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What Does Working Class Voter Really Mean?

Abstract

Understanding how class interests are articulated in U.S. elections has a problematic history in the social sciences as a result of a poor conceptualization of class. Recent scholarly articles by political scientists contribute to this problem by promoting a narrative that the two U.S. political parties are undergoing "realignment" of class interests. This article challenges that narrative by critiquing the way that class is defined and measured, arguing that Weber should be replaced by Marx.

Keywords

Working class, voting, U.S. elections, political parties.

I was trained in the discipline of political science, which has never had a good history investigating or understanding the term “working class.” Mainstream political science has tended to avoid acknowledging that class categories even exist, preferring instead to ask why the U.S. has been “exceptional” in its lack of class conflict (despite the evidence to the contrary). When “class” has been discussed, it is typically conflated with income or with education in much of the political science scholarship. Another way of saying this is that Weber has long trumped Marx in political science and in many of the other social sciences as well, which has ideological and normative implications.¹

The Weberian tradition defines class by income and therefore collapses a wide range of categories of employment and ownership into overlapping income brackets. In other words, a Weberian definition of class would conflate small business owners with workers when both occupy the same income tier. Depending on how much income a worker gets in wages, that worker might be categorized in a Weberian definition as lower class, lower-middle class, middle class or even upper-middle class. A small business owner might occupy the upper-middle class or lower-upper class category, depending on income status. The same goes for professional-managerial jobs, which under the Weberian definition could end up in more than one category, depending on the income of the professional-manager.

A Marxist definition defines class and “working class” very differently, based on a person’s relationship to the means of production. Working class is defined as those who are forced to sell their labor-power for wages; capitalists are those that own the means of production. In this formulation, the relationship of the working and ownership classes to each other is the central defining feature of capitalism. For Marxists, the working class exists in relationship to the private ownership of capital; the sale of working class labor-power to capitalists is the driving feature of the capitalist system. The ownership of the means of production structures and informs power relationships throughout capitalist society, including categories that fall in between capitalist and workers, such as small business owners and professional-managers, who occupy a middle tier which is also defined, in Marxist terms, by this tier’s relationship to the dominant class ownership structure in society—in other words, the large-scale capitalist owners of production have dominant economic, political and social power within capitalism.

Political science is generally not focused on the Weber-Marx debate, which is considered passe now, though there have been periods in the history of the discipline when socioeconomic questions of class and “elites” were more front and center, often dependent on the rise and fall of class conflict in US society. Mostly political scientists focus on how governing institutions operate, the political “rules of the game” that inform dominant institutions and establish the relationship between the rulers and the ruled. In mainstream political science, this means a scholarship focused on the legitimacy of the rulers, the institutions that provide stability for the system, the motivations and behavior of political elites in relationship to voters, and in electoral

¹ Kieran Allen, “Max Weber Was a Class-Conscious Champion of the Bourgeoisie,” *Jacobin*, May 17, 2023.

systems, the way that public opinion, voter preferences and voter mobilization informs the choices of political parties.²

Mainstream political scientists are now having a debate about the two dominant political parties in the U.S. in relationship to working class voters. The debate is about whether or not there has been enough of a shift of working-class voters to the Republican Party, and away from the Democratic Party, to constitute a realignment of the voting blocs that each Party depends on to get elected. The debate hinges on how to define “working class” and whether or not this “working class” is switching its party allegiances, as well as how to understand the power and influence of business within each party coalition. Proponents of the party realignment thesis, Eitan Hersh at Tufts and Sarang Shah at Berkeley, argue in their recent paper “The Partisan Realignment of American Business,” (discussed in Thomas E. Edsall’s latest NYT column of August 16) that the Democratic Party is becoming a party of socioeconomic elites rather than labor and the Republican Party is becoming less of a business party and more of a party of “working class social conservatives.”³

The arguments of Hersh and Shah epitomize the long-term inability and unwillingness of mainstream political science to seriously interrogate the socioeconomic class structure of American politics. The assumptions of Hersh and Shah, as reflected in their recent paper, are wrongheaded in several areas: First, that the Republican Party is moving away from a base dominated by business and socioeconomic elites, and second, that the Democratic Party has ever been a labor party. Corporations and the wealthy continue to dominate fundraising, lobbying, and financing of think-tanks and policy-planning organizations for the Republican Party, whose policies remain heavily tilted in favor of rich donors. At the same time, the Democratic Party has long been dominated by owners of capital, and this has been well-documented in terms of who disproportionately funds Democratic Party candidates, which lobbies dominate access to the Democratic Party lawmakers, and which organizations disproportionately finance Democratic think-tanks and policy-planning organizations.⁴ Business organizations have exercised power in each of these three areas throughout the history of the Democratic Party, including the realignment that led to the New Deal coalition in the 1930s.⁵ It is true that organized labor increased its influence and power within the Democratic Party during the height of the New Deal, which owe a great deal to conflicts and divisions among business elites as well as large-scale labor movements and strike waves, which at times shifted policies in a relatively pro-labor direction.

² Sean Diamond, Adam J. Howat, and Matthew J. Lacombe, “What is the Canon in American Politics? Analyses of Core Graduate Syllabi,” *Journal of Political Science Education*, Vol. 13, No. 3, 256-278, 2017.

³ Eitan Hersh and Sarang Shah, “The Partisan Realignment of American Business: Evidence from a Survey of Corporate Leaders,” online research paper, August 1, 2023; Thomas Edsall, “It’s Not Your Father’s Democratic Party. But Whose Party Is It?”

⁴ Benjamin I. Page and Martin Gilens, *Democracy in America: What Has Gone Wrong and What We Can Do About It*, University of Chicago Press, 2020.

⁵ Thomas Ferguson and Joel Rogers, *Right Turn: The Decline of Democrats and the Future of American Politics*, Hill and Wang, 1987; Ronald W. Cox and Daniel Skidmore-Hess, *U.S. Politics and the Global Economy: Corporate Power, Conservative Shift*, Lynne Rienner, 1999.

However, since the right-turn of the late 1970s, early 1980s, business power remains entrenched within the Democratic Party. The thesis advanced by Hersh and Shah is wrongheaded in their assumption that the Democratic Party is moving toward a base of socioeconomic elites, as that has been true for some time. In fact, the dominant power blocs within the Democratic Party have not just been socioeconomic elites, but large-scale capitalist owners who exert their power through campaign contributions, lobbying money and donations to prominent Party think-tanks, foundations and policy planning organizations. Instead of examining who has long dominated the investment profile that the Democratic Party is beholden to, Hersh and Shah use a much more problematic compilation of survey data to conclude that the Democratic Party's support base has shifted toward business and "socioeconomic elites." Likewise, in separate commentaries Hersh has concluded that working class voters have been shifting to the Republican Party.

There are several problems with the thesis of the working-class shift, primarily the measurements used to define "working class." As consistent with the Weberian tradition in political science, "working class" is defined by a combination of income and education, but among proponents of this "working class" realignment thesis, education takes front and center stage, which means "working class" is defined as those without a college degree. It's true that this measures significant numbers of working class people, but it also captures as many as 10 million voters, who are not working class voters according to the Marxian definition, but instead are business owners, mostly quite rich, and mostly local and regional leaders of the pro-Trump insurgency in small towns of the U.S.⁶ This is not just a little mistake, but one that compounds a history of poor theorizing when it comes to conceptualizing a meaningful definition of working class in U.S. capitalism.

A better way to capture what is happening: both parties are going through an institutional crisis due to decades of plunder by a largely unaccountable ruling class that has exercised increased control over the economy and the state. That crisis has seen shifts in voting allegiances. Working class voters have shifted from the Democratic Party to the Republican Party, though the shift is less than implied by proponents of the working class realignment thesis. The first is that working class voters are split by occupation, with manufacturing workers increasing their votes for Republican candidates but service sector workers, the largest category of the working class by far, consisting of 70 million members, continuing to vote Democratic Party. In fact, even if we stick with the Weberian category of income, working class voters with the lowest income (below \$50,000) voted for Biden over Trump in the 2020 Presidential election by a margin of 57-43%; Biden also won voters making between \$50,000 and \$99,999 by a margin of 56-44%. Trump won 54% of voters making \$100,000 or more.⁷

The reason the working-class realignment theory is being advanced by some political scientists is due to poor measurements of class, overwhelmingly defined by education, specifically those with

⁶ Kim Moody, "Who Put Trump in the White House?" *Jacobin*, January 11, 2017; Ronald W. Cox, "Trump's Ponzi Scheme Victory," *Class, Race and Corporate Power*, Vol. 4, Issue 2, 2016.

⁷ "Exit Polls of the 2020 Presidential Election in the United States on November 3, 2020, share of vote by income," Statista, Sep. 30, 2022.

a college degree versus those without. That's a poor measure that does not even track the Weberian income measure of class very well. Second, the tendency to conflate working class with manufacturing workers (and white workers) is also prevalent. This fits well within the electoral college of U.S. politics, which gives disproportionate voting power to low populated states and to low-populated areas, including rural areas which have long voted Republican and have in fact been hit hard by a massive socioeconomic redistribution from poor people to rich people. These areas in many cases increased their turnout and thereby aided Trump and the Trump voting coalition that the Republican Party is depending on. This has not realigned U.S. politics, however, as the policies of the Republican Party have continued to be much more favorable to business interests and the wealthy, while the Democrats have continued to juggle a wider range of interest groups, more diverse and varied, within a big tent that has long been directed by corporate interests and the privileged position of socioeconomic elites in American capitalism.