

The Realignment of U.S. Presidential Voting, 1948–2004

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Introduction

U.S. presidential elections since the 1960s have offered ample material for political scientists and political sociologists who have contended that the stable class politics of the industrial era—roughly 1932–1964 (or maybe as late as 1976)—gave way to new, “postmaterial” politics (e.g., Abramson and Inglehart 1995; Clark and Lipset 1991; Inglehart 1977, 1990; Lipset 1981). Scholars who subscribe to this view point to newer cleavages based on gender, identity, concern for the environment, and family values, which have, they argue, displaced class from its central place in U.S. politics. When Democrats appeal to middle-class voters and the British Labour party touts a “third way” in twenty-first century politics, some of these ideas ring true.

Other scholars have countered the postmaterialists. First, they note that although elections are zero-sum—an individual’s vote

for one candidate precludes her vote for another in the same election—cleavages are not. Voters can choose candidates based on a single dimension of their social identity, whether it be class, gender, religion, or something else, or they can balance a variety of considerations. Nothing in the political arithmetic of social cleavages mandates that a rise in the weight given to one factor lowers the weight given to others. In fact, research has shown that, to a first approximation, all the factors that were important for voting in U.S. presidential elections in the 1960s were more important in the 1990s (Greeley and Hout 2006, ch. 3). Second, the empirical evidence contradicts the postmaterialists. In Britain, class voting fluctuates without trend (Goldthorpe 1999; Heath, Jowell, and Curtice 1985). In the United States, classes realigned (Hout, Brooks, and Manza 1995; Hout, Manza, and Brooks 1999), and the effect of income on the vote increased (McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2005).

Original article prepared for this book. We are updating the work of Hout, Manza, and Brooks (1999). We owe a huge debt to Jeff Manza and Clem Brooks, who established the research templates that we use in this work. We thank the participants of the Stanford-Berkeley Inequality Colloquium, especially Annette Lareau, for helpful discussion.

Class Voting and Class Politics

Interest in class voting goes back to the dawn of modern understandings of class; that is, back to the grand theorists of the nineteenth century. The roots of contemporary debates about class voting, however, are planted in data, not in class theory. The national election surveys that have accumulated in many countries since the 1960s and the World Values Surveys that began in the 1970s yielded a harvest of class-voting time series. Findings through the early 1970s showed a strong, if variable, relationship between class (as indicated by occupation) and voter's choices of candidates and parties (Alford 1963; Lipset 1960, 1981; Rose 1974). Lipset and Rokkan's (1967) influential synthesis of the empirical record pointed to two nineteenth-century revolutions—the National Revolution and the Industrial Revolution. Lipset and Rokkan argued that these two revolutions initiated everywhere processes of social differentiation and conflict. As democracy spread, the four axes of social differentiation—(1) church versus secular state, (2) dominant versus subject subcultures, (3) rural areas versus cities, and (4) employers versus workers—came to influence voting behavior. The details varied from country to country, depending on history, the presence and influence of churches and minority subcultures, and timing. But everywhere the advance of industrialization pushed the first three axes to the side and the fourth—class—to the fore.

In many Western European nations (and Australia) the cleavage structure was “frozen” in the dominance of class-based political parties (see Bartolini and Mair 1990; Lipset and Rokkan 1967; Mair 1999; and Rose and Urwin 1970). Where this happened, it makes sense to speak of “class politics” (Mair 1999).

Elsewhere the association between class and voting behavior is better thought of as “class voting.” Without a party structure that freezes both classes and voters in place, there is the prospect of shifting alliances, new coalitions, and realignment. In the United States, the lack of explicit links between classes and parties frees voters to weigh each party's appeals and frees each party to revise its strategies from time to time.

This process has been explicit in U.S. presidential elections since 1992. First Bill Clinton and then John Kerry dropped the Democrats' familiar appeals to “working people” in favor of direct calls to the middle class. Al Gore made more traditional class appeals in his campaign, and the Republicans accused him of “inciting class warfare.” At the same time, then-Governor Bush addressed the attendees at a high-priced fundraiser as the “haves and the have-mores,” wisecracking that “some people call you the elites; I call you my base” (featured in Michael Moore's *Fahrenheit 911*). It is well known in the United States that many blue-collar workers identify with the middle class (Halle 1984). And, in any event, the working class is too small in the post-industrial United States to be an effective political base (Brooks and Manza 1999).

Even without a labor party, unions used to bind blue-collar Americans to the Democratic Party. From 1936 to 1968 (and again in 1984) Democrats gave unions an important voice in the selection of candidates. In exchange, the unions delivered their share of the working-class vote to the Democrats. That link was snapped by electoral reforms in the 1970s. The popular party primary system of selecting candidates moved politics from back rooms to TV screens. And unions lost out. They were, at the same time, losing membership and the trust of members and

nonmembers alike (Hout, Manza, and Brooks 1999; Lipset and Schneider 1983). In the age of Jimmy Hoffa, identification with unions became more of a political liability than an asset, and unions never regained the clout they once had at the ballot box. Union members still lean strongly toward Democratic candidates (Hout, Manza, and Brooks 1999), but the heyday of identification between the Democrats and the labor movement is over.

The erosion of confidence in unions along with Republican appeals for “the right to work” and less industrial regulation seem to have had the greatest impact on the very people who had the most to lose in the new economy that emerged during the 1970s. As energy shocks and stagflation (inflation plus high unemployment) buffeted the economy and the Democrats seemed unable to deliver the economic prosperity and security that had been their hallmark midcentury, Republican candidates’ promises of relief from regulations and taxes began to seem more appealing. In particular, lower taxes and less regulation had the greatest influence on small businesspeople and manual workers who were not in unions. To these people, Reagan’s firing of striking air-traffic controllers in 1981 may have seemed like a dramatic rebuke of special pleaders who wanted to dodge the apparently inexorable economic changes that everyone else was facing. If we are reading these signs correctly, then the persistence of union membership as a factor in U.S. politics is as likely a reflection of a rightward tilt among people without union protection as it is a reflection of a leftward stance among those with it.

Following Hout, Brooks, and Manza (1995) and Hout, Manza, and Brooks (1999), we distinguish between “traditional” and “total” class voting and use statistical

models appropriate to each. Traditional class voting hinges on the correspondence between the working class and parties of the left and the middle classes and parties of the center or right. This correspondence can be embedded in statistical models of class voting that identify a “natural” party for each class (Weakliem 1995). A slightly weaker version of the traditional approach arrays classes and parties as ordered points on latent continua and examines the strength of association between the two latent variables (Weakliem and Heath 1999). However the researcher approaches the data, the traditional model is really only appropriate to understanding the historically significant but specific identification of classes and parties.

Total class voting, on the other hand, is not tied to any specific correspondence of classes and parties. That trend is useful and informative when traditional class voting alliances may not be the strongest or most evident. For example, the recent emergence of affinities between Democrats and teachers may be as strong and significant as the former links between Democrats and blue-collar workers. Throw in trial lawyers, college professors, nurses, and half of the doctors, and the Democrats’ courting of professionals starts to yield more votes than traditional appeals to blue-collar workers could. A traditional approach would miss this kind of class voting; a total approach can capture it. As long as traditional class voting is but one of several patterns of association between classes and parties, the total approach is preferable for its flexibility. In previous work, the total approach allowed us to see the class *realignment* in U.S. presidential politics, whereas the traditional approach miscast the same trends as *dealignment* (see Hout, Manza, and Brooks 1999).

Another advantage of the total class voting approach is that it incorporates the class differences in turnout as well as class differences in votes. Middle-class people are more likely to vote than working- or lower-class Americans (Verba, Brady, and Schlossman 1996). The class skew in participation is likely to affect the party system and public policy (Piven and Cloward 1986; Rosenthal 2004). Setting it aside, as the traditional class voting approach does, misses an important element of class politics.

Our distinction between traditional and total class voting is related to Mair's (1999) distinction between "class politics" and "class voting." According to Mair, class politics signifies the kind of institutionalized class alliances that we call traditional. Class voting, for Mair, signifies a tendency for classes to ally themselves with parties in a more ad hoc endorsement for a specific election. The deal, far from institutionalized in party structure, must be renegotiated each election cycle. Total class voting, as we have defined it, only requires class voting, not class politics.

The concept of traditional class voting is entrenched in the literature. It is unavoidable when class is conceived of or reduced to a dichotomy. Admitting to more than one class distinction (ergo more than two classes) opens the prospect of recombination. Contemporary theory elaborates several class distinctions, and history is full of examples of shifting class alliances. Thus the total class approach has the advantages of being both truer to theory and truer to history than the traditional class-voting approach is. Previous research (Hout, Brooks, and Manza [1995] and Hout, Manza, and Brooks [1999]) amply demonstrated the superiority of the total class voting model in accounting for trends in voting patterns from 1948 to 1992.

Data and Methods

We use data from the American National Election Surveys (ANES), a time series that stretches back to the 1952 presidential election (with a question in 1952 about the 1948 election). The ANES is a stratified random sample of the English-speaking adult population with sample sizes varying from approximately 1,200 to 2,500 respondents per election.

The dependent variable for our analysis is self-reported vote for president recoded in four categories, (1) the Democratic candidate, (2) the Republican candidate, (3) some other candidate, and (4) did not vote. Self-reports exaggerate turnout but reproduce the partisan split very well (e.g., Abramson, Aldrich, and Rhode 1994).

We include election, class, gender, age, region, education, and racial ancestry as independent variables. Age and education are coded in years; the other variables are coded in standard, obvious ways using dummy variables. Our class scheme involves six substantive classes (as in Hout, Brooks, and Manza 1995) plus separate categories for housewives and retired persons. The six substantive classes are (1) professionals, (2) managers, (3) routine white-collar workers (mostly clerical, sales, and white-collar service workers), (4) self-employed (other than professional), (5) skilled blue-collar workers, and (6) less-skilled blue-collar workers (including blue-collar service workers).

We test for changes across elections in the association between vote and the independent variables by generating interaction effects between the election and each of the independent variables. For statistical efficiency, we exclude interaction effects that fail to reach the conventional significance level (.05) from further calculations. For in-

teraction effects involving class, Hout, Brooks, and Manza (1995) also investigated two intermediate forms, again to improve the statistical efficiency of tests. The first idea is the uniform differences model (see Hout, Brooks, and Manza 1995 for details); the second is a simple linear change. Both of these dramatically reduce the degrees of freedom used to detect change, and the second proved to be the preferred way of modeling class realignment. We fit the following, unrestricted model:

$$\begin{aligned}
 y_{ij} &= \ln \left(\frac{p_{ij}}{p_{i1}} \right) \\
 &= \beta_0 + \sum_{k=1}^{14} \beta_k T_{ki} + \sum_{k=15}^{20} \beta_k X_{(k-14)i} + \sum_{k=21}^{P+20} \beta_k Z_{(k-20)i} \\
 &\quad + \sum_{k=1}^6 \sum_{k'=1}^{14} \gamma_{kk'} X_{ki} T_{k'i} + \sum_{k=1}^6 \sum_{k'=1}^{14} \delta_{kk'} Z_{ki} T_{k'i}
 \end{aligned}$$

for $i = 1, \dots, N$ indexes persons; $j = 1, \dots, 4$ indexes outcomes (1 = Republican, 2 = Democrat, 3 = other, 4 = did not vote); T_1, \dots, T_{14} are dummy variables for elections, $X_1 \dots X_6$ are dummy variables for classes, $Z_1 \dots Z_P$ are dummy variables for other independent variables, $\beta_0 \dots \beta_{P+21}$, $\gamma_1 \dots \gamma_6$, and $\delta_{1,1} \dots \delta_{14,P}$ are parameters to be estimated. For identification, we constrain $\sum_{k=1}^{14} \beta_k = \sum_{k=15}^{20} \beta_k = \sum_{k=1}^6 \sum_{k'=1}^{14} \gamma_{kk'} = 0$. For our graph below, we obtained the points by summing the $\beta_k + \gamma_{kk'}$ for all possible combinations of $k = 1, \dots, 6$ and $k' = 1, \dots, 14$; to that we added a linear trend line (fit by unweighted OLS).

The Realignment of Class Voting

The traditional pattern of class voting held in U.S. presidential elections from 1948 to 1960. With the exception of the self-employed, middle-class voters supported

Republican candidates while working-class voters supported the Democrats. The self-employed split their votes between the two major parties. After 1964 professionals shifted rapidly toward the Democrats; routine white-collar workers followed at a slower pace. At about the same time, the self-employed and skilled blue-collar workers shifted toward the Republicans. For the self-employed this trend amounted to a shift from ambivalence to strong Republican support. For the skilled blue-collar workers, it was a shift from being part of the Democrats' base to ambivalence about the two parties by 1988. Less-skilled blue-collar workers moved about as much in the Republican direction as routine white-collar workers moved in the Democratic direction.

We summarize these trends in Figure 60.1. The dots show the year-by-year votes in detail; the lines show the expected percentages under the linear change model in the equation above. Statistical tests indicate that the lines fit the data well at conventional significance levels.

The most significant feature of these trends for political sociology is the realignment of the professions since the 1960s. This trend was first identified by Hout, Brooks, and Manza (1995) using data from 1948 to 1992. Brooks and Manza (1997) and Brooks (2000) show convincing evidence that professionals' rising commitments to civil rights for blacks (and maybe for other groups) prompted their shift from right to left. Professionals, when picking candidates, began to give greater weight to issues of equal opportunity than they had in the past, even bypassing their personal economic interests to do so. In extending the analysis onward by three more elections, we find that the trend that was already

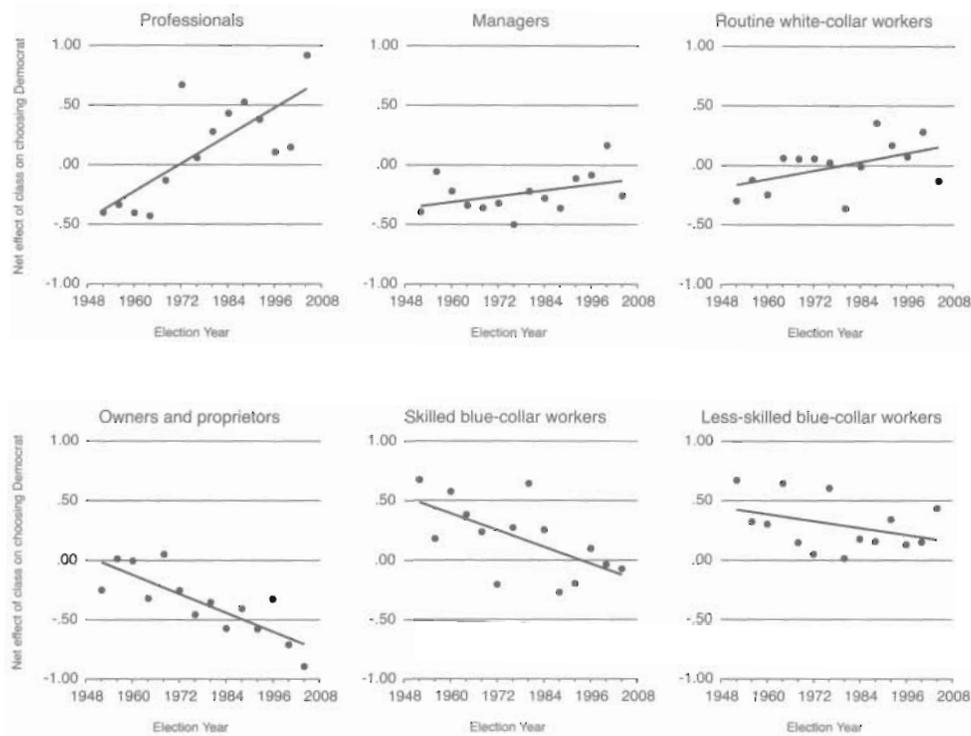


Figure 60.1 Net Effect of Class on Partisan Choice by Election, Class, and Model: Experienced Civilian Labor Force, 1948–2004

Note: Points and lines represent multinomial logistic regression coefficients, normed to sum to zero within an election year. The models control for the effects of gender, race, region, age, education, and statistically significant changes in those effects.

significant by 1992 continued into the 1996, 2000, and 2004 elections. Comparing the dots and the lines in Figure 60.1, we see that the Democrats got less support from professionals in 1996 and 2000 but recouped it in 2004.

In one sense the triumph of civil rights movements (along with those for civil liberties and the environment) over personal material interests is a point in favor of post-materialist accounts of electoral change. But the postmaterialists assert that class no longer correlates with vote. The correlation is evident here; it is just nontraditional (although it is by now forty years old). Here

we see one class moved from one party to another in response to these rising concerns and did so as a class. Furthermore, as we move through the rest of the class structure, we will see much more evidence of “traditional,” that is, self-interested, class voting.

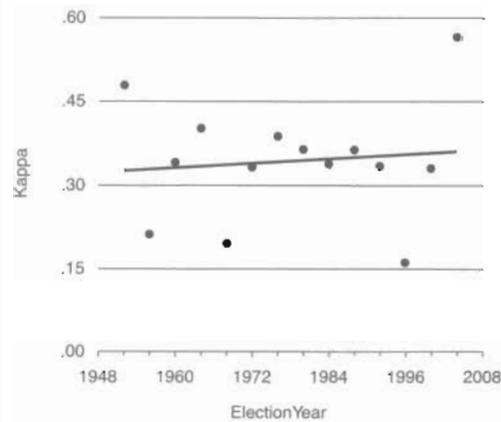
Managers voted in recent elections more or less as they did in the 1960s. They changed their attitudes toward civil rights through the 1970s, but their changing attitudes failed to influence their votes. Their personal interests (and perhaps the interests of the firms they managed) in cutting taxes and deregulating the economy proved to be more crucial to how

they voted. Over time, the voting pattern of the self-employed became more and more conservative, eventually surpassing even managers' preference for Republicans. The self-employed were, in the 1950s, evenly divided between Democrats and Republicans. They moved strongly toward the Republicans and were their staunchest supporters by 1976 or perhaps 1980. We suspect that some of the change reflects issues and some reflects a shift from farming to small business within the ranks of the self-employed.

Skilled blue-collar workers moved from strong Democratic support to an even split between Republicans and Democrats (or perhaps a slight preference for Republicans, although their partisan split does not pass the statistical test for being significantly different from even). The evidence through 1992 was unclear on this point. Hout, Brooks, and Manza (1995) wrote of "volatility." The continued drift of the upper blue-collar voters in the last three elections makes it clear that they are moving toward the Republicans. Disaffection with the welfare state, a preference for a tougher approach to criminal justice, and support for the military are possible explanations for this shift.

Change among less-skilled blue-collar workers is more subtle but also, overall, favors Republican candidates. It is offset by a modest shift toward Democrats among routine white-collar workers.

All of these changes might suggest that total class voting has changed significantly. That is not the case, though. The summary measure of total class voting, *kappa*, introduced by Hout, Brooks, and Manza (1995), shows no net change from 1948 to 2004. Figure 60.2 shows that there are some up and down cycles in its value over a span of a few



Total Effect of Class on Partisan Choice by Election:

Figure 60.2 Total Effect of Class on Partisan Choice by Election: Experienced Civilian Labor Force, 1948–2004

elections, but the experience of the 1996–2004 elections added here does not alter the conclusion Hout, Brooks, and Manza (1995) reached regarding 1952–1992—the long-term trend line is flat.

Conclusions

U.S. class coalitions realigned after the civil rights movement in the 1960s. Voters changed what they expect from presidential politics and parties changed what they promise. The Republican platform of lower taxes and deregulation deepened the loyalty of managers and won over the self-employed workers who used to back the Democrats. Blue-collar workers also prefer low taxes. Republicans courted and won their votes in most elections since 1972. But Democrats countered with strong plays for professionals' interests in many kinds of social spending and their commitment to civil rights. "New Democrats"—most notably

Clinton—appealed directly to middle-class voters and shored up support among professionals by balancing the budget in the 1990s. Overall, the Republicans gained and the Democrats lost among employed people. But the Democrats' defense of Social Security and Medicare allowed them to gain support among retirees and pensioners—people out of the labor force and, thus, out of this analysis. These changes helped balance the political arithmetic.

We do not have enough evidence to know if the class-voting realignment in U.S. politics is a general trend that extends to other Western democracies or another instance of "American exceptionalism." We note that English and German parties have started to adopt some American-style appeals. In Britain, "New Labour's" platform is known as "the third way;" Schröder moved the German Social Democrats in that direction, too. The statistical evidence makes us cautious. In Blair's first win, he drew proportionally higher support in each class, leading to no change in the association between class and vote in Britain (Goldthorpe 1999).

In this chapter we have shown that American social classes realigned: professionals replaced skilled blue-collar workers as the class base of the Democratic Party, whereas shopkeepers and proprietors joined managers as the class base of the Republican Party. This historical realignment coupled with no net change in total class voting shows how class can be important for elections without lining up in the traditional way.

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