

The White Working Class and the 2016 Election*

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Abstract

Academics and political pundits alike claim that the white working class exhibited unprecedented and crucial support for Donald Trump in the 2016 election. But what is the evidence for this claim? We examine all of the available academic survey data gathered around the 2016 election, as well as a number of surveys from prior elections. We test four versions of the claim about the white working class in 2016: (1) that most Trump voters were white working-class Americans; (2) that most white working-class voters supported Trump; (3) that unusually large numbers of white working-class voters who had voted for Obama in 2012 switched to Trump in 2016; and (4) that white working-class voters were pivotal in several key swing states. We find no empirical support for three of these claims. We do find evidence that a majority of white working-class voters supported Trump over Clinton, but show that a similar majority of white working-class voters supported Romney over Obama in 2012. The white working class was not central to Trump's election, and there was nothing unprecedented about his support among this group.

By late 2015, journalists converged on a narrative about Donald Trump's campaign for president that emphasized his unique appeal among working-class Americans. In September 2015, *The Atlantic* covered Donald Trump's campaign with the headline, "The Billionaire Candidate and His Blue-Collar Following" (Brownstein 2015). Robert Reich discussed the "real reason Donald Trump appeals to working-class whites" (Reich 2015). *The Wall Street Journal* wondered what "Trump's success in attracting white, working-class voters" meant for his general election strategy (Zitner and Chinni 2015). And *The Guardian* marveled at the "working-class white people who make up the bulk of Trump's fan base" (Frank 2015).

Since then, a handful of scholars have disputed this narrative (Carnes and Lupu 2016b; 2017; Devega 2017; Fiorina 2017; Manza and Crowley 2017; Rodden 2017; Silver 2016), but to this day it remains a widespread media trope about the 2016 election.² When the Trump administration attempted to repeal the Affordable Care Act, journalists marveled at how the move would harm the working-class voters who made up the bulk of Trump's base (e.g., Newkirk 2016; Sargent 2017). In 2017, *The Atlantic* continued to ponder "Why the White, Working Class Voted for Trump" (Foreman and Pollock 2017). And after the 2018 midterms, *The Washington Post* reported that, "the white, working class is no longer uniformly in Trump's corner" (Rubin 2018), suggesting that they once were.

For their part, scholars have produced a somewhat conflicted body of research on the relationship between class and voting in 2016. Many studies have shown that Trump's election had more to do with racism and immigration than it did with the economic anxiety thought to have been behind his alleged working-class appeal (e.g., Mutz 2018; Schaffner, MacWilliams,

² When ABC rebooted *Roseanne*, the hit sitcom from the 1990s about a working-class family, in 2018, its creators thought it fitting to make the Conner family Trump supporters (Enten 2018; Healy 2018).

and Tatishe 2017; Sides, Tesler, and Vavreck 2018; Smith and Hanley 2018). But a handful of scholars have insisted that the white working class played a critical role in Trump's election (McQuarrie 2017; Morgan and Lee 2018), and some recent studies have simply taken for granted that the 2016 election was won by "Trump's working-class supporters" (Fukuyama 2018: 119).

Despite its popularity, the narrative about Trump and the working class is only loosely based on empirical evidence. The earliest iterations of the narrative presented little more than anecdotes about colorful individuals who attended Trump rallies (e.g., Frank 2015). When journalists subsequently presented data from exit polls, they frequently used haphazard definitions of "the working class." Even scholars have presented suspect analyses, sometimes presenting textbook ecological fallacies as evidence that, "community-level well-being played an important role in the 2016 election, particularly in the parts of America far-removed from the world of urban elites, media, and foundations" (e.g., Monnat 2016: 6). Many commentators are imprecise about the very nature of their claims, saying things like Trump "appeals to" working class voters or that "the working class voted for Trump" without specifying what exactly those claims mean, what threshold of support the commentator has in mind, or the conditions under which the claim might be falsified. Many of the claims about Trump and the working class have been based on splashy rhetoric, not scientific research.

In this paper, we examine the four distinct empirical claims that seem to make up the bulk of the popular and scholarly arguments about Trump and the working class: (1) that most Trump voters were white working-class Americans, (2) that most white working-class voters supported Trump, (3) that unusually large numbers of white working-class voters who had voted

for Obama in 2012 switched to Trump in 2016, and (4) that white working-class voters were pivotal in several key swing states.³

We test each of these claims using data from all of the relevant academic surveys conducted during the 2016 election. We find no empirical support for three of these claims. We find evidence that a majority of white working-class voters supported Trump over Clinton, but that a similar majority of white working-class voters supported Romney over Obama in 2012. The white working class was not central to Trump's election, and there was nothing unprecedented about his support among this group.

Surveys from the 2016 Election

To test these four claims, we gathered all of the available academic surveys conducted around the 2016 election that included some question about how respondents voted in the presidential election. These are the American National Election Studies (ANES), the Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES), and the Views of the Electorate Research (VOTER) panel study. We rely primarily on the 2016 waves of these studies, but in some cases also return to prior elections as a point of comparison. These include the 2012 wave of the VOTER panel, the 2008 and 2012 ANES and CCES studies, and the 2000-2004 ANES panel study. When analyzing

³ A related narrative is that white, working-class voters make up Trump's "base" of supporters. Although the term is often used ambiguously and often encompasses the four propositions we examine here, another possible interpretation is that these voters are thought to be the most enthusiastic about or loyal to Trump. We focus in this paper on whether white, working-class voters were critical to Trump's electoral victory and leave other possible elements of Trump's appeal among these voters to future research.

vote choice, we rely on respondents' self-reported choice in the wave of the survey conducted after the election.⁴

These three studies differ in the kind of information they provide for identifying working-class respondents. Like most modern class analysts (e.g., Hout, Manza, and Brooks 1995; Weeden and Grusky 2005; Wright 1997), we prefer a measure of class that is rooted in occupational data, that is, information about how a person earns a living. Detailed data on survey respondents' occupations, however, are only available for the 2016 ANES. For the sake of comparability, we therefore rely on a combination of education and household income to identify working-class respondents. Specifically, we identify working-class respondents as those who do not hold a college degree *and* report annual household incomes below \$50,000, following previous studies (e.g., Bartels 2006).

Why not simply use income or education? Income alone is a problematic measure of membership in the working class because incomes fluctuate over the course of careers and in response to short-term shocks. A factory worker and a PhD student at Princeton might both earn household incomes below \$50,000, but it would not make sense to say that both belong to the “working class.”

As for education, as we highlight in the results section in more detail, educational attainment—although widely used by journalists to define “the working class”—is also problematic by itself. Many Americans without hold college degrees achieve a level of affluence that would be difficult to square with any definition of working class. In fact, Bartels (2006, 205) reports that in 2004, “the economic circumstances of whites without college degrees were not

⁴ The online appendix provides information about the survey methodologies, question wording, and response options. All of our analyses use the survey weights provided by the study. The online appendix also reports estimates that focus only on validated voters, yielding similar results.

much different from those of America as a whole.” Whites without college degrees run the gamut from lower-income manual laborers and service workers to business leaders and titans of industry, but the latter probably aren’t what commentators have had in mind when they’ve written about Trump’s allegedly special appeal among working-class Americans.

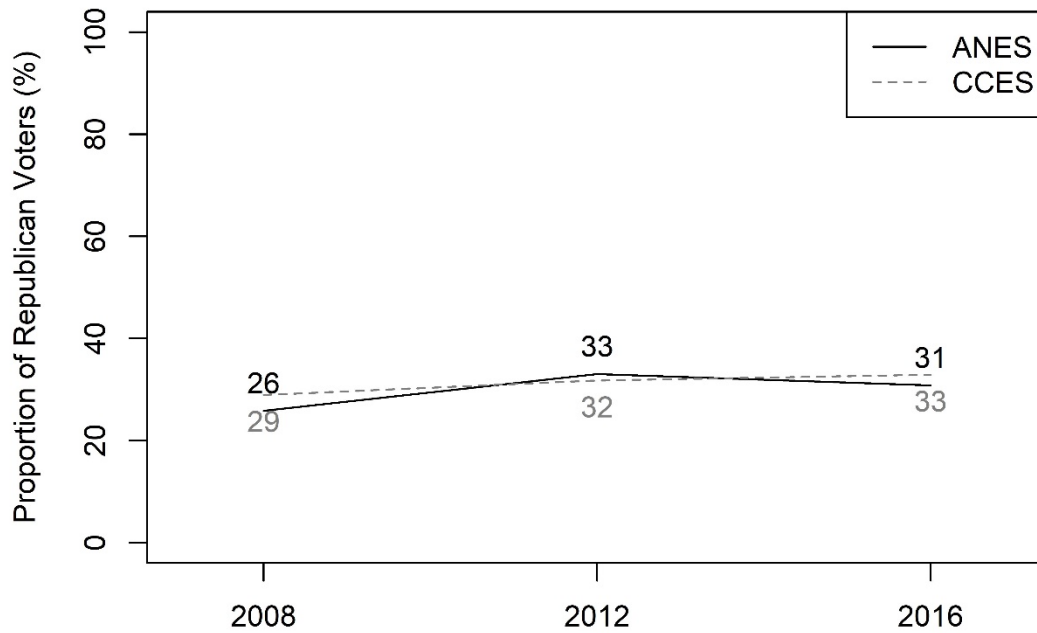
In the analyses that follow, we use a combination of income and education data to test the narrative about Trump and the white working class. Specifically, we define the working class as people with household incomes under \$50,000 (below the national median in 2016) who do not have college degrees. In past research on the working class, we use occupational data and define the working class as people employed in manual labor, service industry, and clerical jobs (e.g., Carnes 2013; 2018; Carnes and Lupu 2015; 2016a), and when we use a similar approach to study the 2016 ANES’s occupational data, we reach the same basic conclusions about Trump and the working class. But since none of the other surveys in our analysis include data on respondents’ occupations, in this paper we use a definition of the working class that allows us to test whether Trump appealed to lower-income people without college degrees.

Claim 1: Were Most Trump Voters from the White Working Class?

Commentators routinely depict the typical Trump voter as white and working-class. According to this version of the narrative, the people who supported Trump were mostly white working-class people; that is, if we focus on Trump voters, we will mostly see white working-class Americans. (In the next section we test the related—but not logically equivalent—idea that if we focus on white working-class people, we will mostly see Trump voters.)

The data simply do not support this popular journalistic refrain. Figure 1 shows the share of voters for the Republican presidential candidate in 2008, 2012, and 2016 who were white and

Figure 1. *Proportion of Republican Voters from the White Working-Class*



Notes: Values indicate the white working-class share of Republican presidential voters in each election. The white working class are non-Hispanic white respondents with no college degree and annual household incomes below \$50,000. The sample sizes for the ANES are 401 in 2008, 1,648 in 2012, and 1,154 in 2016. For the CCES, sample sizes are 11,621 in 2008, 17,216 in 2012, and 17,392 in 2016.

Sources: ANES 2008, 2012, 2016; CCES 2008, 2012, 2016.

working class, according to both the ANES and CCES studies. White working-class voters made up only about a third of Trump’s voter base in the 2016 election.⁵ They represented a minority of Trump supporters in 2016, just as they have in other recent presidential elections. In fact, the typical Trump voter was relatively affluent (see also Silver 2016).

⁵ White, working-class voters also made up about a third of his voter base during the 2016 primaries (Carnes and Lupu 2016b; Manza and Crowley 2017).

As a share of voters, the white working class was just as important to Trump in 2016 as it was to Romney in 2012, and somewhat more important than it was for McCain in 2008. We would need more historical data to establish whether the growing share of the Republican presidential vote held by the white working class is a long-term trend. But if this group is becoming a larger share of Republican voters over time, the most recent increase took place in 2012, not 2016. There is simply no evidence for the claim that most Trump voters were white working-class people

Claim 2: Did Most White Working-Class Voters Support Trump?

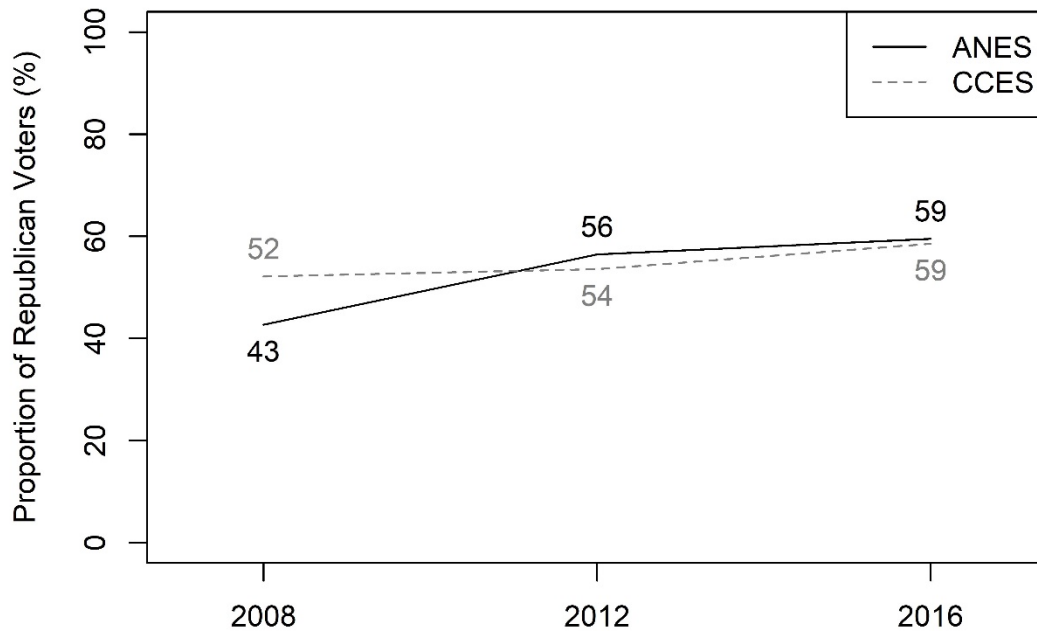
People with college degrees and higher household incomes made up two thirds of Trump supporters, but it is still possible that, for their part, most working-class people voted for Trump. Even if middle- and upper-class Trump supporters outnumbered white working-class Trump supporters, it might still be the case that 2016 saw a wave of red hats sweep through America's white working class.

Indeed, journalists and commentators often say that Trump won because he uniquely appealed to the white working class. Unlike prior Republican candidates, the narrative goes, Trump's rhetoric and individual qualities uniquely positioned him to cash in on the disaffection and grievances of the white, working class (e.g., Lamont, Park, and Ayala-Hurtado 2017).

Figure 2 plots the share of white, working-class voters who reported casting their ballots for the Republican presidential candidates in 2008, 2012, and 2016.

According to these data, Trump indeed won over a solid majority of white working-class voters in 2016. But so did Mitt Romney in 2012. Indeed, Trump performed only slightly better among white working-class voters than Romney. Figure 2 clearly shows that white working-

Figure 2. *Proportion of White Working-Class Voters who Supported Republicans*



Notes: Values indicate the share of white working-class voters who voted for the Republican presidential candidate in each election. The white working class are non-Hispanic white respondents with no college degree and annual household incomes below \$50,000. The sample sizes for the ANES are 248 in 2008, 899 in 2012, and 473 in 2016. For the CCES, sample sizes are 5,755 in 2008, 8,403 in 2012, and 9,421 in 2016.

Sources: ANES 2008, 2012, 2016; CCES 2008, 2012, 2016.

class voters have been moving toward Republican candidates in recent presidential elections (see also Stonecash 2017). But the major turning point among this demographic group, at least according to ANES data, was in 2012, when white working-class voters went from mostly casting ballots for the Democrat to mostly casting ballots for the Republican. Trump improved

among this group slightly, but the white working-class leaned Republican long before Trump's 2016 campaign.⁶

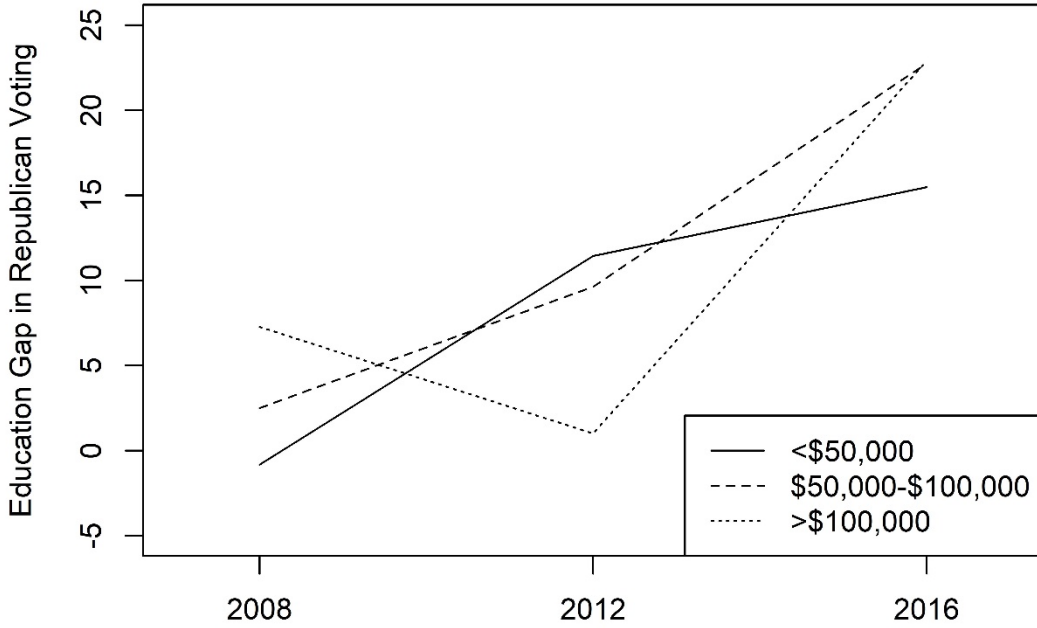
One reason these data diverge so starkly from the oft-repeated narrative of Trump's special appeal to the white working class goes back to measurement. Many popular commentaries identify working-class survey respondents as those who do not hold a college degree. And the education gap in how Americans voted for president did increase dramatically in 2016 (Sides, Tesler, and Vavreck 2018). The problem with using the widening education gap to make claims about class, however, is that many Americans without college degrees are actually quite affluent—and it was among the affluent that the education gap grew most sharply in 2016.

Figure 3 plots the gap in support for Republican presidential candidates between voters with and without college degrees, dividing citizens by their household income as well. Across the board, the education gap widened in 2016. Americans without college degrees were much more likely to vote for Trump than those with college degrees. Once again, though, the trend is informative. Among both the bottom and the top income group, the education gap was already widening in 2012.

The education gap did widen substantially between 2012 and 2016. But in 2016, it was substantially wider among middle- and high-income voters than among low-income voters. In both those groups, voters without college degrees were 23 percentage points (more than 50%) more likely to cast a ballot for Trump than voters with college degrees. In other words, while the widening education gap is real, most of the action in 2016 was actually happening among the

⁶ This is not to say that the voting behavior of the white working class did not change from 2012 to 2016. In fact, whereas white, working-class voters who did not support Romney voted for Obama in 2012, a substantial minority of white, working-class voters (7% in the ANES, 6% in the CCES) cast ballots for third-party candidates in 2016. As we note in the conclusion, there is therefore some basis for Democrats to worry about losing support about the white working class, but from 2012 to 2016, most of that loss was not to Republicans.

Figure 3. Education Gap in Republican Presidential Support, by Income Group



Notes: Values indicate the difference between the shares of college-educated and non-college-educated whites who voted for the Republican presidential candidate in each election. For the low income group, the same sizes are 137 in 2008, 794 in 2012, and 429 in 2016. For the middle income group, the same sizes are 103 in 2008, 421 in 2012, and 410 in 2016. For the high income group, the same sizes are 109 in 2008, 386 in 2012, and 284 in 2016.

Sources: ANES 2008, 2012, 2016.

affluent, not people in the bottom half of the income distribution. This can hardly be evidence that Trump appealed uniquely to the white working class. And it further underscores how important it is to use appropriate measures when making claims about the working class. Most working-class people voted for Trump in 2016, but most voted for Romney in 2012. And election analyses that focused only on college attainment missed one of the real stories of 2016, namely, that the education gap was steady among people of modest incomes but exploded among

middle- and high-income households. The appealingly simple narrative about Trump and the white working class seems to have blinded many observers to this important development.

Claim 3: Did Working-Class Voters Switch from Obama to Trump at Unusual Rates?

Another popular—and misleading—version of the narrative about Trump and the working class asserts that working-class voters who had supported Obama in 2012 flocked to Trump in 2016 (Morgan and Lee 2018).⁷ This claim is slightly more elaborate than the simpler idea that unusually large numbers of white working-class people voted for Trump. In this version, Trump appealed to the white working class, *and many of those same white workers had supported Obama just four years earlier.*

In addition to the analyses in the two preceding sections, there are at least three reasons to doubt this claim up front (see also Mutz 2019). First, some of the evidence for this claim is based on surveys conducted in 2016 that asked voters to recall how they voted in 2012 (Morgan and Lee 2018). However, survey respondents are notoriously bad at recalling past behavior (Belli et al. 1999; Tourangeau et al. 2000), especially when that behavior took place several years prior. Respondents are more likely to say that they voted for the winner in vote recall questions (Atkeson 1999; Wright 1993), especially as more time elapses between the election and the interview. (Indeed, just 41 percent of respondents in the 2016 ANES said they voted for Mitt Romney in 2012, when he actually won 47 percent of the popular vote). Recent studies even suggest that respondents have begun intentionally “trolling” academic surveys (Lopez and Hillygus 2018). Asking Trump voters in 2016 how they voted in 2012—the empirical exercise at

⁷ It is also regularly claimed that this “proved a decisive factor” in the election (Tavernise and Gebeloff 2018). As we note below, it is difficult to identify which demographic group was “decisive” in any election.

the heart of some recent efforts to claim that Trump uniquely appealed to the white working-class—is unlikely to yield highly accurate responses.

The other source of data scholars have offered in support of the idea that Trump inspired legion working-class Obama switchers—county-level data on presidential vote outcomes—is also highly suspect. A handful of recent papers argue that in counties with large numbers of white working-class people, Trump performed better than Romney, which the authors interpret as evidence that white working-class people switched their allegiances from Obama to Trump (McQuarrie 2017; Morgan and Lee 2018). These analyses are textbook ecological fallacies; they wrongly infer individual-level behavior from aggregate trends. It could be that working-class counties shifted to Trump because working-class people shifted to Trump, or it could be that affluent voters living in counties with more white, working-class voters turned out for Trump more than they did for Romney (and there are some indications that it was the latter, in fact; Ogorzalek and Piston 2018). Researcher armed with county-level data simply cannot make inferences about how individual voters behaved; as Sides, Tesler, and Vavreck (2018: 172) put it, “counties do not vote. People do.”

A third problem with popular arguments about working-class Obama switchers is that commentators have not, to our knowledge, described a benchmark for what would constitute an *unusually* large amount of switching. Vote switching occurs in every presidential election, of course, and commentators can always marvel at the number of vote switchers from any given social group. But knowing that there *were* vote switchers is not the same as knowing that *there were an unusually large number of* vote switchers. Even if many white working-class voters switched from Obama in 2012 to Trump in 2016, if the level of switching was comparable to switching rates in previous elections—or switching rates in the opposite direction in the same

election—it would be difficult to maintain that Trump had a special appeal among the white working class.

The non-parenthetical numbers in Table 1 report the overall rates of vote switching in the entire population in 2012 and 2016, as estimated using the only three relevant academic surveys, the ANES, CCES, and VOTER studies. According to ANES—the survey cited by some proponents of the Obama-Trump vote switching claim—more than 30% of Trump voters reported either voting for Obama in 2012 or not voting at all that year. In contrast, just over 20% of Clinton voters in the 2016 ANES said that they had voted for Romney or not voted in 2012. Perhaps Trump really did master the art of the steal.

Then again, when we look beyond the ANES, the picture becomes far less clear. In keeping with the idea that vote recall data are unreliable, the same questions in the CCES elicited substantially lower—and considerably more equal—rates of self-reported vote switching. In that survey survey, people who claimed to be switchers were 21% of Trump voters (compared to 30% in the ANES) and 16% of Clinton voters (compared to 20% in the ANES), a difference of just five percentage points (half the size of the difference in the ANES).

Which of these studies is closer to the truth? We cannot know for certain, because both studies ask voters in 2016 to recall how they voted in 2012. But we can turn to the VOTER panel study to at least assuage concerns about respondents misreporting their 2012 behavior four years after the fact.⁸ The VOTER study is a panel that re-interviewed respondents from the 2012 Cooperative Campaign Analysis Project (CCAP) survey. Since the VOTER study is limited to voters, we cannot validate rates of switching for those who did not vote in 2012. But as Table 1

⁸ Of course, panel surveys have other limitations, including attrition (Bartels 2000; Frankel and Hillygus 2014). In the VOTER panel, 23% of the invited 2012 CCAP respondents did not complete the December 2016 wave.

Table 1. *Vote Switching in 2016, 2012, and 2004*

Election	Source	D-R switchers as share of R voters	R-D switchers as share of D voters	Nonvoter-R switchers as share of R voters	Nonvoter-D switchers as share of D voters
2016	ANES	13.5 (35.3) <i>N</i> =1,178	3.8 (12.4) <i>N</i> =1,290	17.8 (19.1) <i>N</i> =1,178	17.9 (32.5) <i>N</i> =1,290
	CCES	10.6 (32.6) <i>N</i> =18,755	4.9 (22.8) <i>N</i> =22,136	11.4 (21.8) <i>N</i> =18,755	11.3 (50.0) <i>N</i> =22,136
	VOTER (panel)	9.2 (29.9) <i>N</i> =3,479	4.7 (28.5) <i>N</i> =3,545	-- --	-- --
2012	ANES	6.1 (30.8) <i>N</i> =1,692	3.0 (29.1) <i>N</i> =2,496	9.6 (43.3) <i>N</i> =1,692	12.1 (15.2) <i>N</i> =2,496
	CCES	9.0 (31.4) <i>N</i> =18,777	3.8 (35.1) <i>N</i> =19,132	7.9 (47.7) <i>N</i> =18,777	11.3 (32.8) <i>N</i> =19,132
	VOTER	7.6 (31.3) <i>N</i> =3,384	4.3 (32.9) <i>N</i> =3,734	-- --	-- --
2004	ANES (panel)	9.9 (22.3) <i>N</i> =389	6.6 (17.7) <i>N</i> =337	11.0 (52.4) <i>N</i> =389	9.9 (14.9) <i>N</i> =337

Notes: Values indicate the share of respondents who were switchers, by survey. Values in parentheses are the proportion of each type of switcher who were white and working-class. The white working class are non-Hispanic white respondents with no college degree and annual household incomes below \$50,000.

Sources: ANES 2000-04, 2012, 2016; CCES 2016; VOTER.

reports, the VOTER estimates of Obama-Trump and Romney-Clinton switching are closer to the what CCES respondents reported. According to the VOTER panel, in fact, the CCES may even under-estimate the number of Romney-Clinton switchers (consistent with what we know about misreporting typically favoring the winner). If the VOTER panel is right, the overall shares of

Trump and Clinton voters who had cast ballots for the opposing party's candidate in 2012 or not voted that year were actually quite similar, although Trump still seems to have a slight edge.

But what about the white working class? Were white working-class voters the bulk of Obama-Trump switchers?⁹ For each switcher proportion reported in Table 1, we also calculated the proportion of those switchers who were white and working class (and reported it in parentheses). Across the three studies, the proportion of Obama-Trump switchers who were white and working class seems to have been roughly thirty percent. This is about the same as the proportion of all voters in 2016 who were white and working class, and the proportion of Trump voters in 2016 who were white and working class (see Figure 1). In every study considered here, white working-class respondents made up unremarkable percentages of Obama-Trump switchers. White working-class Americans were not a majority of those who defected to Trump.¹⁰

Were any of the patterns in switching in 2016 unusual? Table 1 also includes summaries of self-reported switching between the 2008 and 2012 elections, from the ANES, the CCES, and the 2011 wave of the VOTER panel (which asked first-time interviewees how they had voted in

⁹ The three surveys are more mixed about the share of white working-class people among Republican-to-Democrat switchers. White workers made up a significantly smaller share of Romney-Clinton switchers in the ANES than they did in the VOTER panel, where they approach one-third. In both the ANES and the CCES, the white working-class represents a substantially larger share of 2012 nonvoters who voted for Clinton than 2012 nonvoters who voted for Trump.

¹⁰ Relying solely on ANES data, Morgan and Lee (2018: 238) conclude that “Obama voters in 2012 were a substantial portion of Trump’s voters in 2016, and they were disproportionately white and members of the working class.” The first part of this claim, as we have shown, seems to be specific to the ANES data. The second seems to be based on a comparison of the shares of working-class and non-working-class whites who were switchers. Morgan and Lee find that, “Obama-to-Trump switchers were also substantially more prevalent among white, working-class voters” (237). If the comparison is to white, working-class voters overall, then Morgan and Lee are correct that a higher proportion of them were switchers than the proportion of white, non-working-class voters who were switchers. This, however, is true of all switchers in 2016, not just those who switched to Trump. It is also true of switchers in 2012 (see online appendix). Moreover, these proportions are similar to the overall proportions of white, working-class and white, non-working-class supporters of Trump. There is nothing particularly unusual about switchers in 2016, nor is there anything unusual about the proportions of them who were white and working class.

2008). We know of no panel survey of presidential voting that re-interviewed the same subjects in 2008 and 2012, so we must use recall data here. However, the proportions of switchers were similar across all three studies—and when we compared recollections of switching in 2012 to 2016 data on both recollections of switching and switching estimated from re-interviews. In the CCES, the share of Obama-Trump switchers in 2016 was only 1.6 percentage points higher than the share of Obama-Romney switchers in 2012. The share of Romney-Clinton switchers in 2016 was 1.1 percentage points higher than the share of McCain-Obama switchers in 2012. This hardly seems like the momentous shift it has been made out to be. Indeed, with the exception of the 2016 ANES, the rates of switching documented in Table 1 were on par with the general rates of vote switching observed in American politics (Erikson and Wlezien 2012).

The proportion of white, working-class voters among these switchers was also fairly constant over time. Roughly one third of switchers were white and working-class in both 2012 and 2016. If anything, the white working class played a larger role among Obama-Romney switchers than among Obama-Trump switchers. Likewise, the white working class was a larger share of 2008 nonvoters who voted for Romney in 2012 than 2012 nonvoters who turned out for Trump. Again, though, we urge substantial caution about drawing strong inferences from respondents' self-reports about their behavior four years after the fact – but the data we have do not fit with the narrative that Trump somehow inspired scores of workers to defect.

We also compared switching in 2016 to the data on switching in the most recent panel survey conducted by the ANES, which interviewed respondents in 2000 and then again in 2004 (see Table 1). In that survey, 21% percent of Bush voters in 2004 had either not voted in 2000 or had cast their ballots for Al Gore, 16 and % of Kerry voters in 2004 had either not voted in 2000 or had voted for Bush. These rates of switching were very close to what we observe in the CCES

and VOTER studies in 2016.¹¹ The proportion of white working-class voters among cross-party switchers seems higher in 2016, but not just for Trump –white working-class people also made up greater shares of R-to-D switchers in 2016 than they had in 2004.

There simply does not seem to be anything particularly unusual about vote switching in the 2016 election, or the share of vote switchers who were white working-class Americans, at least according to the available data. Obama-Trump switchers were no more numerous or more working-class than Obama-Romney or Gore-Bush switchers. Most importantly for our purposes, most switchers were not white and working class, and white working-class voters did not seem to have done more switching in 2016 than they had in prior elections. White working-class voters did not seem to abandon the Democrats for Trump at unusual rates, either compared to past elections or compared to the rates at which they abandoned the Republicans for Clinton.

Claim 4: Were White Working-Class Voters Critical in Swing States?

Of course, presidential elections are won and lost in the states, not in the national popular vote. Even if there were nothing unusual about Trump’s appeal among the white working class nationally, it could still be true—as many commentators argue—that white working-class Trump supporters were pivotal in the six states that flipped in 2016 and cost Hillary Clinton the election (Florida, Iowa, Michigan, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin).¹² Perhaps this is what authors

¹¹ One difference does emerge across these elections (see online appendix). In the VOTER survey, one third of Obama-Trump switchers identified in 2012 as Independents. In contrast, in the 2000-04 ANES panel, only 11% of Gore-Bush switchers identified as Independents in 2000 (the vast majority had identified as Democrats). This suggests that what is remarkable about Obama-Trump switching is that these individuals had voted for Obama in 2012, not that they voted for Trump in 2016.

¹² Some authors have focused only on the states of Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin, the so-called Rust Belt or “blue wall” states. But this only raises the question of what the appropriate counterfactual is. We treat the 2012 election as the counterfactual and therefore look at all six states Trump carried where Obama had won a majority.

have in mind when they claim that the white working class gave Trump the presidency (Leonhardt 2018).

This claim is the hardest to test empirically (a point that should raise red flags in itself). First, most national surveys do not interview enough respondents in each state to allow researchers to make inferences about how different social groups voted. The 2016 ANES, for instance, includes only 217 cases in Florida, 36 in Iowa, 138 in Michigan, 162 in Ohio, 174 in Pennsylvania, and 97 in Wisconsin—and its sample is not designed to produce representative samples of respondents within each state.

The one exception is the CCES, which uses a much larger national sample that is representative of the population within each state. In 2016 the CCES interviewed 4,988 respondents in Florida, 688 in Iowa, 2,110 in Michigan, 2,698 in Ohio, 3,524 in Pennsylvania, and 1,354 in Wisconsin.

However, there is a second and more fundamental challenge associated with testing the claim that white working-class voters were critical to Trump's success in the swing states, namely, that there is no clear-cut way to measure whether any social group is *critical*.

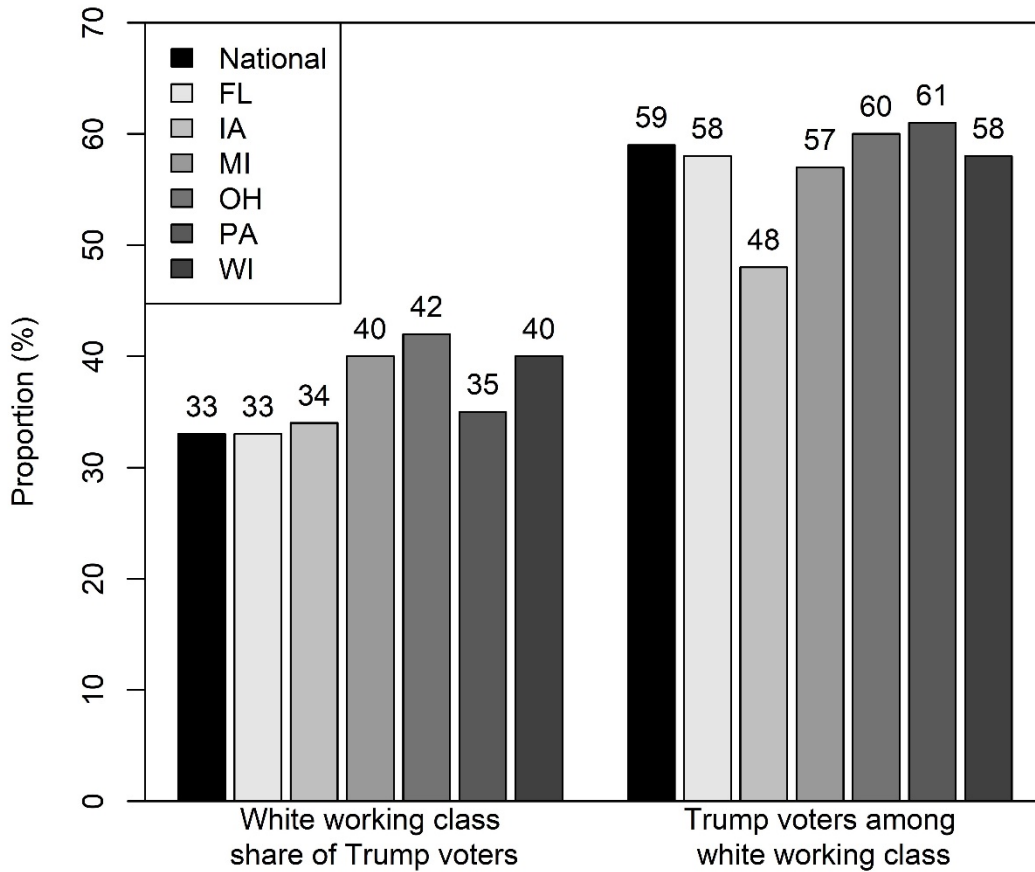
There are two criteria we might use to deem any demographic group critical to the presidential election outcome within a given state. One would be to ask whether the group was *pivotal* in the outcome, that is, to ask if Trump's wins in the six swing states depended crucially on his support among that social group. Unfortunately, in large elections it is essentially impossible to know for certain whether any demographic group was truly pivotal in this sense. If *any* large social group had turned out more for the Democrat, the Democrat would have won—it is impossible to know whether any single social group was truly pivotal, because every large social group counts. For example, African-American turnout in Michigan, Pennsylvania, and

Wisconsin declined substantially between 2012 and 2016, as did turnout more generally among registered Democrats (Fraga et al. 2017; McElwee et al. 2018; Sides, Tesler, and Vavreck 2018). Had either of these (overlapping) social groups turned out at rates closer to 2012, Clinton would have won the election (and we would probably not be talking about Trump's unusual appeal among the white working class). Does that mean that those social groups were the pivotal voters who cost Clinton the election? We cannot know, because we cannot know whether any social group was pivotal in this sense. Even if white working-class Trump voters were a large enough demographic group to account for his margin of victory in the swing states, they are only one of many multiple groups whose behavior on Election Day put Trump over the top.

A second (more empirically testable) way to think about whether the white working class was critical to Trump's victory in the six swing states would be to ask if white workers' support for Trump was *considerably higher* in those six states than the white working class's support for Trump nationwide. If working-class whites were a substantially larger share of Trump supporters, or went for Trump in larger numbers as a group, or switched from Obama to Trump in larger numbers—in essence, if any of Claims 1, 2, or 3 were true—in the six key swing states that cost Clinton the election, it might be reasonable to say that the white working class was critical to Trump's win (even if we couldn't prove that they were *pivotal per se*).

Using this standard, however, there is no evidence that the white working class was critical to Trump in 2016. Figure 4 uses CCES data to compare the voting behavior of white, working-class voters in the swing states to the national patterns discussed above (in our discussion of Claims 1 and 2). The first set of bars asks whether the white working class made up a majority of Trump voters nationally and in the swing states. The second set of bars asks

Figure 4. *Voting Behavior of the White Working Class in Swing States*



Notes: Values indicate the stated proportion nationally and within each swing state. The white working class are non-Hispanic white respondents with no college degree and annual household incomes below \$50,000. The sample sizes for the left-hand set of bars is 17,392 for the nation, 1,493 in Florida, 203 in Iowa, 584 in Michigan, 772 in Ohio, 1,096 in Pennsylvania, and 385 in Wisconsin. For the right-hand set of bars, the sample sizes are 9,421 for the nation, 796 in Florida, 157 in Iowa, 443 in Michigan, 563 in Ohio, 632 in Pennsylvania, and 262 in Wisconsin.

Sources: CCES 2016.

whether the percentage of white working-class voters who went for Trump was higher nationally or in the six swing states.

Nothing remarkable stands out. White working-class voters did not make up a majority of Trump voters nationally (as we noted in our discussion of Claim 1) or in any of the six swing states. They did make up a larger proportion of Trump supporters in three of the swing states

(Michigan, Ohio, and Wisconsin) than in the nation as a whole, but we would expect as much given that white working-class voters were a larger share of *all voters* in those states. White working-class citizens made up 25% of the national electorate in 2016, but 39% of voters in Iowa, 34% of voters in Michigan, 35% in Ohio, and 33% in Wisconsin.¹³ As a result, white working-class voters were also a substantially larger proportion of *Clinton's* voter base in Iowa (41%), Michigan (27%), Ohio (27%), and Wisconsin (26%) than they were nationally (18%).

Consequently, when we focus on the white working-class itself, the percentages of Trump supporters are about the same in each of the six swing states as the share nationwide. The lone exception was Iowa, where white working-class people were substantially *less* likely to vote for Trump.

What the idea that white working-class voters switched en masse from Trump to Obama. Was that claim true in the six swing states? As we noted in the section on Claim 3, the 2016 CCES interviewed a fresh sample of voters and learned about how they voted in 2012 by asking them to remember (not by asking them in 2012, then re-interviewing them in 2016). Moreover, even with the relatively large samples of the CCES, when we subdivide the respondents in each state by whether they were partisan switchers and whether they belonged to the white working class, our samples get small enough to give us pause.

Table 2 makes the most of the available data. In five of the six of the swing states, voters who said they supported Obama back in 2012 made up slightly higher percentages of Trump voters (12.3 to 12.8 percent, as opposed to 10.6 percent nationally). And white working-class respondents made up larger shares of Obama-Trump switchers in all six states, including a

¹³ As a result, white, working-class voters were also a substantially larger proportion of Clinton's voter base in Iowa (41%), Michigan (27%), Ohio (27%), and Wisconsin (26%) than they were nationally (18%).

Table 2. Vote Switching in Swing States

State	D-R switchers as share of R voters	R-D switchers as share of D voters	Nonvoter-R switchers as share of R voters	Nonvoter-D switchers as share of D voters
National	10.6 (32.6) <i>N=18,755</i>	4.1 (22.8) <i>N=22,136</i>	11.3 (50.0) <i>N=18,755</i>	11.4 (21.8) <i>N=22,136</i>
FL	12.8 (38.2) <i>N=1,623</i>	5.6 (30.3) <i>N=1,683</i>	7.0 (49.6) <i>N=1,623</i>	10.6 (17.3) <i>N=1,683</i>
IA	10.7 (45.2) <i>N=222</i>	2.3 (44.5) <i>N=257</i>	9.4 (8.7) <i>N=222</i>	9.2 (45.8) <i>N=257</i>
MI	12.3 (56.4) <i>N=615</i>	4.8 (39.1) <i>N=764</i>	13.8 (61.7) <i>N=615</i>	8.4 (23.4) <i>N=764</i>
OH	12.3 (49.1) <i>N=832</i>	5.6 (25.2) <i>N=965</i>	10.5 (91.0) <i>N=832</i>	7.9 (43.0) <i>N=965</i>
PA	12.3 (45.9) <i>N=1,171</i>	5.6 (24.0) <i>N=1,134</i>	14.4 (37.6) <i>N=1,171</i>	13.3 (18.5) <i>N=1,134</i>
WI	10.8 (40.7) <i>N=411</i>	3.3 (39.1) <i>N=470</i>	12.0 (35.4) <i>N=411</i>	8.3 (59.1) <i>N=470</i>

Notes: Values indicate the share of respondents who were switchers nationally and in the swing states. Values in parentheses are the proportion of each type of switcher who were white and working-class. The white working class are non-Hispanic white respondents with no college degree and annual household incomes below \$50,000.

Sources: CCES 2016.

majority in Michigan. Of course, without panel data, we cannot know for certain whether these trends reflect real vote switching, or some combination of misremembering and misreporting. And if working-class respondents in these states really did make up larger shares of Obama-Trump switchers, they were essentially “catching up” to white working-class Americans

elsewhere, who must have already switched to the Republican Party in earlier elections (since working-class voters in these six states went for Trump at roughly the same rates as working-class voters nationwide; see Figure 4). Alternatively, what might be unusual about these voters is that they had voted for Obama in 2012. And again, note that even with the large CSES samples, when we look at the composition of, say, Obama-Trump switchers in Michigan, we are talking about a sample of 75 respondents. This is the strongest evidence we have found to support the popular narrative that Trump had a special appeal among the working class that won him the election, and it is hardly enough to sustain such a claim.

It is a far cry from most narratives about Trump and the working class. It is not the case that most Trump voters were white working-class Americans, that most white-working class Americans voted for Trump, that white, working-class Americans disproportionately switched from Obama to Trump, or that white working-class Americans went bigger for Trump in the six swing states than they did nationwide. The most we can say is that in the six swing states, white working-class voters made up larger shares of the Trump voters who said that they had voted for Obama back in 2012. We doubt this collection of findings would inspire as many headlines as the racy claim that the white working class handed Trump the election.

So Then What's Going On?

But surely *something* is happening with the white working class, right? After all, Figure 1 shows that white working-class Americans made up a greater share of Romney and Trump voters than McCain voters, Figure 2 shows that a majority of white working-class voters cast ballots for Romney and Trump, Figure 3 shows that college attainment is becoming a more salient dividing line in presidential elections, and Table 2 shows that the white working-class made up a larger

share of Trump supporters who said they voted for Obama back in 2012 in the six states that swung to Trump in 2016. Even if the broad claims about how Trump won because he uniquely appealed to the white working class are wrong, it *must* be the case that things are changing in American electoral politics, and that 2016 was a window into those changes.

We agree completely. A careful examination of the data does not support many of the blunt claims observers and scholars have made about Trump and the working class. But the data reported here highlight long-term trends that are deeply important and worthy of a great deal of additional analysis.

The simple narrative that “working class people flocked to Trump” profoundly obscures this point. By fixating on Trump and his allegedly unique appeal to the working class, commentators have missed larger trends that predate Trump, that have nothing to do with his unique campaign and presidency, and that will be with us long after he leaves office. The relationship between education, income, race, and presidential voting is evolving. But observers will never understand that evaluation if they get stuck on the simple narrative that Trump uniquely appealed to the working class. It obscures the fact that working-class Americans have been voting Republican in larger numbers for years, and it obscures the fact that 2016 saw an unprecedented education gap *among affluent voters*. The existence of gradual historical changes—the fact that *something* is happening—gives journalists and scholars an imperative to study those changes carefully—not a license to endorse a loosely-related narrative that is false.

When pundits get the wrong answer, they miss important historical trends, and they also jump to the wrong conclusions about how to approach the next race. As Masket (2018) has recently shown, for instance, when voters are reminded of the post-election narrative that economic anxiety drove Trump support, they are less likely to support female and minority

candidates. When scholars and pundits fixate on the narrative that Trump uniquely appealed to the working class, they miss broader historical trends, and they also make bad decisions about how to shape history going forward. Elections have consequences, but so too do our *interpretations* of elections.

Of course, claims about Trump and the working class are often phrased in ambiguous terms. We have done our best to distill popular rhetoric and sweeping claims about Trump into testable hypotheses, but of course it is still possible that commentators could devise another version of the narrative about Trump's special appeal to the working class that implies a hypothesis we have not yet tested.

Our findings suggest it is more important for future research to grapple with questions about long-term changes in the racial and social class makeup of the two parties' electoral coalitions. We also think it would be profitable for scholars to investigate *why* observers were so quick to embrace the narrative about Trump and the working class, often without evidence, or based on analyses that would normally make critical observers bristle. Why did journalists and scholars flock to the idea that Trump had a special relationship with the white working class? We suspect that the answer may have something to do with the fact that most journalists and scholars are not Trump supporters or people who have much contact with the white working-class, but we will leave that hypothesis to future research.

To make such a claim now would be to commit the same basic error that journalists did when they wrote that working-class white people make up the bulk of Trump's fan base, namely, presenting our untested intuitions as though they were facts.

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**(Incomplete) Online Appendix for
“The White Working Class and the 2016 Election”**

Table A1. *Measuring Working Class Using Occupation*

Measure	WWC as proportion of Trump voters	Proportion of WWC who voted for Trump	WWC proportion of switchers to Trump	WWC proportion of switchers to Clinton
Income and education	30.8 <i>N=1,154</i>	59.5 <i>N=473</i>	33.7 <i>N=320</i>	18.0 <i>N=236</i>
Occupation	38.3 <i>N=767</i>	60.0 <i>N=472</i>	42.0 <i>N=234</i>	20.8 <i>N=193</i>

Notes: Values indicate proportions using different measures of white working class. The income and education measure identifies the white working class as non-Hispanic white respondents with no college degree and annual household incomes below \$50,000. The occupation measure identifies them as holding manual and service-industry occupations. Sample sizes are reported in parentheses.

Sources: ANES 2016.

Table A2. Validated Votes

Sample	WWC as proportion of Trump voters	Proportion of WWC who voted for Trump	WWC proportion of switchers to Trump	WWC proportion of switchers to Clinton
ANES				
All self-reported voters	30.8 <i>N=1,154</i>	59.5 <i>N=473</i>	33.7 <i>N=320</i>	18.0 <i>N=236</i>
Validated voters only	29.7 <i>N=965</i>	61.1 <i>N=378</i>	33.6 <i>N=120</i>	13.3 <i>N=51</i>
CCES				
All self-reported voters	32.9 <i>N=17,392</i>	58.5 <i>N=9,421</i>	41.5 <i>N=3,184</i>	22.1 <i>N=2,275</i>
Validated voters only	35.5 <i>N=13,496</i>	58.3 <i>N=7,893</i>	45.9 <i>N=2,275</i>	22.5 <i>N=1,656</i>

Notes: For proportions of switchers in the ANES, we include only respondents who were validated voters in both 2012 and 2016. Sample sizes are reported in parentheses.

Sources: ANES 2016; CCES 2016.

Table A3. Partisanship of Vote Switchers in Panel Surveys

Source	Partisanship	D-R	R-D	Nonvoter-R	Nonvoter-D
VOTER 2012-16	Democrat	58.8	22.4	--	--
	Independent	32.9	24.4	--	--
	Republican	7.9	46.9	--	--
	<i>Sample size</i>	<i>254</i>	<i>141</i>		
ANES 2000-04	Democrat	69.6	15.2	33.8	52.0
	Independent	11.3	26.7	17.9	9.9
	Republican	19.1	58.1	47.0	37.1
	<i>Sample size</i>	<i>39</i>	<i>20</i>	<i>27</i>	<i>27</i>

Notes: Values indicate the share of respondents who were switchers, by survey. Values in parentheses are the proportion of each type of switcher who were white and working-class. The white working class are non-Hispanic white respondents with no college degree and annual household incomes below \$50,000.

Sources: ANES 2000-04; VOTER.