increased substantially. Through the 1950s and 1960s there was virtually no difference in Democratic support on the basis of income; the average Democratic vote shares among the lower-, middle-, and upper-income segments of Frank's white working class were 48%, 52%, and 48%. (Since almost 90% of white voters in this era counted as "working class" by Frank's definition, the figures are virtually identical for the entire white electorate.) However, since the 1970s there has been a large and fairly consistent gap in partisan preferences between richer and poorer white voters regardless of whether or not they happen to have college degrees. Since 1976, Democratic presidential candidates have received 50% of the votes from the lower-income segment of Frank's white working class, 43% from the middle-income segment, and 35% from the upper-income segment. (The corresponding Democratic vote shares from the lower, middle, and upper thirds of the white electorate as a whole are 51%, 44%, and 37%.)

The pattern of income polarization in Figure 3 is consistent with Stonecash's (2000, 118) finding that "less-affluent whites have not moved away from the Democratic Party and that class divisions have not declined in American politics," and with McCarty, Poole and Rosenthal's (forthcoming, chapter 3) finding that income has become an increasingly



strong predictor of Republican partisanship and presidential voting since the 1950s. In the white working class, as in the electorate as a whole, net Republican gains since the 1950s have come entirely among middle- and upper-income voters, producing a substantial gap in partisanship and voting between predominantly Democratic lower income groups and predominantly Republican upper income groups.

The voting behavior of Frank's white working class in the 2004 election suggests that, if anything, the partisan divergence between its richer and poorer segments is continuing to increase. John Kerry received 49% of the two-party vote in the poorest third of Frank's white working class, virtually identical to the 50% received by previous Democratic candidates over the preceding three decades. However, his support fell to 40% among middle-income whites without college degrees, and to 30% among those in the top third of the income distribution. Thus, insofar as Kerry's performance reflects a continuing erosion in Democratic support among Frank's white working class, that erosion continues to be concentrated among people who are, in fact, relatively affluent.

The contrasting trends evident in Figures 2 and 3 present a fascinating puzzle for observers of American electoral politics. We assume, on the basis of the limited data available from the 1930s and 1940s, that the partisan divisions of the New Deal era were strongly grounded in class conflict between relatively rich Republicans and relatively poor Democrats. However, the data from the 1950s and 1960s summarized in Figures 2 and 3 indicate quite clearly that the politically significant class divisions of the late New Deal era, at least, had much more to do with educational status than with straightforward economic distinctions. On the other hand, since the 1970s the attention of political observers has increasingly focused on social and cultural manifestations of class politics – but during this same period the partisan significance of educational attainment has largely evaporated, while the partisan significance of income disparities has escalated considerably. Do these shifts reflect significant changes in the distributions of education and income? Changes in the issue content of partisan conflict? We simply do not know. In any case, they seem at odds with accounts like Frank's which emphasize the significance of social rather than economic dimensions of contemporary class politics.

Table 1 provides a different way of looking at the growing electoral importance of income differences within Frank's white working class. The rows of the table present separate tabulations of changing Democratic support over the whole period from 1952 through 2004 among voters in the upper, middle, and lower thirds of the income distribution in each election year. The first entry in the first column of the table, –5.9, represents the overall decline in Democratic presidential support among white voters without college degrees over the 14 presidential elections covered by the NES surveys. (The dotted line in Figure 1 is a graphical representation of the same cumulative decline.) Reading down the first column, we see that the decline in support for Democratic candidates was much greater – almost 15 percentage points – among the most affluent members of this group (with family incomes in the top third of the national income distribution). On the other hand, the Democratic vote share among the least affluent members of this group (those in the bottom third of the national income distribution) actually *increased* by almost five percentage points.

**Table 1.** Decline in Democratic presidential vote among whites without college degrees, 1952–2004

	Total ( <i>N</i> = 10,641)	South ( <i>N</i> = 2,625)	Non-South ( <i>N</i> = 8,016)
Total ( <i>N</i> = 10,641)	–5.9 (1.5)	–19.7 (3.1)	–1.0 (1.8)
High Income ( <i>N</i> = 3,581)	–14.6 (2.7)	–31.6 (6.0)	–10.4 (3.0)
Middle Income ( <i>N</i> = 3,441)	–9.9 (2.8)	–24.6 (5.9)	–5.1 (3.2)
Low Income ( <i>N</i> = 3,021)	4.5 (2.8)	–10.3 (5.2)	11.2 (3.3)

Cumulative change in Democratic percentage of major-party presidential vote, measured by linear trend (with standard error in parentheses).

It should be clear from these comparisons that material economic circumstances have become more important, not less important, in structuring the presidential voting behavior of Frank's white working class over the course of the past half-century. While it is true that Democratic presidential candidates have lost significant support among this group, those losses turn out to be heavily concentrated among its middle- and upper-income segments, and indeed have been partially offset by *increasing* support for Democratic candidates among working-class whites with low incomes.

Whereas the rows of Table 1 differentiate Frank's white working-class voters on the basis of income levels, the columns present separate tabulations of changing Democratic support for the South and for the rest of the country.<sup>4</sup> These separate tabulations suggest a third and even more striking lacuna in Frank's account of the decline in Democratic support among white working-class voters over the past half-century. Focusing on the overall trends, in the first row of the table, we see that the Democratic presidential vote share has declined by almost 20 percentage points among southern whites without college degrees. Among non-southern whites without college degrees it has declined by one percentage point. That's it. Fourteen elections, 52 years, one percentage point.

The remaining entries in the table provide similar comparisons of southerners and non-southerners within each income segment of Frank's white working class. In every case, we see a similar 20-point gap between the South and the rest of the country. Among the most affluent segment, the difference is between a substantial ten-point Republican shift outside the South and a massive 32-point Republican shift in the South. Among the least affluent segment, a ten-point Republican shift in the South has been more than counterbalanced by an 11-point Democratic shift in the rest of the country. (On the other hand, within each region we see a similar 20-point difference in the shifts observed among voters in the top and bottom thirds of the income distribution; the economic and regional trends are largely independent and both quite powerful.)

<sup>4</sup> I employ the U.S. Census Bureau's regional classification. The South includes the 11 former Confederate states plus Delaware, Kentucky, Maryland, Oklahoma, West Virginia, and D.C.

To a good approximation, then, the overall decline in Democratic support among voters in Frank's white working class over the past half-century is *entirely* attributable to the demise of the Solid South as a bastion of Democratic allegiance. In the first half of the 20th century the historical legacy of the Civil War and the contemporary reality of Jim Crow racial politics induced southern whites to maintain "unquestioning attachment, by overwhelming majorities, to the Democratic party nationally" (Key 1949, 11). However, dramatic action on civil rights issues by national Democratic leaders in the early 1960s precipitated a momentous electoral shift among white southerners (Carmines and Stimson 1989), eventually replacing an anomalous Democratic majority with a much less anomalous Republican majority.

Of course, the fact that the net erosion in Democratic presidential support among Frank's white working-class voters comes almost entirely from the South does not make the trend any less real or any less politically significant. However, it does tend to cast considerable doubt on the plausibility of accounts positing broad national shifts in working-class political behavior. Insofar as less-educated white voters have, in fact, abandoned the Democratic Party over the past half-century, the evidence in Table 1 suggests that their reasons are to be found in the formerly Democratic Solid South, not in Kansas.

#### DO "VALUES MATTER MOST" TO THE WHITE WORKING CLASS?

According to Frank (2004, 6),

backlash leaders systematically downplay the politics of economics. The movement's basic premise is that culture outweighs economics as a matter of public concern – that *Values Matter Most*, as one backlash title has it. On those grounds it rallies citizens who would once have been reliable partisans of the New Deal to the standard of conservatism.

For their part, he adds (2004, 245),

Democrats no longer speak to the people on the losing end of a free-market system that is becoming more brutal and more arrogant by the day. . . . [B]y dropping the class language that once distinguished them sharply from Republicans they have left themselves vulnerable to cultural wedge issues like guns and abortion and the rest whose hallucinatory appeal would ordinarily be far overshadowed by material concerns.

In his response to my earlier paper Frank (2005, 12) elaborates on this argument, emphasizing that "‘values’ only matter as much as they have obviously come to matter" because the Democratic Party

has either largely accepted the conservative economic agenda or is perceived to have largely accepted the conservative economic agenda. Either way, economic issues are effectively removed from the table, and social issues are highlighted. This is important because economic issues are the area where working-class voters are historically most liberal.

In the context of Frank's argument, these claims might be read as implying that white working-class voters attach more weight to social issues than to economic issues, or that they attach more weight to social issues than other voters do, or that they attach more

weight to social issues than they used to, or that they attach less weight to economic issues than they used to. In my earlier paper, I tested each of those possibilities using summary indices of economic and social policy preferences constructed from issue questions included consistently in NES surveys since the 1980s. I found that less affluent voters attached much *less* weight to social issues than to economic issues, that they attached much *less* weight to social issues than more affluent voters did, that the apparent weight of social issues increased substantially over the past 20 years among more affluent voters, but *not* among those in the bottom third of the income distribution, and that the apparent weight of economic issues among less affluent voters *increased* rather than decreasing as Frank's account would suggest.

Here, I replicate those analyses using Frank's new definition of the white working class. However, rather than relying on summary indices of social and economic policy views, I include separate measures of voters' positions on the six issues included consistently in NES surveys over the past 20 years – abortion, gender roles, government aid to blacks, government spending and services, government jobs and income maintenance, and defense spending. The wording of these and other NES issue questions employed in my analysis appears in Table 2. In most cases the survey items consisted of seven-point scales with the indicated conservative and liberal positions as the two endpoints.<sup>5</sup> In each case, I recoded the responses to range in equal intervals from zero for the most extreme conservative position to one for the most extreme liberal position.

Table 3 reports the apparent impact of each of these six issues over the entire period from 1984 through 2004. The first two columns of the table report the results of separate probit analyses for white voters with and without college degrees; the parameter estimates for each issue reflect the apparent weight of that issue in accounting for the presidential votes of white voters without college degrees and white voters with college degrees, respectively. The entries in the third column of the table are the differences between the parameter estimates for less-educated and more-educated voters for each issue. In addition to the coefficients for issue preferences, each probit analysis includes separate intercepts for each election year (not shown in the table) to capture election-specific considerations unrelated to these policy views.

Do the results presented in Table 3 suggest that “culture outweighs economics as a matter of public concern” among Frank's white working-class voters? No. The probit coefficient for the government spending item is more than twice as large as the coefficient for the most potent of the cultural issues, abortion (1.47 versus 0.56). Even the rather antiquated NES item on government jobs and income maintenance, which Frank (2005, 14) ridicules as “an issue that comes wheezing and creaking out of the 1970s, from the

---

<sup>5</sup> The abortion scale includes two intermediate positions between the conservative and liberal endpoints shown in Table 2: “The law should permit abortion only in case of rape, incest, or when the woman's life is in danger”; and “The law should permit abortion for reasons other than rape, incest, or danger to the woman's life, but only after the need for the abortion has been clearly established.” The gun control, school voucher, immigration, death penalty, and social security privatization scales are derived from two-part questions in the 2004 NES survey, each with a total of five response options.

**Table 2.** Issues in NES surveys

	Conservative position	Liberal position
Abortion	By law, abortion should never be permitted	By law, a woman should always be able to obtain an abortion as a matter of personal choice
Women's role	A woman's place is in the home	Women should have an equal role with men in running business, industry, and government
Government aid to blacks	Government should not make any special effort to help blacks because they should help themselves	Government should make every effort to improve the social and economic position of blacks
Government spending/ services	Government should provide many fewer services to reduce spending	Government should provide many more services even if it means an increase in spending
Government jobs	Government should just let each person get ahead on their own	Government should see to it that every person has a job and a good standard of living
Defense spending	Defense spending should be greatly increased	We should spend much less money for defense
Gun control	Federal government should make it a lot easier for people to buy a gun	Federal government should make it a lot more difficult for people to buy a gun
Gay marriage	Same-sex couples should not be allowed to marry	Same-sex couples should be allowed to marry
School vouchers	Strongly favor giving low-income parents money to help pay for their children to attend a private or religious school	Strongly oppose giving low-income parents money for children to attend a private or religious school
Immigration	The number of immigrants who are permitted to come to the U.S. to live should be decreased a lot	The number of immigrants who are permitted to come to the U.S. to live should be increased a lot
Death penalty	Strongly favor the death penalty for persons convicted of murder	Strongly oppose the death penalty for persons convicted of murder
Health care	All medical expenses should be paid by individuals through private insurance plans	A government insurance plan should cover all medical and hospital expenses for everyone

	Conservative position	Liberal position
Environmental protection	Protecting the environment is not as important as maintaining jobs and our standard of living	Protect the environment even if it costs some jobs or otherwise reduces our standard of living
Social Security privatization	Strongly favor allowing people to put a portion of their Social Security payroll taxes into personal retirement accounts	Strongly oppose allowing people to put a portion of their Social Security payroll taxes into personal retirement accounts
Military intervention	U.S. must be ready to use military force	Solve international problems by using diplomacy

**Table 3.** Issue preferences and presidential votes by education level, 1984–2004

	Without college degrees ( <i>N</i> = 3,614)	With college degrees ( <i>N</i> = 1,776)	Difference
Abortion	0.56 (0.07)	1.21 (0.12)	−0.65 (0.14)
Women's role	0.29 (0.09)	0.89 (0.18)	−0.59 (0.20)
Government aid to blacks	0.47 (0.10)	0.44 (0.20)	0.03 (0.23)
Government spending/services	1.47 (0.12)	2.28 (0.22)	−0.82 (0.25)
Government jobs	0.89 (0.10)	1.04 (0.21)	−0.14 (0.23)
Defense spending	1.48 (0.11)	2.65 (0.23)	−1.18 (0.25)
Log-likelihood	−2024.6	−737.0	
Pseudo- <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	0.18	0.40	

Probit coefficients (with standard errors in parentheses). Separate intercepts for each group in each election year not shown. White major-party voters only.

era of Hubert Humphrey and wildcat strikes,” was as important in accounting for their voting behavior as abortion and gender roles combined (0.89 versus 0.85).

Do Frank's white working-class voters attach more weight to cultural issues than better-educated white voters do? No. The estimates for white voters with college degrees reported in the second column of Table 3 suggest that they attached more than twice as much weight to abortion as those without college degrees did (1.21 versus 0.56). The relative disparity is even greater (0.89 versus 0.29) for the item on gender roles.

Finally, do Frank's white working-class voters attach more weight to cultural issues than they used to? The probit analyses reported in Table 4 allow for linear trends over the 20-year period from 1984 through 2004 in the weight attached to each issue by voters in each group. The cumulative change in the apparent impact of each issue is

**Table 4.** Trends in the impact of issue preferences by education level, 1984–2004

	Without college degrees ( <i>N</i> = 3,614)	With college degrees ( <i>N</i> = 1,776)	Difference
Incremental effects (1984–2004)			
Abortion	0.51 (0.20)	1.11 (0.39)	−0.60 (0.43)
Women's role	0.21 (0.25)	0.79 (0.59)	−0.58 (0.64)
Government aid to blacks	0.24 (0.29)	0.37 (0.60)	−0.13 (0.67)
Government spending/services	0.16 (0.32)	−0.24 (0.64)	0.40 (0.72)
Government jobs	0.14 (0.27)	0.13 (0.61)	0.01 (0.67)
Defense spending	0.53 (0.31)	−0.55 (0.67)	1.08(0.74)
Baseline effects (1984)			
Abortion	0.29 (0.12)	0.55 (0.26)	−0.25 (0.28)
Women's role	0.22 (0.14)	0.48 (0.36)	−0.26 (0.39)
Government aid to blacks	0.34 (0.17)	0.26 (0.37)	0.08 (0.41)
Government spending/services	1.40 (0.19)	2.44 (0.40)	−1.04 (0.45)
Government jobs	0.82 (0.16)	0.95 (0.38)	−0.13 (0.41)
Defense spending	1.25 (0.17)	3.01 (0.41)	−1.76 (0.45)
Log-likelihood	−2017.5	−730.3	
Pseudo- <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	0.18	0.40	

Probit coefficients (with standard errors in parentheses). Separate intercepts for each group in each election year not shown. White major-party voters only.

reported in the upper half of the table, while the baseline effect of each issue in 1984 appears in the lower half of the table.<sup>6</sup> (As in Table 3, each analysis also includes separate intercepts for each election year to capture election-specific considerations unrelated to these policy views.)

At the most basic level, the evidence presented in Table 4 clearly supports Frank's thesis. The trend coefficient for abortion preferences among white voters without college degrees is strongly positive, suggesting that the apparent electoral significance of abortion increased substantially over this 20-year period (from 0.29 to  $0.29 + 0.51 = 0.80$ ).

<sup>6</sup> The parameter estimates in the top half of Table 4 are generated by interacting each issue scale with a "trend" variable taking the value 0 in 1984, 0.2 in 1988, 0.4 in 1992, 0.6 in 1996, 0.8 in 2000, and 1.0 in 2004. Thus, the estimated impact of each issue in 1984 is represented by the "baseline effect" in the bottom half of the table, while the estimated impact in 2004 is represented by the sum of the "baseline effect" in the bottom half of the table and the corresponding "incremental effect" in the top half of the table. Of course, this simple specification will not capture highly irregular shifts in the impact of each issue from election to election, but it should be sufficient to capture major trends in the impact of any issue over the 20-year period.

This result is quite consistent with Adams' (1997) description of abortion as an instance of "issue evolution": the emergence of clear policy differences between the parties gradually reshaped the electorate, pulling pro-life voters toward the Republicans (and Republicans toward the pro-life position) and making pro-choice voters more Democratic (and Democrats more pro-choice). The trend coefficient for gender roles is also positive, though a good deal smaller in magnitude.

On the other hand, the comparable results for white voters *with* college degrees, presented in the second column of Table 4, suggest that the same trends appear even more strongly in that group. Indeed, the increase in the apparent electoral significance of abortion is more than twice as large for better-educated whites as for Frank's working-class white voters (1.11 versus 0.51), while the disparity for the gender item is, in relative terms, even larger. These comparisons make it clear that, whatever Frank's observations may suggest, the growing importance of social issues in American electoral politics over the past 20 years is mostly *not* a working-class phenomenon.

Moreover, it is worth noting that the substantial increase in the apparent weight of abortion among Frank's working-class white voters in Table 4 is entirely concentrated in the first half of the period covered by that analysis. Election-by-election calculations employing all six issues (not shown here) indicate that the electoral salience of abortion for white voters without college degrees has actually *declined* substantially since 1996 (from 0.92 to 0.80 in 2000 to 0.51 in 2004). In sharp contrast, the apparent salience of abortion among white voters with college degrees has almost doubled since 1996 (from 0.99 to 1.42 in 2000 to 1.92 in 2004).

Finally, the evidence presented in Table 4 contradicts Frank's claim that economic issues have been "effectively removed from the table" because the Democratic Party "has either largely accepted the conservative economic agenda or is perceived to have largely accepted the conservative economic agenda" (2005, 12). The trend coefficients for economic issues in the first column of Table 3 suggest that, if anything, those issues have had a slightly *larger* impact on Frank's white working-class voters in recent elections than they had in earlier years. This persistence is especially surprising for the "wheezing and creaking" issue of government jobs. Frank (2005, 13) complains that "it has been almost thirty years since Congress last seriously debated a full employment bill and . . . America has been speeding away from the cradle-to-grave welfare state ever since then, with politicians of both parties in rough agreement on the subject." Nevertheless, the people he says he was writing about seem to have gotten the point of the question, and to have considered it powerfully relevant to their electoral choices throughout this period.

One other item in Tables 3 and 4 deserves brief mention – the item on government aid to blacks. Frank (2005, 15–16) accuses me of "a bad gaffe, and a consequential one" in having classified that item as an economic issue rather than a social issue in my earlier paper. He notes that affirmative action has been "a backlash beef since its inception," and guesses that if it was correctly classified as a social issue my results "would be, as they say in Kansas, shot all to hell."

Of course, if the classification was mistaken the error was the voters'; they were the ones whose views about government aid to blacks lined up clearly with their views about other economic issues rather than with their views about social issues in the factor analysis



reported in my earlier paper. In any event, counting the item as a cultural issue rather than an economic issue would do little to alter the basic story in Tables 3 and 4. The apparent impact of the issue was essentially similar for white voters with and without college degrees, discernible but modest. It certainly did not rival the impact of the government jobs issue, much less the government spending issue. Its weight probably increased over time among both groups, though it is hard to be sure.

If one simply counts affirmative action as a social issue along with abortion and gender roles, the combined weight of all three among Frank's working-class white voters still falls well short of the combined weight of the two purely economic issues included in the tables. That is true whether we focus on the period as a whole in Table 3 (1.32 versus 2.36) or on the 2004 endpoint of the trend analysis in Table 4 (1.81 versus 2.52) or on a separate analysis (not shown) of voting behavior in the 2004 election only (1.66 versus 2.66). No matter how we slice these data, they demonstrate clearly that "material concerns" are far from being overshadowed in the contemporary electoral arena.

#### "WEDGE ISSUES" IN 2004

Frank (2005, 15) rightly complains about the paucity of social issues included in my earlier analysis. Since I was interested in analyzing long-term trends in ideology and voting behavior, I focused on the issue questions that have appeared consistently in NES surveys over the past 20 years. Only two of those questions focus squarely on cultural conflicts of the sort that are central to Frank's account – the items on abortion and gender roles. Frank offers a long list of other social and cultural issues, and asks: "How do *these* issues test? Are some of them more powerful than others? Do some of them appeal to different demographics than others, as in the classic definition of a 'wedge issue'?"

The issues on Frank's list range from bias in the news and school prayer to flag burning and offensive art to "windsurfing/latte drinking/Volvo driving/blue-state tastes generally" (2005, 15). The last, especially, sounds suspiciously like "the tastes-and-values way our punditry defines class" – precisely the sort of definition Frank (2004, 104) had earlier promised to eschew in favor of a "material, economic" definition. No matter; the 2004 NES survey did not include questions about windsurfing or latte drinking, so I cannot tell him how they test.

On the other hand, the survey did include questions about several other salient social and cultural issues in addition to abortion and gender roles, including gun control, gay marriage, and school vouchers (all of which made Frank's list) and immigration and the death penalty (which he didn't mention but presumably could have). These items allow for a more detailed test, albeit only for a single election year, of Frank's assertions about the hallucinatory appeal of cultural wedge issues among less-educated white voters.

Table 5 reports the results of parallel probit analyses relating positions on all 15 of these issues to the presidential votes of white voters with and without college degrees. The issues are listed in Table 5 in order of their apparent importance to Frank's working-class white voters. Given the large number of distinct issues included in the analysis, most of the coefficients are fairly imprecisely estimated, and thus the ordering is only

**Table 5.** Issue preferences and presidential votes in 2004, by education level

	Without college degrees ( <i>N</i> = 374)	With college degrees ( <i>N</i> = 236)	Difference
Defense spending	1.91 (0.49)	2.44 (0.95)	−0.53 (1.07)
Government spending/services	1.66 (0.44)	1.07 (0.81)	0.60 (0.92)
Military intervention	1.40 (0.35)	1.82 (0.73)	−0.42 (0.81)
Social security privatization	1.04 (0.24)	0.16 (0.43)	0.88 (0.49)
Gun control	0.93 (0.37)	0.62 (0.59)	0.32 (0.70)
Government aid to blacks	0.80 (0.39)	−0.29 (0.80)	1.09(0.89)
School vouchers	0.76 (0.29)	0.05 (0.41)	0.71 (0.50)
Gay marriage	0.73 (0.24)	1.00 (0.36)	−0.27 (0.44)
Environmental protection	0.52 (0.44)	2.76 (0.86)	−2.24 (0.97)
Government jobs	0.50 (0.35)	1.72 (0.83)	−1.21 (0.90)
Death penalty	0.39 (0.28)	0.45 (0.52)	−0.06 (0.60)
Government health care	0.33 (0.35)	0.02 (0.79)	0.31 (0.87)
Abortion	0.32 (0.29)	1.33 (0.53)	−1.01 (0.61)
Immigration	0.16 (0.44)	−0.13 (0.88)	0.29 (0.99)
Women's role	−0.15 (0.36)	−0.15 (0.89)	0.00 (0.96)
Intercept	−5.71 (0.72)	−7.00 (1.18)	
Log-likelihood	−133.35	−55.14	
Pseudo- <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	0.47	0.66	

Probit coefficients (with standard errors in parentheses). White major-party voters only.

approximate; nevertheless, it provides some sense of which issues seem to have been most consequential to the people Frank says he was writing about.

Not surprisingly, in light of the ongoing war in Iraq, two foreign policy issues – defense spending and military intervention – rank near the top of the list. The other two top issues among those without college degrees are both purely economic issues – government spending and social security privatization.

How do Frank's "cultural wedge issues" test among his white working-class voters? The most potent of them, gun control, ranked fifth out of 15 issues. Abortion ranked thirteenth. Summing the coefficients for all seven – abortion, gun control, school vouchers, gay marriage, the death penalty, immigration, and gender roles – suggests a total impact that is only about two-thirds as large as the total impact of the economic issues included in the analysis – government spending, social security privatization, government aid to blacks, environmental protection, government jobs, and government health care. Even with a much richer portfolio of cultural issues than in Tables 3 and 4, the statistical analysis continues to demonstrate that material economic concerns rather than cultural wedge issues were of primary importance to Frank's working-class white voters.

Nor do cultural wedge issues generally seem to have been more potent among Frank's working-class white voters than among better-educated white voters. On abortion, just as in the more rudimentary but longer-term analyses reported in Tables 3 and 4, the relationship between issue positions and voting behavior was vastly stronger among whites with college degrees than among those without college degrees. On the other hand, school vouchers and gun control probably had larger effects among the less-educated. The combined weights for the seven cultural issues included in the analysis were virtually identical for the two groups, suggesting that whatever "hallucinatory appeal" they had was by no means limited to people without the civilizing influence of a college degree.

Again, it is worth noting that the basic story in Table 5 would be little altered by reclassifying the item on government aid to blacks as a cultural issue rather than an economic issue. Net of all the other issues included in the analysis, this "original 'wedge issue'" (Frank 2005, 15) probably did resonate more with less-educated voters than with the better-educated (and generally more liberal) stratum of the white electorate (though the difference is not statistically reliable, and in fact is slightly reversed in a simple comparison of the voting behavior of liberals and conservatives on this issue).<sup>7</sup> Nonetheless, the combined weights for the five remaining economic issues still exceeds the combined weights for the augmented set of eight cultural issues including government aid to blacks. Even with some artful redefinition supplementing the improved coverage of cultural issues in the 2004 NES survey, it seems impossible to sustain the notion that "culture outweighs economics as a matter of public concern" among Frank's working-class white voters.

#### IS THE DEMOCRATIC PARTY PURSUING A "CRIMINALLY STUPID STRATEGY"?

Having lost two successive presidential elections, albeit by extremely close margins, some Democrats seem inclined to believe that their party is in need of reinvention. Indeed, according to one prominent political reporter, "The big conversation going on in Democratic Washington at the moment, at dinner parties and luncheons and think-tank symposia, revolves around how to save the party" (Bai 2005, 62). The prescriptions for saving the party focus on ideology, infrastructure, linguistic strategy, and more. However, a surprisingly large number seem to be predicated on the notion that "Democrats need to give a more prominent voice to Middle American, wheat-hugging, gun-shooting, Spanish-speaking, beer-guzzling, Bible-toting centrists" (Kristof 2004b) in an effort to

<sup>7</sup> Among white voters without college degrees, Kerry's vote share was 49 percentage points higher among those who supported government aid for blacks than among those who took conservative positions on the issue. The corresponding difference among white voters with college degrees was 55 percentage points. Meanwhile, examining the correlations among the 15 issues included in the 2004 NES survey casts further doubt on Frank's contention that his white working-class voters interpreted the affirmative action item as a cultural issue. Their responses to that item are *most* strongly correlated with responses to the government jobs item and *least* strongly correlated with responses to the recognizably cultural items about school vouchers, gender roles, and abortion.

inoculate the party against the “hallucinatory appeal” among working-class whites of “cultural wedge issues like guns and abortion” (Frank 2004, 245).

According to Frank (2004, 242–243), the Democratic Party’s “more-or-less official response to its waning fortunes” has been “to forget blue-collar voters and concentrate instead on recruiting affluent, white-collar professionals who are liberal on social issues.” This “criminally stupid strategy . . . has dominated Democratic thinking off and on ever since the ‘New Politics’ days of the early seventies.” Meanwhile, the party “has either largely accepted the conservative economic agenda or is perceived to have largely accepted the conservative economic agenda. Either way, economic issues are effectively removed from the table, and social issues are highlighted” (Frank 2005, 12).

I can find no empirical support for the notion that “economic issues are effectively removed from the table” of contemporary American electoral politics. On the contrary, the evidence presented in Table 4 suggests that economic issues have lost none of their potency over the past 20 years, and that they continue to structure presidential voting behavior more powerfully than social issues do. But how can that be the case, if the Democratic Party “has either largely accepted the conservative economic agenda or is perceived to have largely accepted the conservative economic agenda”?

Well, perhaps Frank is wrong about that as well. As it happens, respondents in the 2004 NES survey were asked to place the Democratic and Republican parties on several of the same issue scales that they used to report their own policy views, including both economic issues (government spending and services, government jobs, government aid to blacks) and social issues (abortion, gender roles). Those comparisons are presented in Table 6.

The first column of Table 6 reports the average position of white voters without college degrees on each zero-to-one conservative-to-liberal issue scale. The second and third columns report the average position assigned by those voters to the Democratic and Republican parties, respectively. The fourth column measures the average distance between the two parties. The fifth column shows the Republican Party’s advantage or disadvantage with respect to average proximity on each issue, while the final column shows the plurality of voters who saw themselves as closer to the Republican Party than to the Democratic Party.<sup>8</sup>

Looking at what Frank’s white working-class voters actually say about where the two parties stand on major issues reveals at least two significant additional problems for his account of the contemporary partisan landscape.

First, his white working-class voters certainly do not see the Democratic Party as having “largely accepted the conservative economic agenda” (2005, 12). Their average placements of the party are well to the left of center on every economic issue – if anything, a bit further to the left of center than their placements of the Republican Party are to the right of center. Nor do they see “[n]o choice” between the parties on economic issues (Frank 2005, 14). On the issue of government spending and services, the average gap between voters’ placements of the two parties amounts to almost 40% of the total length of the scale. The same average gap appears on the issue of government jobs;

<sup>8</sup> The numbers of cases for each of these calculations differ slightly because voters who did not place themselves or the relevant party on each issue scale are excluded.

**Table 6.** Issue positions and perceived party positions, 2004

	Average voter's position	Average democratic Party position	Average Republican Party position	Average difference between parties	Average Republican advantage ( $\pm$ )	% Republican advantage ( $\pm$ )
Liberal ideology	0.402 (0.012)	0.691 (0.013)	0.315 (0.013)	0.493 (0.014)	0.108 (0.022)	15.2
Defense spending	0.354 (0.012)	0.597 (0.012)	0.260 (0.010)	0.385 (0.014)	0.105 (0.018)	15.2
Government jobs	0.391 (0.016)	0.633 (0.013)	0.320 (0.012)	0.384 (0.015)	0.088 (0.021)	9.4
Government aid to blacks	0.326 (0.015)	0.607 (0.014)	0.362 (0.011)	0.324 (0.016)	0.087 (0.019)	15.0
Government spending/ services	0.546 (0.014)	0.674 (0.014)	0.457 (0.014)	0.387 (0.015)	0.032 (0.019)	4.3
Military intervention	0.477 (0.016)	0.655 (0.012)	0.257 (0.010)	0.435 (0.013)	0.024 (0.022)	0.3
Abortion	0.560 (0.018)	0.744 (0.016)	0.303 (0.015)	0.498 (0.017)	-0.019 (0.028)	-9.4
Women's role	0.806 (0.014)	0.705 (0.012)	0.556 (0.015)	0.213 (0.014)	-0.082 (0.016)	-17.4
<i>N</i>	325-367	309-357	306-361	304-356	304-356	374

All positions on 0-to-1 (conservative-to-liberal) issue scales. White major-party voters without college degrees, excluding missing responses ("don't know," "haven't thought," etc.).

Frank's working-class white voters clearly discern a very substantial difference between the parties' positions on the issue, though his account requires seeing "politicians of both parties in rough agreement" (Frank 2005, 13).

Second, Frank's white working-class voters were neither liberal in absolute terms nor closer to the Democratic Party than to the Republican Party on economic issues. On the central issue of government spending and services, voters who saw themselves as closer to the Republican Party outnumbered those who saw themselves as closer to the Democratic Party by four percentage points. On the issues of government jobs and aid to blacks the pluralities seeing themselves as closer to the Republican Party were even larger – nine and 15 percentage points, respectively. Moreover, 60% to 85% of the voters who perceived differences between their own position and the Democratic Party's position on each of these economic issues said the Democratic Party was too liberal, not too conservative. Thus, it is hard to see why taking even more liberal positions on these issues, or stressing them more heavily, would help the Democrats win back the white working class.

On the other hand, the only two issues on which Frank's white working-class voters *did* see themselves as closer to the Democratic Party than to the Republican Party were the two social issues in the table, abortion and gender roles. In the case of abortion the advantage is quite modest and not statistically reliable; nevertheless, voters who saw themselves as closer to the Democratic Party outnumbered those who saw themselves as closer to the Republican Party by nine percentage points. For the item on women the Democratic advantage is more substantial, and Frank's white working-class voters actually saw themselves as more liberal than *either* party.

On the most potent cultural issue in Table 5, gun control, the 2004 NES survey did not include placements of the parties but did include placements of the presidential candidates. On that issue, too, white voters without college degrees saw themselves as more liberal than *either* presidential candidate. (Four percent said it should be easier to buy a gun; 48% said it should be more difficult.) The big effect in Table 5 implies that these people were more likely, other things being equal, to vote Democratic, not Republican.

The pattern here is exactly the opposite of the one suggested by Frank's account. On economic issues, where the Democratic Party is supposed to have squandered its natural advantage among working-class voters because it has "largely accepted the conservative economic agenda" (Frank 2005, 12), white voters without college degrees see themselves as closer to the Republicans precisely because the Democratic Party is too liberal. But on cultural issues, where Democrats are supposed to "have left themselves vulnerable" to Republican inroads by catering to liberal white-collar professionals (Frank 2004, 245), Frank's white working-class voters say that they, too, are closer to the Democrats than to the Republicans – and sometimes more liberal than *either* party!

It would be a mistake to jump directly from aggregate patterns of this sort to conclusions about winning and losing issue positions. For one thing, the data presented in Table 6 do nothing to distinguish between those voters who care passionately about a given issue and weigh it heavily in their voting decisions and those who are less sensitive to the parties' relative positions. On the issue of abortion, the 30% of white working-

class voters who say the issue is “extremely important” to them are more likely to be pro-life than pro-choice, and thus much more likely to see themselves as closer to the Republican Party than to the Democratic Party. On the other hand, the 25% who say that gun control is “extremely important” are even more liberal on that issue than the white working-class as a whole.

It is also worth bearing in mind that electoral strategies calculated to appeal to one group of voters may cause significant collateral damage among other groups. Prescriptions for more gun-shooting and Bible-toting on the Democrats’ part often seem to be predicated on the assumption that conservative cultural appeals to the white working-class would have no effect at all on the *other* half of the electorate; but that assumption seems highly implausible. As we have seen, white college graduates attach as much or more weight to social issues as white working-class voters do – and they are a good deal more liberal on those issues. Thus, even if the political views of the white working class were entirely consistent with Frank’s account, it would by no means follow that it is “criminally stupid” for the Democratic Party to cater to “white-collar professionals who are liberal on social issues.” Indeed, the steady, substantial Democratic gains among white college graduates over the past 25 years evident in Figure 2 may be a testament to the success of the very strategy that Frank decries.

It is not my intention here to provide a detailed analysis of the costs and benefits of alternative electoral strategies – merely to highlight some of the key features of contemporary American politics that any such analysis must take into account. Strategic choices involve difficult trade-offs, especially in a messy majoritarian system where both major parties must assemble large, socially and politically heterogeneous coalitions if they are to thrive in the electoral arena. Neither party has ever found that task straightforward. As they continue to juggle the difficult trade-offs as best they can, they would do well to recognize that economic issues remain at the heart of the American party system, where they have been for most of the past 150 years.<sup>9</sup>

Meanwhile, the very notion of “saving” the Democratic Party reflects a ludicrous overreaction to the party’s current political difficulties. Obviously, the Republican Party controls the levers of national government at the moment; but in the electoral arena it is far from being the “dominant political coalition” conjured up by Frank (2004, 8) and other liberal hand-wringers. Rather, the current partisan balance between Republicans and Democrats is remarkably even, both with respect to party identification and with respect to presidential and congressional voting behavior. That is exactly what we should

---

<sup>9</sup> At the elite level, Poole and Rosenthal (1997) provide a good deal of evidence suggesting that economic issues have defined the primary dimension of conflict in Congress over most of this period; the major historical exception is the Civil War era. There is also evidence of a second, racial dimension of conflict through the middle third of the 20th century, when significant numbers of southern segregationists and northern liberals coexisted in the Democratic Party’s congressional delegation. While there is no comparable evidence on the bases of mass partisanship and voting behavior before the era of systematic survey research, it does not seem unlikely that economic issues have been of primary importance at that level as well – with similar exceptions for the Civil War era and for the South in the Jim Crow era.

expect in a two-party system where the artificial Democratic lock on the Solid South has been swept into the dustbin of history. We might as well get used to it.

#### A “MYSTERIOUS INVERSION” INVERTED

“As a formula for holding together a dominant political coalition,” Frank writes (2004, 8), the backlash seems so improbable and so self-contradictory that liberal observers often have trouble believing it is actually happening. By all rights, they figure, these two groups – business and blue-collar – should be at each other’s throats. For the Republican Party to present itself as the champion of working-class America strikes liberals as such an egregious denial of political reality that they dismiss the whole phenomenon, refusing to take it seriously.

If that was true before Frank wrote, the dismissive skepticism of liberal observers seems to have melted away in the warmth of their enthusiastic critical response to his book. What makes the enthusiastic response doubly ironic is that the backlash Frank describes *isn’t* actually happening – at least, not in anything like the way he suggests.

The analyses presented here contradicts Frank’s (2004, 19) account of a “mysterious inversion of American politics” on a variety of key points. While it is true that white voters without college degrees have become more Republican in their presidential voting behavior over the past half-century, that trend is almost entirely confined to the South, where the historic commitment of the Democratic Party to civil rights in the early 1960s precipitated the end of the long, unnatural Democratic monopoly of the Jim Crow era. Not much mystery there.

Even if we set aside that paramount historical fact, the erosion of Democratic support among Frank’s white working-class voters does not seem plausibly attributable to the “hallucinatory appeal” of “cultural wedge issues like guns and abortion” (Frank 2004, 245). For one thing, Frank’s white working-class voters continue to attach less weight to social and cultural issues than to bread-and-butter economic issues in deciding how to vote. Indeed, there is no evidence that economic issues have diminished in electoral significance over the past 20 years, much less been “effectively removed from the table” (Frank 2005, 12). Meanwhile, the political significance of social issues has certainly increased; but it has increased less among Frank’s less-educated white voters than among those with college degrees and more liberal social views.

Nor does Frank’s account jibe with what his white working-class voters themselves say about where they stand and where they see the parties on specific political issues. Frank (2005, 12, 14) tells us that white working-class voters are “historically most liberal” on economic issues and that the Democratic Party has squandered its long-standing advantage on those issues by “accepting the conservative economic agenda,” leaving them with “[n]o choice”; but *they* see important differences between the parties on every economic issue, with the Republican Party closer to their own views and the Democratic Party well to their left. On the other hand, Frank (2004, 245) tells us that they have been won over to the Republican Party by the “hallucinatory appeal” of “cultural wedge issues like guns and abortion”; but *they* see themselves as closer to the Democratic Party



than to the Republican Party on abortion and gender roles, and more liberal than either presidential candidate on the issue of gun control. Clearly these people need to read Frank's book more carefully.

Obviously, none of my analysis implies that working-class cultural conservatives do not exist, or that their views are politically inconsequential. The final section of Frank's critique of my earlier paper (2005, 18) defends his book against the view "that right-wing populism is not significant or that it is not worth examining." I'm not sure why he associates that view with me, since the basic premise of my work was and is that "Frank's thesis seems sufficiently important to deserve serious scholarly scrutiny."<sup>10</sup> Moreover, I continue to second Brownstein's (2004) assessment that "Frank is a talented stylist and engaging storyteller, and his stew of memoir, journalism and essay produces many fresh insights."

The problem, for readers of Frank's book, is to match those insights up against the broader realities of contemporary American politics. Here, Frank himself is generally unhelpful, slipping from insightful observations to large implications with nary a pause for evidence or perspective. When evidence is adduced that casts doubt on his account, he retreats to the position that his book "is largely concerned, as its title makes very plain, with events and political culture in the state of Kansas" (2005, 10). But that defense seems disingenuous, since the book's subtitle makes very plain that its author aspires to explain "how conservatives won the heart of America." He doesn't – and, for that matter, they haven't.

At one point in his critique of my earlier paper Frank (2005, 2) writes that "NES America is not a place that I recognize. It might as well be the moon." I can't say that I'm surprised. He seems to intend the observation as a criticism of statistical analyses, or at least of *my* statistical analyses. I am more inclined to interpret it as an unwitting admission that even a talented stylist and engaging storyteller may find himself bewildered by the complex, shifting landscape of American electoral politics.

## REFERENCES

- Adams, Greg D. 1997. "Abortion: Evidence of an Issue Evolution." *American Journal of Political Science* 41: 718–737.
- Bai, Matt. 2005. "The New Boss." *New York Time Magazine*, January 30, pages 38–71.
- Brooks, David. 2005. "Meet the Poor Republicans." *New York Times*, May 17, section 4, page 14.
- Brownstein, Ronald. 2004. "Vexations of the Heartland." *American Prospect Online*, September 19.
- Carmines, Edward G., and James A. Stimson. 1989. *Issue Evolution: Race and the Transformation of American Politics*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Cohen, Marty. Forthcoming. "Moral Victories: Cultural Conservatism and the Creation of a New Republican Majority in Congress." Forthcoming Ph.D. diss., Department of Political Science, University of California, Los Angeles.

<sup>10</sup> I should add for the record that I am less rigid than Frank seems to imagine about what sorts of scrutiny might be valuable. In particular, I agree that it is "manifestly absurd" to suppose "that the only legitimate objects of study are those that result in electoral majorities or that can be quantified and tested by the National Election Survey." Fortunately, his characterization of this view as "Bartels' assumption" is not supported by anything I actually wrote.

- Edsall, Thomas Byrne, and Mary D. Edsall. 1991. *Chain Reaction: The Impact of Race, Rights, and Taxes on American Politics*. New York: W. W. Norton.
- Frank, Thomas. 2004. *What's the Matter with Kansas? How Conservatives Won the Heart of America*. New York: Henry Holt & Company.
- Frank, Thomas. 2005. "Class is Dismissed." Unpublished manuscript (<http://www.tcfrank.com/dismissd.pdf>).
- Huckfeldt, Robert, and Carol W. Kohfeld. 1989. *Race and the Decline of Class in American Politics*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press.
- Key, V. O., Jr. 1949. *Southern Politics in State and Nation*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
- Kristof, Nicholas D. 2004a. "Living Poor, Voting Rich." *New York Times*, November 3, page A19.
- Kristof, Nicholas D. 2004b. "Time To Get Religion." *New York Times*, November 6, page A19.
- Ladd, Everett Carll, Jr., with Charles D. Hadley. 1975. *Transformations of the American Party System: Political Coalitions from the New Deal to the 1970s*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company.
- McCarty, Nolan, Keith T. Poole, and Howard Rosenthal. Forthcoming. *Polarized America: The Dance of Ideology and Unequal Riches*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Phillips, Kevin. 1969. *The Emerging Republican Majority*. New Rochelle, NY: Arlington House.
- Poole, Keith T., and Howard Rosenthal. 1997. *Congress: A Political-Economic History of Roll Call Voting*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Stonecash, Jeffrey M. 2000. *Class and Party in American Politics*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.