

The Working-Class Win-O-Meter

Dialing Up to
Victory

The Center for Working-Class Politics

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The Center for Working-Class Politics is a research institution dedicated to studying the relationship between working-class voters and progressive politics. Its projects include regular surveys of working-class voters, statistical analyses of elections and polling data, and the construction of a comprehensive database of progressive candidate demographics, strategy, and messaging.

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Executive Summary

Democrats are losing the working class, and with it their best path to power. Working-class voters are over 60% of the national electorate and the decisive bloc in the states and districts that decide who controls Washington. Winning more working-class voters back is the central strategic problem facing the Democratic coalition.

In this report we develop a data-based roadmap to help increase Democrats' support among working-class voters, based on one of the largest survey experiments of its kind, with over 40,000 respondents. Each respondent worked through a series of head-to-head matchups between fully described Democratic and Republican candidates and told us which one they would vote for (or neither). Because each candidate's demographics, background, rhetoric, and policy positions were varied at random, comparing the candidates voters choose allows us to pinpoint which features shift working-class votes.

The result is what we call the Win-O-Meter: an electoral victory machine with six dials. Turning its dials — leading with working-class economics, adopting cultural and climate positions that resonate with the working class, explicitly prioritizing working-class people, speaking to working-class values, striking a populist tone, and running a non-elite for office — raises a Democratic candidate's working-class vote by about 11 points, and at no significant cost to the college-educated, higher-income vote.¹ That gain is measured against a Kamala Harris 2024-style Democrat.

A note on the numbers that follow: Because every Democrat in our experiment was matched against a Republican, just as on a real ballot, partisanship, the single most powerful force in any election, is built into the results. The point gains we report are therefore more realistic effect sizes than we typically observe in studies of this kind, since studies that ignore partisanship can overstate support and exaggerate differences that would shrink in a partisan setting. Individually, each effect may look small, but a dial worth 2 or 3 points represents a meaningful shift in a close race, and turning multiple dials simultaneously on the Win-O-Meter has the potential to generate substantial gains for candidates. Testing the effect of candidates' partisanship is a key reason we needed such a large sample: once partisanship is accounted for, the remaining effects are small enough that detecting them requires an unusually large respondent pool.

1 This total is the sum of the six dials' individual effects, each estimated separately.

The Win-O-Meter formula has six elements:

1. Lead with working-class economics (+2.8 points).

Making working-class economic policies a campaign’s top priority substantially increases Democratic candidates’ support among working-class respondents, compared to leading with a culture, climate, or democracy issue that isn’t resonant with the working class (as the Harris campaign did when it centered abortion rights and the defense of democracy). The gain is largest among key voters that Democrats need to win in difficult districts.

Leading with economics raises Democrats’ share among key blocs

TABLE 1

Working-class voter bloc	Points
Independents	+4.0
Whites	+3.6
2024 Trump voters	+3.3
Republicans	+3.0

The effect is smaller, and not always significant, among segments of the Democratic base. But it is especially valuable for a candidate who holds *progressive positions on culture and climate*: leading with economics partly offsets the electoral cost of those stances, a pattern we call the Mamdani effect. What appeals most to voters is defending existing popular programs, affordability, and bold action on skills-building and unions.

The economic policies that pop the most

TABLE 2

Policy	Points
Make community college tuition-free	+3.1
Remove medical debt from credit reports	+2.7
Guarantee the right to organize a union (penalize employer interference)	+2.2
Cap insulin and essential drug costs at \$35	+2.1
Maintain food-assistance access	+1.8
Create skilled-trades apprenticeships via employer tax incentives	+1.7
Maintain existing aid for low- and moderate-income students	+1.7
Maintain unemployment benefits tied to a job-training requirement	+1.7
Fund 500,000 new skilled-trades apprenticeships each year	+1.6
Protect Social Security from any cuts	+1.3

Values represent the increase in working-class Democratic support when a candidate runs on that policy, relative to the average economic policy tested. Read the table as a ranking of the strongest-testing policies and, especially, of the preferred general policy areas — affordability, defending existing popular programs, and worker power — rather than as a decisive margin for any one issue.

On average a candidate can go big on economic messaging at essentially *no electoral cost*, and some of the bolder economic policies we tested may actually increase support among key blocs: a \$17 minimum wage gains 3.3 points among lower-income, working-class voters and 4.3 points among 2024 Harris voters; a stronger right to organize a union gains 6.4 points among working-class Latino voters and 3.6 points among younger workers; and standing up to offshoring and mass layoffs gains 2.9 points among working-class whites. Candidates only lose support for holding bold economic policies when those policies take the form of taxes or government transfers that are seen as unearned — a flat monthly cash

payment to all adults regardless of employment was among the lowest-scoring economic policies we tested. It is the form of the economic policies, rather than the scale of their ambition, that determines how they are received by working-class voters.

2. Adopt culture and climate policies resonant with the working class (+2.9 points).

By a *resonant* position, we mean that the candidate’s stance on a cultural or climate issue reflects core working-class values — the dignity of work, fairness, family, community, and physical safety — not how far left or right the position is. For example, a path to citizenship framed around immigrants who “worked and paid taxes” is resonant; “abolish ICE” is not, though both are progressive.

In our prior Williams–Abbott *Coalition Crisis* report, we identified culture and climate policies that resonate with working-class values, such as the dignity of hard work, “family comes first,” loyalty to community and country, and physical security.² In this report we show that developing the cultural competence to connect with working-class values affects Democrats’ working-class support by around the same factor as prioritizing economics does. Democratic candidates are viewed more favorably by working-class respondents when they take culturally resonant positions, not necessarily when they adopt more moderate positions on those issues. Culturally resonant progressive positions receive 47.6% working-class support, which is statistically indistinguishable from the 48.1% support for moderate positions. The roughly 2.5-point penalty that progressive positions face overall therefore comes almost entirely from *nonresonant* progressive positions (45.1%), not from progressivism as such.

Contrary to conventional wisdom, a stance can be centrist and still fall flat, or progressive and still land. The moderate advantage is really a penalty for nonresonant progressive framing, not a reward for centrism. Turning up this dial is especially helpful among working-class Republicans, but it also raises support among other key groups.

Culture resonant with the working class raises the Democrats’ share among key blocs

TABLE 3

Working-class voter bloc	Points
Whites	+3.9
Independents	+3.6
Republicans	+3.4
2024 Trump voters	+2.9

And there is no cost to turning up this dial for the base (see section 5).

3. Explicitly prioritize working-class people (+1.9 points)

Also important is whom the candidate says they will listen to and prioritize. A candidate who says they will listen more to working-class people beats one who centers the middle class, business leaders, policy experts, or specific demographic groups. (Note this is different from the candidate’s class background, which is a separate dial below.) Explicitly prioritizing working-class people provides a 1.9-point advantage over the average alternative — though an appeal to *all* Americans, “people from all walks of life,” does about as well (the two run within half a point of each other — not a significant difference). This is particularly effective in increasing a candidate’s appeal among 2024 nonvoters, but it also raises support among other key groups.

2 Joan C. Williams and Jared Abbott, *The Left’s Coalition Crisis: Understanding the Massive Divide Between Working Class and College Educated Voters, and How to Bridge It* (EAC Research for Impact, 2026).

Explicitly prioritizing working-class people raises Democrats’ share among key blocs

TABLE 4

Working-class voter bloc	Points
2024 nonvoters	+4.0
Union households	+2.9
Independents	+2.8
Rural and small-town America	+2.0

4. Combine working-class policies with an explicit statement of working-class values (+1.6 points).

An explicit working-class values message adds 0.7 points on its own.³ More important, it amplifies the power of social policies resonant with the working class: pairing the two adds 1.6 points beyond their separate effects. That added boost is strongest among 2024 Trump voters, where a resonant social policy and a working-class values message together lift support by about 4.9 points, compared to a candidate who does neither (the two messages paired together perform roughly 1.9 points better than they do individually). For example, a candidate might *say* “People who play by the rules shouldn’t be the ones falling behind” and *stand* for “a path to citizenship for immigrants who have held jobs, paid taxes, and stayed out of trouble”; or *say* “We should take care of our own communities and country first” and *stand* for “tax incentives for companies that create jobs building solar panels, wind turbines, and batteries, and help workers whose jobs are lost find new ones”; in both cases, pairing the values statement with the policy position amplifies what each does alone.

Pairing values with resonant policy raises Democrats’ share among key blocs

TABLE 5

Working-class voter bloc	Points
2024 Trump voters	+4.9
Republicans	+4.4
2024 Harris voters	+1.7
Democrats	+1.3

Combined effect of running a working-class-resonant social position *and* a working-class values message, versus neither.

5. Lean into populist rhetoric, and pick the right enemy (+1.7 points).

Populism of every kind beats establishment, technocratic rhetoric. Placing themselves squarely on the side of the people or against elites, Democrats increase their working-class support by an average of 1.7 points. Calling out political elites, over and above a plain “for the people” message, modestly increases Democrats’ support across the electorate as a whole (by about 0.6 points). Among working-class respondents, however, that edge was too small to reach significance. Naming a political enemy adds the most support among middle- and upper-class moderates (+3.7 points) and independents (+2.5) — swing groups that the party needs to win — but it also delivers a significant +1.8 points among 2024 Trump voters and about as much among conservative working-

3 In the prior Williams–Abbott *Coalition Crisis* survey, we developed a working-class values scale that identifies the values predicting working-class support across a range of policies; the values messages tested here draw on that scale.

class voters. For most other groups, naming a political enemy adds little more support than a general “for the people” populist appeal.

By contrast, naming *corporate* elites appears to modestly increase support among the Democratic base (by about 1.2 points), but the effect is only marginally significant compared to a plain “for the people” message in the groups we analyzed, including the base itself ($p = .07$).

Centering the defense of democracy does not move the working-class vote; it neither clearly helps nor hurts. Notably, the defense of democracy message does not help Democratic candidates win independents either (see section 7).

6. Run candidates with non-elite class backgrounds (+1.0 points).

A non-elite occupational history — in manual, service, clerical, or pink-collar jobs or small-business ownership, rather than a career as a corporate executive, lawyer, or financier — provides a 1-point boost, and it is especially valuable for reaching working-class men of color.

Running a non-elite candidate raises the Democrats’ share among key blocs

TABLE 6

Working-class voter bloc	Points
Non-white	+1.6
Big city and suburban voters	+1.6
Men	+1.4
Under 45	+1.4
2024 Trump voters	+1.2
Republicans	+1.2
Union households	+1.2

We also tested whether having a non-elite background amplifies the effects of other dials — whether working-class economics or populist rhetoric, for example, land better when they come from a working-class messenger — but found little evidence that it does; the candidate’s background and the message on which they run appear to work independently (see section 9).

Is it better to say nothing about cultural issues?

Candidates should tailor their engagement of cultural issues to suit district characteristics. A candidate who says nothing at all on culture receives 46.2% of the working-class vote. By contrast,

- candidates who run on working-class-resonant or moderate positions poll ahead of candidates who stay silent (+1.5 points for resonant and +1.7 points for moderate, both marginally significant);
- candidates who run on progressive or nonresonant positions poll behind candidates who stay silent (−0.9 points for progressive and −1.3 points for nonresonant, neither statistically significant).

But we saw large divides between segments of the electorate:

- among the groups Democrats need to persuade to be competitive in red and purple districts, a progressive or nonresonant position is significantly *worse* than silence (−3.3 points among 2024 Trump voters and −2.6 among working-class whites);

→ among the Democratic base, by contrast, both nonresonant and progressive positions edge out staying silent, and this holds for both working-class and middle- and upper-class segments of the base, though the difference is only marginally significant: +2.4 points among working-class Democrats (progressive +2.5 and nonresonant +2.4, both marginally significant) and +1.2 to +2.3 points among middle- and upper-class Democrats (progressive +2.3, marginally significant; nonresonant +1.2, not significant). Both segments of the base reward taking a position over silence, regardless of the messaging’s resonance.

A district-level simulator in section 5 traces how this plays out as a district’s demographic composition shifts.

Does appealing to the working class cost votes among affluent Democrats?

There is virtually no penalty among affluent Democratic voters. None of the Win-O-Meter dials provokes a significant backlash among higher-income, college-educated voters in the Democratic base. With the exception of running working-class candidates (though here the result is not statistically significant), every part of the formula either helps with this group or makes no difference; the formula as a whole raises the group’s support for Democratic candidates as well, by about 7.8 points.

The same six dials raise support among affluent, college-educated voters, too

TABLE 7

Dial	Points
Lead with economics	+2.3
Working-class culture	+3.5
Working-class appeal	+1.3
Working-class values	+0.8
Populist tone	+0.3
Working-class candidate	-0.3
Total	+7.8

Dial contributions are rounded to one decimal place.

The two key takeaways:

1. [Turning all the dials of the Win-O-Meter adds a combined 10.9 points among working-class voters](#), and even more among the vital groups that Democrats need to win in tough districts. For scale, that is close to the roughly 13-point margin by which Senator Jon Tester outran Kamala Harris in heavily working-class Montana in 2024.

Where the formula moves votes the most

TABLE 8

Dial	Points
2024 nonvoters	+13.2
Independents	+13.7
Whites	+12.4
2024 Trump voters	+10.6

2. [The Win-O-Meter can be the difference between winning and losing in swing districts](#). Translated to a real district, candidates who employ the Win-O-Meter can improve their performance in swing districts by 2 to 3 points, a margin that regularly decides close elections:
 - in a 45% working-class district, a Harris 2024–style Democrat loses with 48.5% of the vote, while the Win-O-Meter Democrat wins with 50.5%;
 - in a 60% working-class district, the Harris-style Democrat loses with 48% of the vote, while the Win-O-Meter Democrat wins with 50.9% — an even wider margin.

The Harris-style Democrat does worse as a district grows more working-class, while the Win-O-Meter Democrat does better.

Introduction

The Democratic Party is losing the working class. Over the past decade, and sharply in 2024, Democrats have shed working-class voters of *every* race, even as they have consolidated their support among college-educated professionals. Once the party of the working class, Democrats increasingly speak the language and reflect the priorities of the credentialed upper-middle class.

This is an existential problem for the party. Voters without a four-year degree were roughly three-fifths of the 2024 electorate and an even larger share in the Rust Belt and Sun Belt states and House districts that decide control of Washington. The Electoral College, the Senate, and the location of the most competitive House and Senate districts all give extra weight to places with large working-class electorates. There can be no durable progressive majority, and no reliable defense of democracy, without winning back more of these voters.

Our diagnosis is not that the Left's goals are wrong but that it's lacking in *class competence*. As we argue in our recent report, *The Left's Coalition Crisis: Understanding the Massive Divide Between the Working Class and College Educated Voters, and How to Bridge It*, upper-middle-class language and priorities that make perfect sense among liberal college graduates often lack the cultural resonance to win working-class votes.⁴ Working-class voters' principal concerns are paychecks, prices, and personal security. And their values tend to run in the opposite direction from those of the college-educated left: loyalty to community and country over globalism, family and self-discipline over self-actualization, tradition over sophistication, physical safety, and a distrust of credentialed experts. These are values the Right has learned to channel effectively; the Left, less so.

Our *Coalition Crisis* study shows that choosing progressive policies that connect with the concerns of working-class voters and framing policies in terms that resonate with them can raise working-class support by 20 points or more on issue after issue. That report provides key lessons about which policies a candidate should pick and how those policies should be explained.

But whereas the *Coalition Crisis* study tested messages in isolation, this study focuses instead on the combined policies, framings, and candidates that can help Democratic candidates win working-class votes. In a large candidate-choice experiment, we put working-class people in a virtual voting booth and had them choose between Democratic and Republican contenders whose demographics, class backgrounds, campaign rhetorics, issue priorities, and stances on economic and cultural policies were varied at random. Because we assigned all characteristics to candidates randomly in the survey, any resulting difference in voter preference for a given characteristic is the causal effect of that characteristic; we can disaggregate the effect of each factor on voters' support for a given candidate.

That lets us ask questions that build on the *Coalition Crisis* poll: if class-competent policy and framing can change voters' attitudes around a single issue in isolation, can they also change voters' support for political candidates whose backgrounds, tones, values, policy priorities, and the groups they say they stand for send signals of their own? And what does a Harris 2024-style Democrat who does *not* use strategies resonant with the working class cost the party among the key voting blocs it needs to win?

In essence, we find what political scientists have long documented. Policies matter, but people vote to a substantial extent based on their *identities*. This is true of elites as much as of non-elites. Voters reward candidates who signal they are for, and will be on the side of, people like them. Indeed, we find that respondents choose the candidate they feel better understands "the problems facing people like [them]" in about 93% of the matchups we test, and the pattern holds across classes.⁵ This doesn't mean

4 Joan C. Williams and Jared Abbott, *The Left's Coalition Crisis*.

5 This echoes a long line of political-science work on the limits of pure policy voting; see, e.g., Christopher H. Achen and Larry M. Bartels, *Democracy for Realists: Why Elections Do Not Produce Responsive*

policies don't matter, but that they may function (at least in part) as signals of whether a candidate connects with people like them. The trouble for Democrats is that they too often embrace policies and language aimed at the party's college-educated base.

Our one-line prescription is to send consistent signals of inclusion of and identification with the working class, using as many components as possible from the six-point formula below.

We summarize our key findings about how to improve Democrats' chances with working-class voters in a single dashboard we call the Win-O-Meter, which consists of six dials a candidate can turn: the economic agenda they foreground, the culture and climate policies they adopt, whom they center in their messaging, the values they invoke, the populist tone they strike or not, and their class background. A candidate who turns all these dials toward the working class beats a Harris 2024-style Democrat by about 10.9 points⁶ among working-class voters, enough to flip a close seat, and at no significant cost to college-educated, higher-income votes.

The value of separating working-class appeals into separate dials is that campaigns and commentators typically treat them as a single, undifferentiated appeal: *Is he working-class?* — as though class appeal were a trait that a candidate simply possessed or lacked. In fact, a working-class background is only one of several factors that help determine whether a candidate connects with working-class voters. Moreover, the six dials can be set independently: a candidate can lead with economics without naming an elite villain, speak to working-class values while running a moderate cultural stance, come from a blue-collar job yet center the middle class in messaging. Because our experiment varies each of these cues separately and at random, we can measure the separate impact of each, so campaigns can understand which working-class appeals are best suited to their districts, rather than staking everything on a single gut impression of whether a candidate “seems” working-class.

This report first examines each of the six dials in order of their contribution to the working-class vote. It then turns to examine when adopting progressive positions on social issues costs working-class votes and when it does not, and whether the candidate's race and gender matter. A wide range of additional analyses are provided in the online appendix.

Government (Princeton University Press, 2016). Policies still matter, but largely as one signal in the broader question of whether a candidate connects with voters.

⁶ The +10.9 is the *combined* gain from turning all six dials toward the working class on one candidate, measured against the Harris-style profile. It is the sum of the six dials' marginal effects, each estimated on its own, the same *marginal* means reported throughout the report. Read it as an *additive projection*: our experiment estimates each dial cleanly, but because the dials can interact, turning all six at once could in principle yield somewhat less (or more) than this sum, in which case the district results below would shift accordingly.

SECTION 1

What We Did

This report draws on a large survey experiment of more than 40,000 US adults, fielded between April and June of 2026. Respondents were recruited through CINT's online panel, and the sample was weighted to match the national population on age, gender, ethnicity, education, region, and partisanship.⁷ Each respondent was presented with a series of head-to-head matchups between a Democratic and a Republican candidate and indicated whether they would vote for the Democrat, the Republican, or neither. The candidates were not real people; each one's features were randomly assembled from a menu.⁸ This way we can isolate the causal effect of each feature, across hundreds of thousands of matchups, on Democrats' vote share. We summarize each effect as the share of voters who would pick a candidate with that characteristic, relative to the other possible options for a given characteristic (e.g., male relative to female). When we report the effect of each feature, it is the difference between the share choosing the Democrat when the candidate takes one position or characteristic and the share when the candidate takes the alternative position or characteristic, averaged over everything else that was randomized. This is the value behind every percentage-point difference given in the report; in each section we specify which options are being compared in the analysis.⁹

What we varied

Each candidate, both the Democrats and the Republicans, was built from a set of independently randomized features, mapping onto the six dials of the Win-O-Meter. A few examples of each follow; the complete list of levels is in the online appendix.¹⁰

- Background/occupation: from working-class jobs (factory worker, mechanic, server), to pink-collar and small-business backgrounds, to elite professional (lawyer, executive, investment banker)
- Populist messaging: populist (siding with ordinary people against political or economic elites) vs. establishment (e.g., leaning on expertise and credentials) messaging.
- Issue priority: lead with an economic issue (wages, jobs, or the cost of living) or a social one (immigration, abortion, or crime)
- Economic policy: specific economic positions, varied in terms of resonance with the working class, delivered in more and less moderate versions, drawn from some seventeen issue areas (wages, unions, jobs, taxes, health costs)
- Social/cultural position: stances on a range of cultural and climate issues, from

7 Full technical details of the survey are provided in the online appendix.

8 It is important to keep in mind that a survey experiment like this (known technically as a candidate-choice conjoint experiment) is built to isolate the causal effect of each candidate feature, but it obviously differs from a real-world electoral setting in critical ways: in addition to candidates' personal appearance, charisma, and style, our experiment cannot account for the money, media, and local context that shape a real race, and it asks respondents to weigh *hypothetical* candidates rather than ones they will actually vote for. Stated choices can diverge from how people behave at the ballot box. Our goal is to identify the patterns that hold across working-class voters as a whole, not to provide a blueprint for any individual campaign.

9 To keep the text readable, we do not report individual *p*-values: every estimate we cite is statistically significant at the .05 level or better unless we explicitly flag it as "not significant" (*n.s.*, $p \geq .10$) or "marginally significant" ($.05 < p < .10$). The online appendix tests every claim in the executive summary under a correction for multiple comparisons, where our key findings survive even the strictest tests.

10 Every occupation, rhetoric statement, issue, policy position, values message, and group appeal we tested is catalogued in the online appendix; the items below are illustrative.

progressive to moderate, across six issue areas: immigration, policing, guns, abortion, climate, and transgender policy; we code each by whether it fits working-class values rather than elite ones.

- Values message: the language and moral worldviews the candidate invokes: a working-class values appeal (“We should take care of our own communities and country first” or “People who play by the rules shouldn’t be the ones falling behind”) vs. a middle- or upper-class one (“Life is about finding your own path and personal fulfillment” or “Our institutions need to be updated to keep up with social change”)
- Group appeal: the group the candidate says politicians should listen to more: working-class people, the middle and upper class, a particular demographic group, or everyone.

Respondents saw each pair of candidates (one Democrat and one Republican) side by side.

How we define class

We use a definition of social class similar to the Williams–Abbott *Coalition Crisis* report’s, the study this report builds on, broadened slightly to make fuller use of the data we collected. The working class is defined as those with no four-year college degree and a household income in roughly the middle 60% of the national distribution (about \$30,000 to \$150,000).¹¹ The *Coalition Crisis* poll contrasts this group with the Democratic-leaning, college-educated, top-income professionals who anchor the modern center-left; our middle- and upper-class comparison group is a slightly broader version of that same affluent professional class, defined as those with a four-year college degree and a household income of at least \$80,000. We analyze more than 14,500 working-class and 8,000 middle- or upper-class respondents, weighted to US Census, ACS, and Gallup benchmarks, including party affiliation.

What we showed respondents

Our survey puts each respondent in a virtual voting booth:

- We show a Democratic and a Republican candidate side by side, every feature randomly assigned, and ask, *If these two were on your ballot, what would you do?*
- They can vote for the Democrat, the Republican, someone else, or not at all, exactly the options a real voter has. This is our primary measure because it captures turnout and defection, not just respondents’ preference if forced to choose.
- We also ask a stricter *forced* choice (pick A or B, no opting out) question. The results were substantively similar and are reported in the online appendix.¹²

11 We show in the online appendix that the results are not sensitive to exactly where these income cutoffs are drawn: tightening the band to the strict income interquartile range (\$35,000–\$137,500, the literal middle 50%) leaves the headline gain and every dial essentially unchanged.

12 Full design, sampling, and weighting detail are in the online appendix. As a validity check, the working-class recalled 2024 Harris vote in our weighted sample (46%) matches validated-voter estimates of the 2024 electorate (e.g., the Pew Research Center validated-voter study and Catalyst’s 2024 analysis), and our realistic-ballot Democratic share (47%) lines up with the results.

SECTION 2

Summary of the Win-O-Meter: What Works With Working-Class Voters

What makes a candidate come across as genuinely *for* working-class people? Part of it is the social class they come from. A candidate's own working-class background, as a mechanic, a bookkeeper, or behind a register, can be a marker of connection: voters may reward shared experience because it signals that a candidate understands their lives and can be trusted to act in their interests. But most candidates who want working-class votes do not have working-class backgrounds, so they need to signal their commitment to working-class voters through their choices about how to run and what to say. These choices, together with a candidate's personal class background, make up the six dials of the Win-O-Meter.

→ What type of policy priorities they lead with: economic or social

A politics fought mainly over cultural issues tends to suppress the economic divisions that once shaped class voting; a candidate who leads with wages, jobs, and the cost of living may reactivate them.¹³ We vary whether the candidate's top campaign priority is economic or social. The Win-O-Meter gain reported for this dial specifically compares leading with economics to leading with a cultural, climate, or democracy issue that doesn't resonate with the working class, like the Harris 2024 campaign's prioritization of abortion and defending democracy in its messaging.

→ Whether the positions they take on cultural issues reflect working-class values

Working-class voters, on average, hold values more rooted in family, community and country, tradition, physical safety, and a skepticism of credentialed experts, as opposed to the key values of liberal college grads: self-expression-forward, cosmopolitan, and expert-trusting. A candidate can take cultural positions that resonate with those values or take cultural positions framed in terms distant from them. We vary the candidate's stance across immigration, policing, guns, abortion, and more, to see whether resonance with working-class values, not just left-right positioning, shifts the vote.

→ Which group they center in campaign messaging

Explicitly naming a constituency signals that a candidate will prioritize its interests — saying, for instance, that politicians should listen more to working people than to the middle class or particular demographic groups. For voters with little patience for policy detail, “we should listen more to people like you” is a powerful signal of who a candidate will represent. We test this by varying whom the candidate says politicians should listen to more: working-class people, the middle and upper class, a particular demographic group, or everyone.

→ The moral values they invoke

Beyond the specific issue positions it takes, a campaign sends signals through the values it speaks to, which can be either working-class values (e.g., self-discipline and self-reliance), or middle-class, professional values (e.g., personal fulfillment

¹³ William W. Franko and Christopher Witko, “Class, Policy Attitudes, and U.S. Presidential Voting in the Post-Industrial Era: The Importance of Issue Salience,” *Political Research Quarterly* 76, no. 2 (2023).

and self-expression). In the survey, each candidate explicitly invokes either a working-class or a middle-class value apart from their specific policy positions.

→ Whether they use populist language and the enemy they name

Populist language refers to messaging that casts the candidate as standing with ordinary people against elites who rig the system for their own benefit, as opposed to establishment, technocratic language that leans on expert-driven solutions. Populist language is one of the most common strategies candidates use to signal whose side they are on. We use two variables at once: first, whether a candidate sounds populist at all, placing themselves on the side of the people, rather than speaking in that establishment voice; and second, whom they name as the enemy — the political establishment (career politicians, lobbyists, and Washington insiders), economic elites (big corporations, billionaires, and Wall Street), or no one in particular (a purely people-centered appeal).

→ Their class background

A candidate’s class background — working-class, pink-collar, small-business owner, or elite professional — potentially lends credibility to their appeals to the working class. Such appeals land differently coming from someone with a working-class résumé. We vary the candidate’s class background across the full occupational range.

The Win-O-Meter turns each of these six choices into a dial. To get a sense of the combined effect of turning every dial of the Win-O-Meter together, we compare a candidate with every dial turned toward the working class to a candidate with a profile based on the 2024 Democratic nominee.

Crucially, each of the elements of the latter profile, which match the actual 2024 campaign of Kamala Harris, performed poorly in our own experiment, so it is not a straw-man but an empirically grounded example of a real campaign. Harris appealed to the middle class (“I come from the middle class”) rather than the working class, which runs about 2 points behind an explicit working-class appeal. She also foregrounded abortion rights and the threat to democracy over a wages-and-prices message, leading with progressive social issues rather than economic ones. In addition, she embraced a values message that failed to move working-class voters by centering a phrase that didn’t track ordinary everyday speech (“opportunity economy”) and leaning heavily on expertise and credentials rather than naming a corporate or political elite. (This was the single worst-performing rhetoric register we tested.) Finally, her professional résumé as a prosecutor, attorney general, senator, and vice president is the background the working class penalizes most in our study. In short, the Harris-style profile is assembled from the lower-scoring option on every dial. Each contrast represents a choice a real campaign could make differently tomorrow.

The Win-O-Meter Candidate vs. the Harris-Style Candidate

TABLE 9

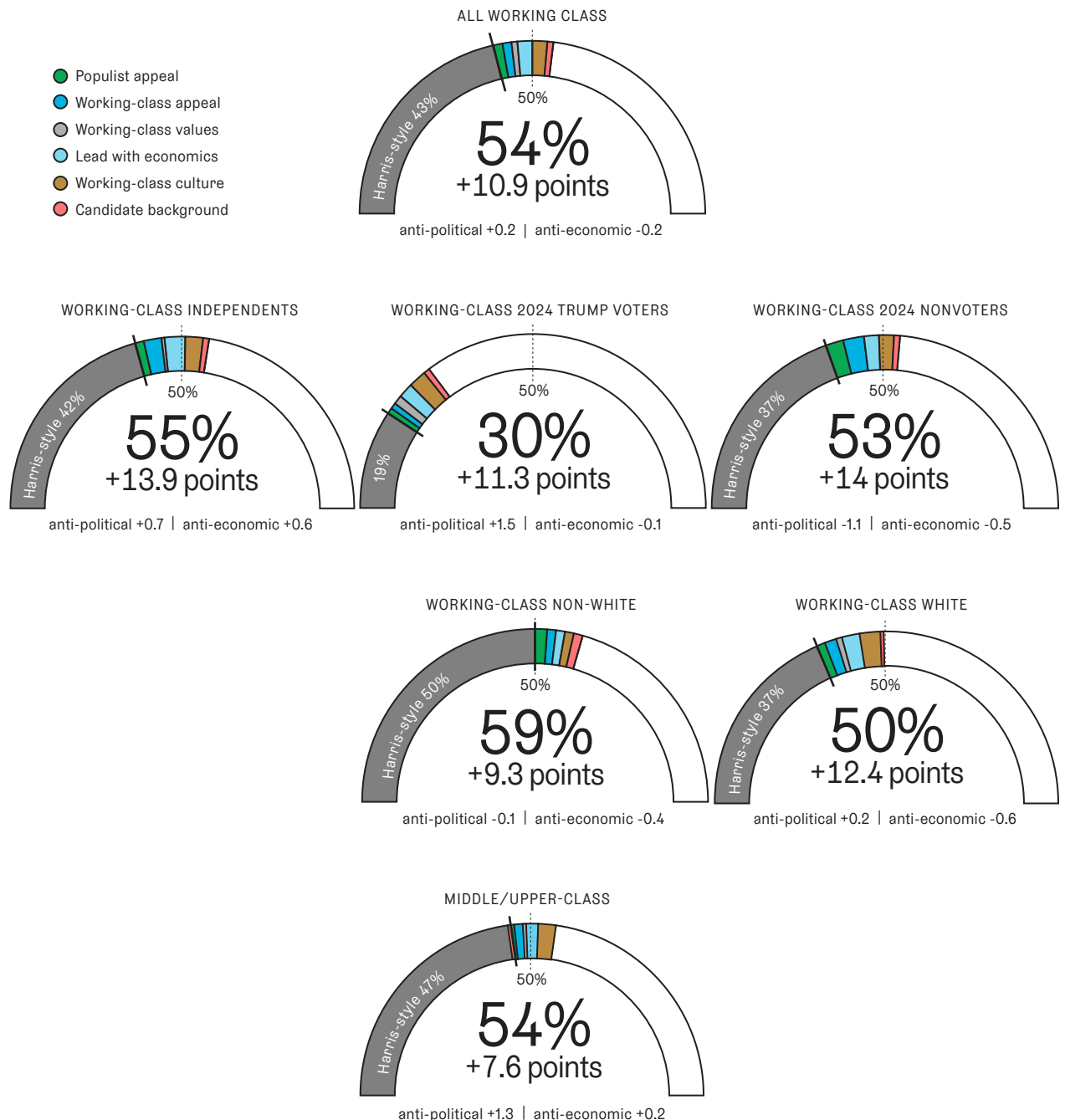
Dial	Win-O-Meter ideal candidate	Harris-style 2024 Democrat
Issue priority	Leads on jobs, wages, and prices	Leads with abortion and the threat to democracy
Cultural stance	Positions resonate with working class	Progressive positions on immigration, policing, and transgender policy do not resonate with working-class values
Who they fight for	Centers working-class people	Centers the middle class
Values	Messages on working-class values	Messages on middle/upper-class values that center personal self-expression, college, and merit
Campaign tone	Populist; sides with ordinary people, not political or economic elites	Technocratic; avoids populist rhetoric in favor of anodyne phrases like “opportunity economy”
Background	Has held a working-class job	Holds a professional job (prosecutor, attorney general, senator, businessperson, vice president)

How to read the gauges

There is one gauge per voter group. On each, the 50% line is the win-lose threshold: a bar that passes it, on balance, leans Democratic. The black tick marks the performance of a Harris 2024-style Democrat. The colored arc represents the gain the Win-O-Meter ideal candidate adds to a candidate's support, and the segments within it represent the specific dials responsible for improving performance. So a group whose black tick sits below 50% but whose arc crosses it is one the Win-O-Meter is responsible for flipping from losing to winning. The extra points available for delivering anti-political elite and anti-economic elite appeals are listed below each gauge.

The Working-Class Win-O-Meter:
Predicted Democratic Vote Shares by Group

FIGURE 1



Among all working-class voters, the Win-O-Meter lifts the Democratic vote from 43% to 54%, a gain of 10.9 points, and 7.8 points even among the middle and upper class. Here is what each dial contributes, and which working-class voters it moves most:

- Leading with economics (+2.8 points): Making working-class economics the campaign's *top* priority (as compared to a nonresonant culture, climate, or democracy issue) delivers a large gain, and it's most pronounced among the key voter blocs Democrats need (+4.0 among independents, +3.6 among working-class whites, and +3.3 among 2024 Trump voters). The specific economic policies that perform best relative to the average economic policy are tuition-free community college, wiping medical debt, the right to organize a union, and capping drug costs.
- Culture that resonates with the working class (+2.9 points): The biggest single contributor to the 10.9-point gain is embracing cultural positions that resonate with the working class. The biggest part of this gain is driven by working-class white voters (+3.9) and 2024 Trump voters (+2.9).
- Explicitly prioritizing working-class people (+1.9 points): Foregrounding working-class people is critical to swaying the voters Democrats most need to win back: 2024 nonvoters (+4.0) and independents (+2.8).
- Populist tone (+1.7 points): Measured against the Harris-style candidate's technocratic tone, a populist one — putting oneself on the side of ordinary working people, whether or not a specific elite enemy is named — lends +1.7 points, and +2.9 among 2024 nonvoters. A plain people-first appeal accounts for the biggest gain (+1.6); naming a specific elite on top of that adds only about 0.1 additional points on average (not significant) and mainly pays off for particular blocs, particularly 2024 Trump voters (a political-establishment enemy adds 1.8 points for this group). We count the general populist effect (+1.7) for the dial and the +10.9 total, and we treat the extra lift from naming a specific elite enemy as a subgroup finding rather than as part of the formula.
- A non-elite background (+1.0 point): Running a candidate with a non-elite background matters most for working-class voters of color (+1.6) and 2024 Trump voters (+1.2). It is the one dial that has a slight cost for middle- and upper-class support (−0.3 points, not significant). A working-class background does about as well as a pink-collar or small-business-owning one, and all of them beat a lawyer or executive background.
- Working-class values (+0.7 points): Speaking to working-class values produces the strongest effect among 2024 Trump voters (+1.5), and it does not come at the expense of support from the Democratic base.

The needle swings most for the key groups Democrats have struggled with and need to win in difficult districts: +13.7 points among working-class independents, +13.2 among 2024 nonvoters, +10.6 among 2024 Trump voters, and +12.2 among working-class white voters.

SECTION 3

How Much Could the Win-O-Meter Affect Elections?

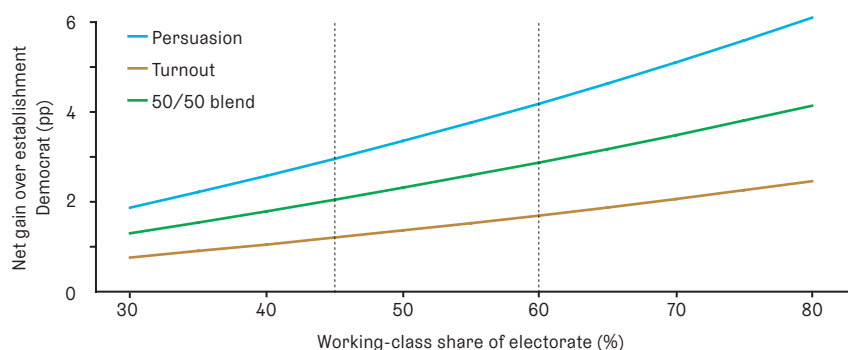
The dials measure how much a candidate's choices move the candidate's working-class support. But elections are won district by district, and district demographics and voter turnout vary widely, so the critical question is how these effects translate into district-level results. This section takes the Win-O-Meter's working-class gain, about 10.9 points of Democratic vote share for the average working-class voter, and traces it through districts with varying class demographics and turnout rates.¹⁴

Democratic candidates can increase their vote share through two channels: persuasion (convincing voters who previously voted for a Republican or a third-party candidate to vote for the Democrat) and turnout (bringing Democratic-leaning voters who would otherwise have stayed home to the polls). Our experiment allows us to measure the impact on both channels. For example, the same factors that move likely voters may affect infrequent voters even more (such as explicitly prioritizing working-class Americans, worth about +1.9 points among working-class voters overall but +4.0 points among nonvoters). Since turnout rates are variable, we report the impact of the Win-O-Meter across a range of turnout assumptions, from gains attributable entirely to persuasion to maxed-out nonvoter mobilization.

We find that the more working-class the district, the larger the gain for the Win-O-Meter. Running the Win-O-Meter candidate instead of a Harris 2024-style Democrat swings the two-party vote toward the Democrat by about 2 points in a 45% working-class district and 2.9 points in a 60% working-class one. The extent of the swing is mechanical: the formula's gains are concentrated among working-class voters, so the larger their share of a district's electorate, the greater the gain at the district level. A Harris-style Democrat performs worse as a district gets more working-class, while the Win-O-Meter Democrat performs better. Whether that swing decides the seat is a separate question that depends on how close the race is. A 2-to-3-point difference could be decisive, but in a safe seat it shifts the margin without changing the outcome.

The Win-O-Meter's net effect grows with a district's working-class share
Gain in Democratic two-party share over an establishment Democrat
by district working-class share

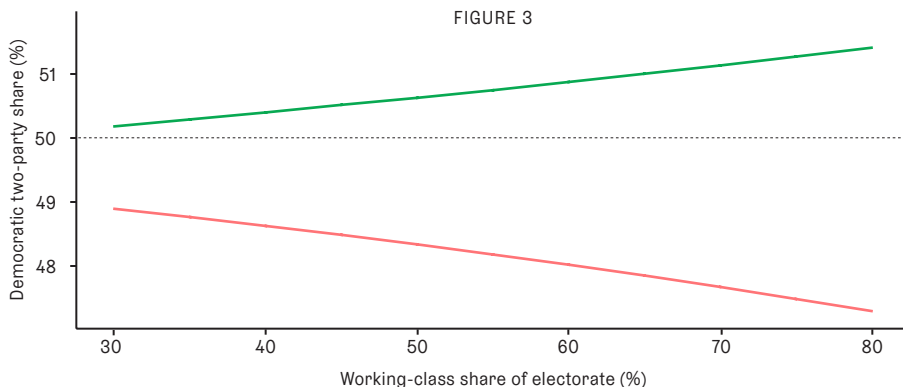
FIGURE 2



14 Please note that what follows is an illustrative simulation, not a forecast of any specific race. We anchor each class's starting point to its recalled 2024 two-party vote (working-class, 46.4%; middle- and upper-class, 49.6%) and apply realistic turnout (working-class, 45%; middle- and upper-class, 68%) rather than the survey's own "would not vote" rate, which, like that of most surveys, runs artificially low. We then apply our experiment's estimated working-class gain to that baseline and report how the district result depends on the persuasion-turnout mix rather than fixing a single value for it.

District outcome: establishment vs Win-O-Meter Democrat
 District Democratic two-party vote by working-class share (50/50 persuasion-turnout blend).
 The establishment Democrat falls further behind as the district
 gets more working-class.

— Establishment
 — Win-O-Meter



The Win-O-Meter can mean the difference between losing and winning a seat. In a 45% working-class district, a Harris 2024-style Democrat loses at 48.5%, while the Win-O-Meter Democrat wins at 50.5% (51.4% if the gain is all persuasion). In a 60% working-class district the Harris-style Democrat loses at 48% while the Win-O-Meter Democrat wins at 50.9% — an even wider margin.

Why only a couple of points difference, when the Win-O-Meter shows about 10.9 points? Because the Win-O-Meter gain is among working-class voters, who are only a fraction of any given district. In a 45% working-class district, even a full 10.9-point swing among that 45% is under 4 points district-wide. District composition also matters: the electoral benefit increases as we raise the working-class share of a given district. Note that these estimates count only the contributions to vote share that come from working-class voters. Since the Win-O-Meter also generates electoral gains among middle- and upper-class voters, accounting for those additional votes would swing the district further still. But the working-class swing alone is large enough to decide races: it is the difference between 48.5% and 50.5%, between losing a seat and winning it.

SECTION 4

Lead With Working-Class Economics

Working-class voters do not primarily judge candidates’ economic policies by how ambitious or expensive they are but by whether they resonate with the core working-class values described earlier in the report (loyalty to community and country, the importance of hard work and personal responsibility, traditional values, personal security, and a wariness of experts). This section offers a playbook on economic issues, identifying what pops, what flops, and how Democrats can escape today’s game of inches in which neither party commands a majority large or stable enough to enact its agenda.

→ Finding 1: To reach working-class voters, lead with economics.

A clear focus on economics offers a large gain across the dials on the Win-O-Meter (2.8 points) when compared to leading with noneconomic issues that do not resonate with working-class values, as Harris did when she centered protecting abortion rights and defending democracy in her 2024 campaign. (For more on why those issues do not resonate, and what does, see the *Coalition Crisis* report.) What pops is to make wages, jobs, and the cost of living the campaign’s top message. Measured against three reference points, leading with economics increases working-class support, especially among the swing voters Democrats most need to win back. The cost of failing to foreground economics is steepest among independents (–5.3 points), 2024 Trump voters (–5.1), and working-class white voters (–4.7).

Effect of leading with economics by working-class group

TABLE 10

Working-class group	vs. leading with any social issue	vs. no economic priority at all	vs. a nonresonant cultural issue
All working class	+0.9	+4.0	+2.8
2024 Trump voters	+1.2	+5.1	+3.3
Independents	+1.1 (marginal)	+5.3	+4.0
Whites	+1.1	+4.7	+3.6
Republicans	+1.1	+3.6	+3.0
Under 45	+1.0	+4.6	+2.0
People of color	+0.7 (n.s.)	+3.2	+1.6
2024 Harris voters	+0.4 (n.s.)	+3.1	+1.6
Democrats	+0.3 (n.s.)	+2.9	+0.3 (n.s.)

Effect on the working-class Democratic vote. “No economic priority at all” means a candidate who leads with a social issue and says nothing about the economy. “Nonresonant cultural issue” means a social position that does not reflect the core working-class values described in the report.

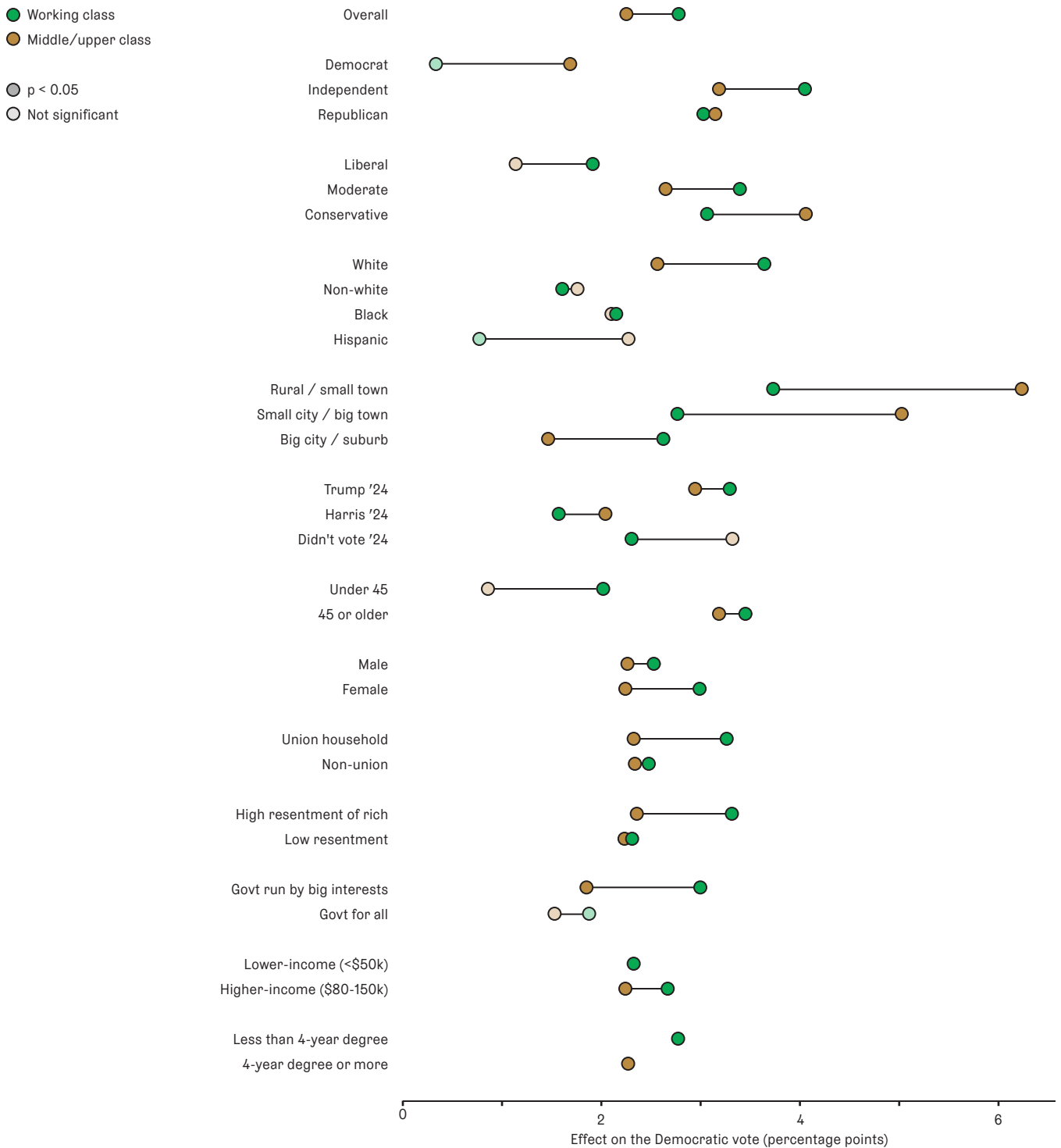
Failing to prioritize *any* economic issue is especially costly. Candidates who highlight only social issues, and no economic ones, lose 4 points among working-class voters overall, 5.3 among working-class independents, and 5.1 among working-class 2024 Trump voters. Even the Democrats’ working-class base punishes silence on economics (–2.9).

Exactly which economic priority a candidate picks matters less. A candidate who leads on an affordability or prices issue draws 47.6% of the working-class vote, and one who leads on wages and jobs wins 47.2% — a 0.4-point gap that is not significant. Neither was there any significant difference among more affluent voters.

Where does leading with economics help most?

Effect of leading with economics (vs. a nonresonant cultural issue) on Democratic vote share by subgroup

FIGURE 4



The payoff for centering economics is remarkably broad. It is significant for virtually every group Democrats have struggled with in recent elections — +4 points among independents, +3.6 among working-class whites, +3.4 among moderates, +3.3 among 2024 Trump voters, and +3.0 among working-class Republicans. Though the effect is significant among middle- and upper-class Democrats, it becomes negligible among the working-class Democratic base (+0.3, not significant).

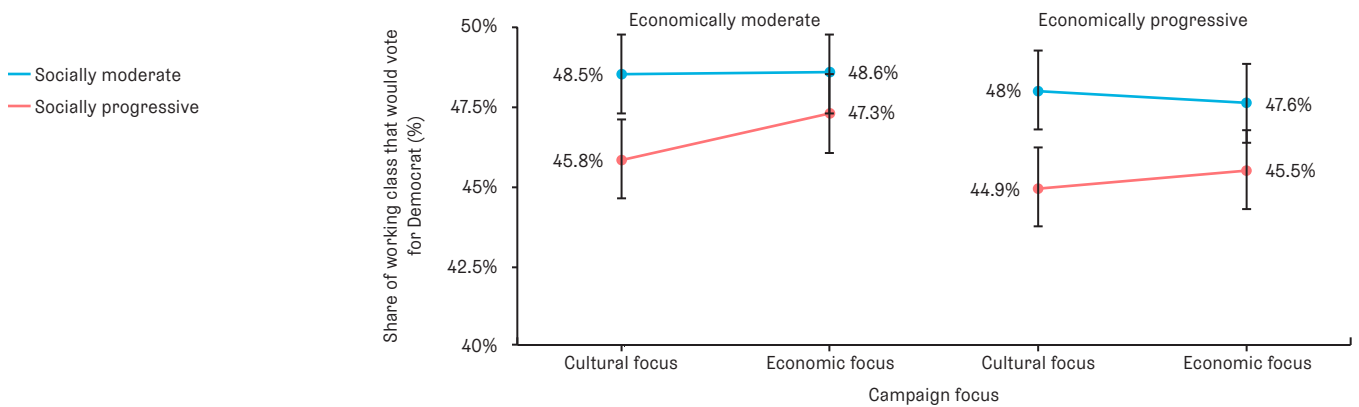
→ Finding 2: Leading with economics partially offsets the cost of the progressive positions the Democratic base cares about.

Leading with economics is especially valuable for candidates who must hold on not only to working-class voters but also to Democrats' base of liberal college graduates, who care about postmaterialist cultural and social issues. Foregrounding the economy partly absorbs the electoral cost of those progressive stances — a pattern we call the *Mamdani effect*. The penalty for taking progressive positions on social issues shrinks from about -2.9 points when the candidate leads on a cultural issue to about -1.7 points when they lead on economics; leading with the economy absorbs roughly 1.2 points of the cultural penalty. This result is marginally significant ($p = .08$), and it does not depend on how progressive the candidate's economic policy is.

Does leading with economics still pay off when the candidate is socially progressive?

Working-class Democratic vote by campaign focus, social position, and economic progressivism

FIGURE 5



→ Finding 3: The lowest-performing economic policies are those that feel distant from kitchen-table economics, detached from work, or at odds with personal responsibility.

Redistributive policies tied to work performed better among working-class respondents than otherwise similar policies that were not, reflecting the reluctance of people who show up to often unfulfilling jobs — on time every day — to support those who don't. Cash benefits targeting "working Americans" beat cash going to all adults regardless of work status by 2.8 points (averaged over two unconditional variants), and unemployment insurance paired with job-training programs likewise outperformed unemployment policies without that requirement by 2.8 points. There is no need to abandon redistributive goals; progressives can win stronger support for them by reengineering programs so they connect with working-class Americans' pride in hard work, insistence on personal responsibility, and belief that hard work should yield a stable life.

If we look at the economic programs that hurt candidates the most, the lowest-scoring are market rules and business taxes that feel distant from kitchen-table economics; transfers that are not tied to work or cut against the hard work, personal responsibility ethic likewise underperform.

The least popular economic policies among working-class voters

TABLE 11

Unpopular policy	Working class	vs. average	Type
Allow mergers only if they won't raise consumer costs	43.6%	-3.1	Distant from kitchen table
Break up large companies that crowd out small businesses	43.9%	-2.8	Distant from kitchen table
Raise the corporate tax rate to 28%–35%	44.4%	-2.2	Detached from work
Cap medical-debt payments at 10%–20% of income	44.5%	-2.1	Violates personal responsibility
Require repayment of tax breaks by firms that offshore jobs	44.9%	-1.8	Distant from kitchen table
\$500–\$1,000/month to all adults regardless of work	44.9%	-1.8	Violates personal responsibility

Each policy is compared to the average across all economic positions tested (46.6%). The Type category indicates the working-class value the policy cuts against. Read the table as a ranking of the weakest-testing policies relative to the average — abstract market rules, business taxes, and unconditional transfers detached from work — rather than as a decisive margin for any one economic policy.

→ Finding 4: What appeals most is defending existing popular programs, advocating affordability, and taking bold action on skills-building and unions.

If the goal is to run on what is most popular, here is the list. Ranked by working-class support, the best-performing economic positions are a mix of defending programs people already count on and instituting some bold policies to increase worker power and expand access to education and skills training. It is not that working-class voters prefer progressive policies or moderate ones; they like some of each.

The most popular economic policies among working-class voters

TABLE 12

Popular policy	Working class	vs. average	Type
Make community college tuition-free	49.7%	+3.1	Progressive
Remove medical debt from credit reports	49.3%	+2.7	Moderate
Guarantee the right to organize a union (penalize employer interference)	48.8%	+2.2	Progressive
Cap insulin and essential drug costs at \$35	48.7%	+2.1	Moderate
Maintain food-assistance access	48.4%	+1.8	Moderate
Create skilled-trades apprenticeships via employer tax incentives	48.3%	+1.7	Moderate
Maintain existing aid for low- and moderate-income students	48.3%	+1.7	Moderate
Maintain unemployment benefits tied to a job-training requirement	48.3%	+1.7	Moderate
Fund 500,000 new skilled-trades apprenticeships each year	48.2%	+1.6	Progressive
Protect Social Security from any cuts	47.9%	+1.3	Moderate

Each policy is compared to the average across all economic positions tested (46.6%). The Type category indicates the more progressive or more moderate version of each issue. Read the table as a ranking of the strongest-testing policies relative to the average — affordability, defending existing popular programs, and worker power — rather than as a decisive margin for any one economic policy.

A few of the most popular policies are both bold *and* progressive. The most popular of all, tuition-free community college, has received comparatively little attention (a broader policy to make *all* public college tuition-free scored substantially lower, at 46.2%). A guaranteed right to organize with real penalties for companies that try to get in the way comes in at number three, and funding skilled-trades apprenticeships is very popular. One common thread is the popularity of benefits that are concrete and visible (a debt off your credit record, capped drug costs); another is support for policies that allow people to build the skills they need to access a good job.

→ Finding 5: The fight over going either centrist or progressive is a distraction.

The big argument over whether Democrats should move to the center or go progressive on economics is a distraction. Still, it is worth being precise: economic policies we coded as moderate performed, on average, 1 point better than those coded as progressive (47.2% vs. 46.2%). But it is important to understand why. That gap is not driven by a broad rejection of progressive economics; it is driven almost entirely by a handful of progressive redistributive policies that do not resonate with the working class — versions of economic policies whose *form*, not ambition, is not viewed positively by working-class respondents.

The largest differences reflect the value that working-class Americans place on personal responsibility: respondents preferred removing medical debt from credit reports (49.3%) over capping medical debt payments at 10%–20% of income (44.5%, a 4.8-point difference), and a targeted cap on insulin prices (48.7%) over a broad cap on all medical expenses (46.1%, a 2.6-point difference). The same ethic drove support for unemployment benefits that require job training over those that do not as well as the unpopularity of universal basic income — among the lowest-scoring economic policies in the study. Respondents much preferred a \$500 tax rebate for low- and moderate-income working Americans (47.6%) over a flat \$500-a-month payment to everyone (43.5%, a 4.1-point difference).

The contrast can run the other way too. When the progressive option is concrete and understandable to voters, it can outperform moderate alternatives. For instance, the single most popular economic policy we tested, tuition-free community college (49.7%), beats its moderate counterpart, maintaining existing student aid (48.3%), by 1.4 points, though the difference does not reach statistical significance. The lesson is not that progressive economics loses with working-class voters but that abstract, complex, or maximalist designs do. Form matters more than ideology.

Finally, working-class respondents hold ambivalent, sometimes positive, attitudes toward business, as seen in their preference for closing corporate tax loopholes over raising rates. Working-class respondents can also hold complex attitudes with respect to means-tested redistributive policies, as seen, for instance, in their support for defending access to SNAP (“food stamps”) over expanding it. This tracks with a long-documented paradox in US opinion: voters are often wary of redistribution in the abstract but support specific programs in practice.¹⁵ And once enacted, those programs build constituencies that defend them, meaning the politics of protecting a program are fundamentally different from — and easier than — the politics of enacting or expanding it.¹⁶

Coding each policy for working-class resonance tells the same story: culturally resonant progressive economic policies average 46.9% support — with moderate economic policies at 47.2% — while nonresonant progressive policies fall to 45.6% support.¹⁷ The advantage of moderation, in other words, is accounted for almost entirely by a limited number of progressive policies that fail to resonate with working-class values. Put simply, the moderate advantage is really a penalty for nonresonant progressive framing, not a reward for centrism.

15 Christopher Ellis and James A. Stimson, *Ideology in America* (Cambridge University Press, 2012).

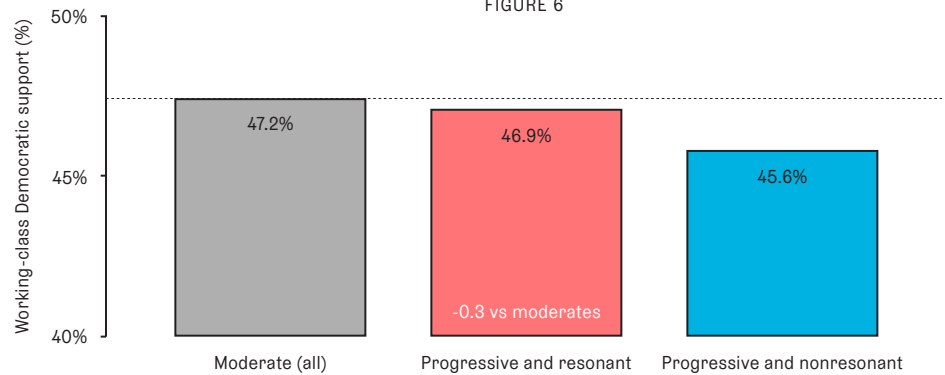
16 Paul Pierson, *Dismantling the Welfare State? Reagan, Thatcher, and the Politics of Retrenchment* (Cambridge University Press, 1994).

17 Each economic policy is scored on the working-class values it engages (work and self-discipline, place loyalty, personal security, or resentment of elites), following the same five-value framework used for social positions. The full policy coding is provided in the online appendix.

The progressive penalty is driven by nonresonant progressive framing

Working-class Democratic support, averaged over policies in each bucket

FIGURE 6



The moderate and progressive, resonant buckets are statistically indistinguishable (-0.5 pp, n.s.); only the progressive, nonresonant bucket falls significantly below the moderate one (-1.7 pp, $p < .001$).

→ Finding 6: Going big is not too risky. It is necessary to defend democracy.

Winning in the short term may mean embracing a few policies that poll very well even if they aren't likely to change the material conditions of life in a substantial way for most working-class Americans. That approach can help to win the games of inches, and inches decide a close race.

But the long game is different. To preserve American democracy, Democrats must do more than eke out a 2028 win; they need to break out of the game of inches altogether and build a broad, cross-class majority that can win decisively and consistently. Today's divided governments lack the power to enact the sweeping policies needed to restore the American dream. Workers' share of GDP has fallen from roughly 70% to 54%, and whereas over 90% of Americans born in 1940 went on to earn more than their parents, only about half of those born in 1980 do.¹⁸ Inequality predicts low trust, including trust in political institutions; the surest way to defend democracy over the long run is to reduce inequality so that every American family has a real shot at a stable, middle-class life.¹⁹

What is needed is a bold agenda: a decent job with good benefits for anyone willing to work, major public investment in union jobs that rebuild the country's infrastructure and competitive edge, and wages that rise with productivity so that hard work leads to a stable life. In short, the only thing that will generate a sustained, broad-based coalition on the Left is an economic agenda of New Deal vision and ambition.

The obvious objection is that bold means risky. Our data contest this. On jobs, wages, unions, skills-building, industrial policy, and beyond, ambitious progressive policies did not cost Democrats votes — and in a few key cases, like unions and the minimum wage, won more. These progressive economic policies are more effective than their moderate counterparts among key segments of the electorate:

- Raising the minimum wage: 2024 Harris voters (+4.3 points) and lower-income working-class voters (+3.3)
- Right to a unions: Working-class Latino voters (+6.4) and under-45 working-class voters (+3.6), both sizable but only marginally significant ($p = .065$)
- Challenging offshoring and mass layoffs: working-class whites (+2.9, marginal at $p = .09$); all white voters (+2.7)

18 Harold Meyerson, "A New Low for American Workers," *The American Prospect*, January 19, 2026; Raj Chetty et al., "The fading American dream: Trends in absolute income mobility since 1940," *Science* 356, no. 6336 (2017).

19 Susan T. Fiske, *Envy Up, Scorn Down: How Status Divides Us* (Russell Sage Foundation, 2011), 153.

It may be possible to win the game of inches by focusing on just the most popular policies — no matter how narrow and uninspiring they may be — but winning the long game will require a bold, work-related agenda that includes increasing worker power; rising real wages; good, stable jobs; and a fierce defense of the existing redistributive programs that Americans already know and love. Democrats need to present themselves not as the tax-and-transfer party but as the party that ensures hard work yields a stable life and a brighter future for one's children.

SECTION 5

Adopt Culture and Climate Policies That Resonate With the Working Class

In our survey, each candidate is assigned one random position on social issues. We code each position as resonant with the working class or not, based on the five working-class values identified and validated in the Williams–Abbott *Coalition Crisis* report.²⁰ Each is defined by a tension between a working-class and a liberal college-graduate worldview.

Tensions between class values

TABLE 13

Tension	Liberal college-grad values	Working-class values	Political battles it fuels
Globalism vs. place loyalty	Pride in being a global citizen; nationwide / global networks	Deep loyalty to community and country; dense local networks	Immigration; patriotism; “America First” appeals; climate change
Self-development vs. family and self-discipline	Pride in elite jobs; self-actualization and personal growth	Family comes first; pride in hard work; personal responsibility; stability over freedom	Abortion; trans rights; welfare and redistribution; work requirements
Sophistication vs. traditionalism	Ironic distance from tradition; sophistication as a taste for the new	Religion, military, and traditional gender roles as sources of honor and stability	Culture wars; role of religion; gun rights
Safety as a given vs. a priority	Live in safe neighborhoods; more focused on justice than safety	Sees the world as threatening; protecting family and following the rules as core duties	Law and order; border security; defund the police
Admiring vs. resenting experts	Respect for credentialed expertise; regulation as rational problem-solving	Resentment of professionals; trust in small business; admiration for hard-earned success	Taxation; business regulation; anti-elite populism; “deep state” narratives

Specifically, we estimate the change in the probability that a working-class voter would pick the Democrat when that candidate holds a resonant rather than a nonresonant position, averaged over all other randomized attributes.

→ Finding 1: Social policies resonant with the working class increase working-class support.

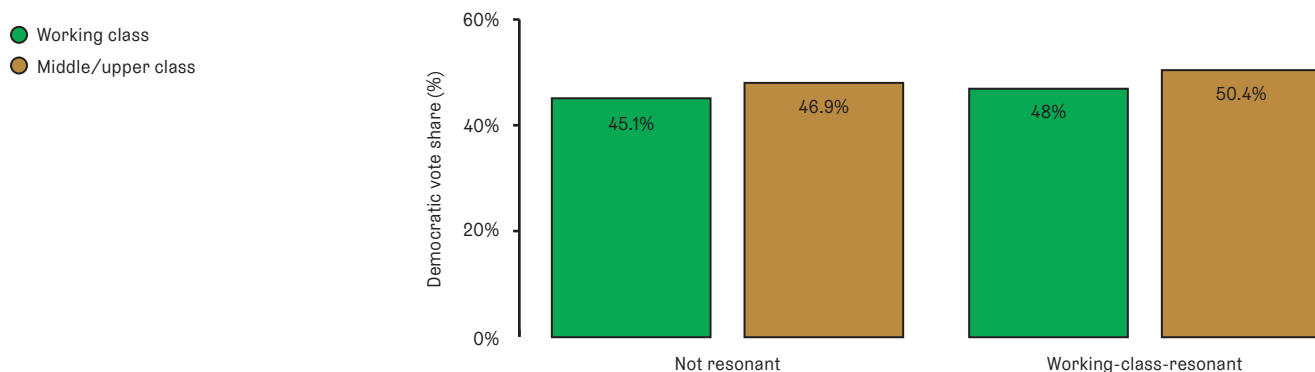
A position on social issues resonant with the working class — one that speaks to family, community and country, the dignity of hard work, and physical safety — earns 48% of the working-class vote, against 45.1% for a nonresonant position, a gap of 2.9 points.²¹ It also adds support from the middle and upper classes, by 3.5 points, so its effect is broad and does not cost support from the liberal, college-educated base. The findings below unpack which voters this moves most, why cultural resonance matters more than ideology, and how the effect of running on culturally resonant social policies compounds with a working-class values message to increase support among working-class voters.

²⁰ The full position coding is in the online appendix.

²¹ The full list of the social positions we tested — each with its resonant versus nonresonant coding and the working-class value it taps — appears in the online appendix.

Democratic vote share by working-class resonance

FIGURE 7



Running on working-class-resonant policies lifts the working-class vote by +2.9 pp ($p < .001$).

→ Finding 2: Social policies resonant with the working class sway voters of all classes.

As with making an explicit appeal to the working class (see section 6), a resonant position on cultural issues pays off most among the key groups Democrats need to win back — and among the Democratic base, it either doesn't cost support or increases it.

- For the working class, the effect is largest among the swing and Republican-leaning voters Democrats have been losing: +3.3 points among working-class Republicans, +3.9 among working-class whites, +3.6 among independents, and +2.9 among 2024 Trump voters.
- It is essentially neutral only among working-class Democrats (+0.8 points, not significant), the one bloc already firmly in the fold, and its effect is positive and significant for almost every other group, including infrequent working-class voters.

Taking resonant rather than nonresonant positions on cultural issues could be a key ingredient in Democrats' formula for winning back many of the Trump-curious voters who went Republican in 2024, at no cost — and often at a modest advantage — for the existing base's support.

Where working-class resonance matters most
Effect of a working-class-resonant (vs. nonresonant) social position on the Democratic vote by subgroup
FIGURE 8

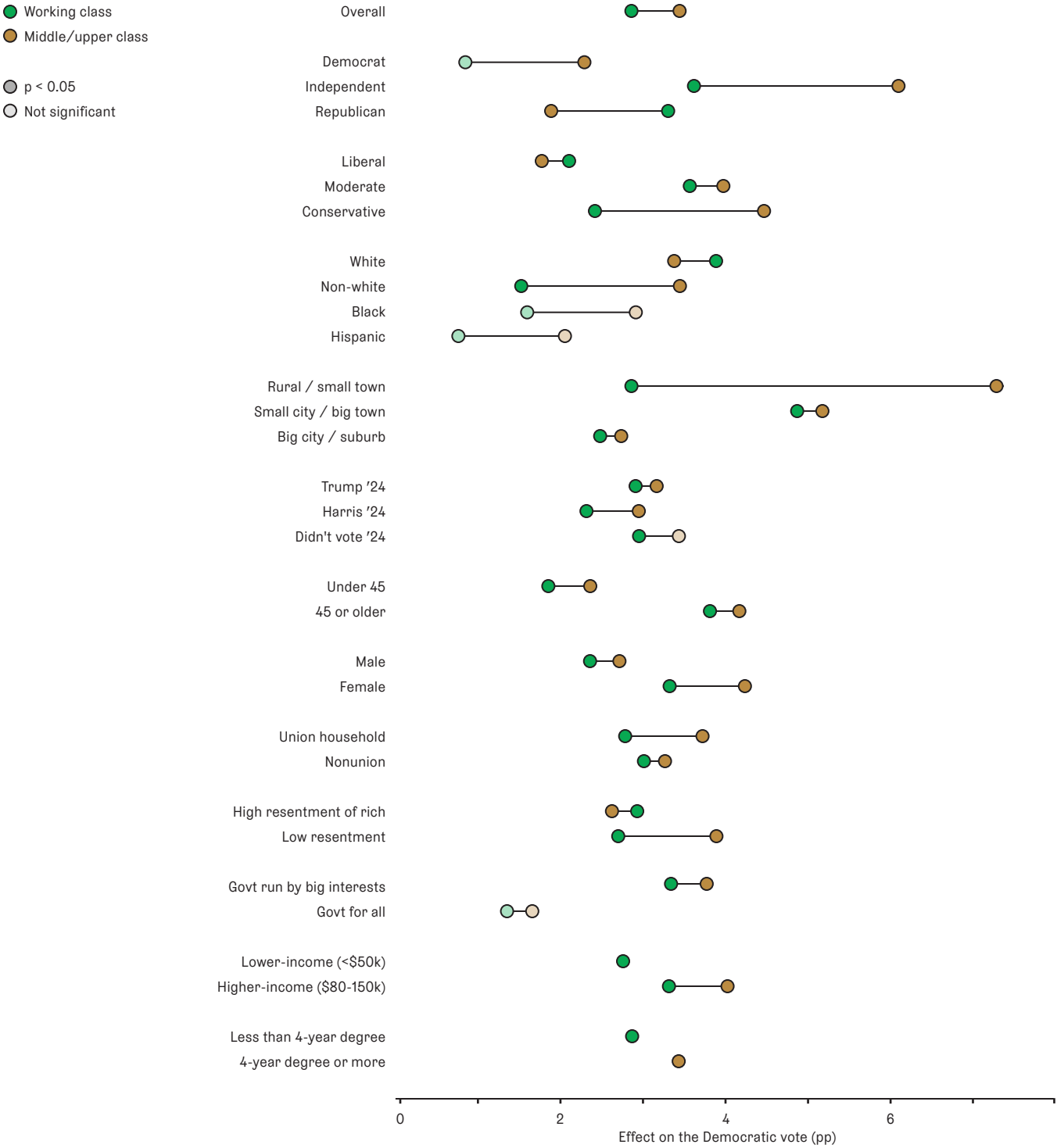


Figure 8 plots this effect for the working class (green) and the middle and upper class (gold) across every major subgroup, in the same format as the economic figures. Two patterns stand out. First, working-class resonance is broadly positive: it shows positive effects for both class groups. Second, among the working class, the payoff is concentrated among the persuadable — independents, moderates, rural and small-town voters, and 2024 Trump voters — and is weakest (and not statistically significant) among working-class Democrats, who are already locked in. Middle- and upper-class

voters, far from punishing positions that resonate with working-class values, reward them at least as much as working-class voters do, so the move pays off across the board, without sacrificing the base for swing voters.

Culturally resonant progressive positions (47.6% support) are statistically indistinguishable from moderate positions (48.1%) — a gap of just 0.4 points (not significant). The roughly 2.5-point penalty that progressive positions carry *overall* therefore comes almost entirely from the nonresonant progressive positions (45.1%), not from progressivism as such.

Progressive goals are perceived by working-class Americans very differently depending on the specific policy a candidate invokes to further the goal: on immigration, both “citizenship for people who work and pay taxes” and “abolish ICE” aim at a more humane system, but only the first taps the working-class value of rewarding those who play by the rules; on climate, both “clean energy that protects workers’ jobs” and “100% clean energy by 2050” pursue sustainability, but only the first speaks to protecting workers’ own jobs and communities. Most of the power behind working-class resonance comes from reframing climate, immigration, and abortion positions in values that resonate with the working class (the Williams–Abbott *Coalition Crisis* report traces this issue by issue).

→ Finding 3: Working-class-resonant policies and working-class values reinforce each other.

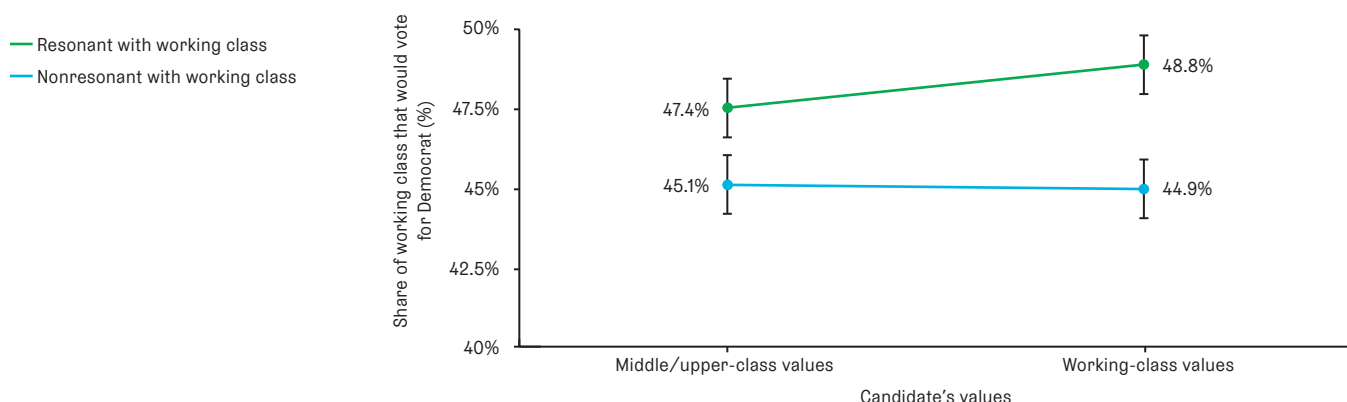
Each candidate profile also included a randomly assigned values statement (described in greater detail in section 7) meant to signal whether the candidate was trying to connect primarily with working-class or middle-class, professional values.²² Pairing working-class-resonant social policies with working-class-resonant values produces more than the sum of their separate effects: the two reinforce each other, adding about 1.6 points on top of what they would contribute separately. For example, a candidate might express a working-class value (“People who play by the rules shouldn’t be the ones falling behind”) alongside a working-class-resonant policy (a path to citizenship for immigrants who have held jobs, paid taxes, and stayed out of trouble).

Interestingly, this added boost is specific to values messaging; pairing a working-class-resonant policy with a working-class group appeal instead (where the candidate explicitly says they will stand up for and represent working-class people) adds little (about 0.7 points, not significant). The positive effect of running on working-class-resonant social policies is only boosted when candidates invoke working-class values, rather than simply announcing they are on the working class’s side.

Resonant policies and working-class values reinforce each other

By social-position resonance and values message

FIGURE 9



Pairing a resonant policy with a working-class-values message adds +1.6 pp beyond the sum of the parts.

²² We give a full description of these working-class values and how they were derived and validated in section 7.

→ Finding 4: Staying silent on cultural issues performs worse than running on policies resonant with the working class, but better than running on nonresonant ones.

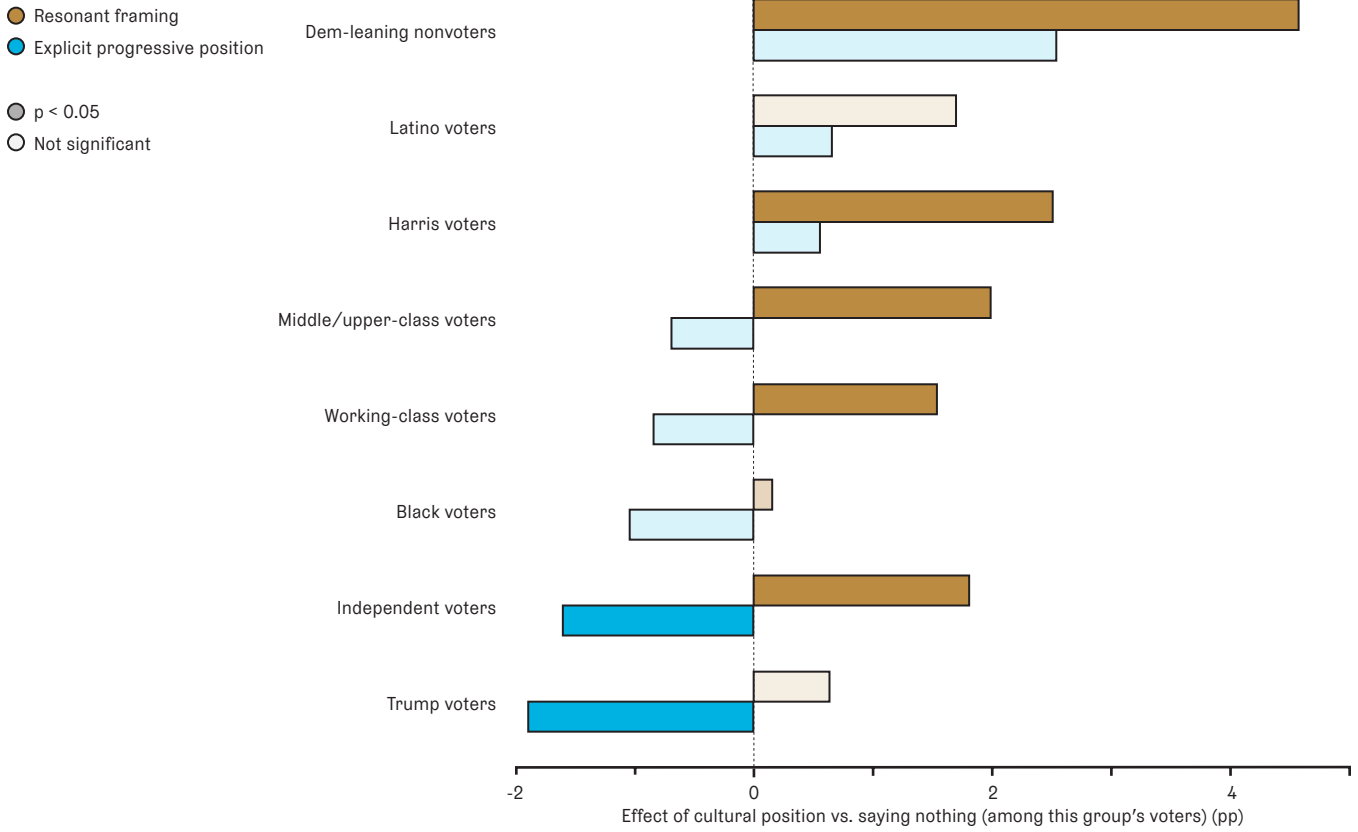
A candidate has a third option beyond taking a resonant or a nonresonant position: take no position at all and stay quiet on culture war issues. About a sixth of the candidates in our experiment did exactly that on any given social issue, which lets us test not just resonant versus nonresonant policies but any stated position versus silence. A candidate who says nothing on culture gets 46.2% of the working-class vote. Taking a resonant (or simply a moderate) position polls ahead of staying silent by about 1.5 to 1.7 points (resonant +1.5, not significant; moderate +1.7, marginal, $p = .06$). By contrast, taking a progressive or nonresonant position performs worse than staying silent, by about 0.9 points and 1.3 points (neither significant), respectively. In short, among the working class as a whole, running on social policies that resonate with the working class is preferable to staying silent, but staying silent performs better than taking nonresonant positions on social issues — though several of these differences, as noted, fall short of statistical significance.

Yet the overall average hides large differences across demographic groups. Among the swing voters Democrats most need to win back, voicing a nonresonant or progressive position is *significantly worse* than silence. By contrast, among the Democratic base (including Democratic-leaning nonvoters), taking a working-class-nonresonant position performs better than staying silent, suggesting a meaningful trade-off exists among some voter groups.

The gain over silence is largest among Democratic-leaning nonvoters (+4.6 points) and 2024 Harris voters (+2.5 points), and positive among independents (+1.8 points) and Latino voters (+1.7 points, marginal). The clearest exception is black voters, where a resonant frame is statistically indistinguishable from saying nothing (+0.2 points, not significant) and an explicit progressive position presents a modest net loss (–1 point, also not significant). So on cultural issues, neither employing working-class-resonant framing nor going progressive measurably moves black voters relative to staying silent on those issues. The figure below shows, for each group, the effects of a resonant frame (gold) and of an explicit progressive position (blue) relative to saying nothing, where solid dots mark effects that reach statistical significance ($p < .05$) and hollow dots mark those that do not. A working-class-resonant frame matches or beats silence for every group, while an explicit progressive position is a net loss for most, significantly so among independents and 2024 Trump voters.

Effect of each cultural approach on each group's own voters

FIGURE 10



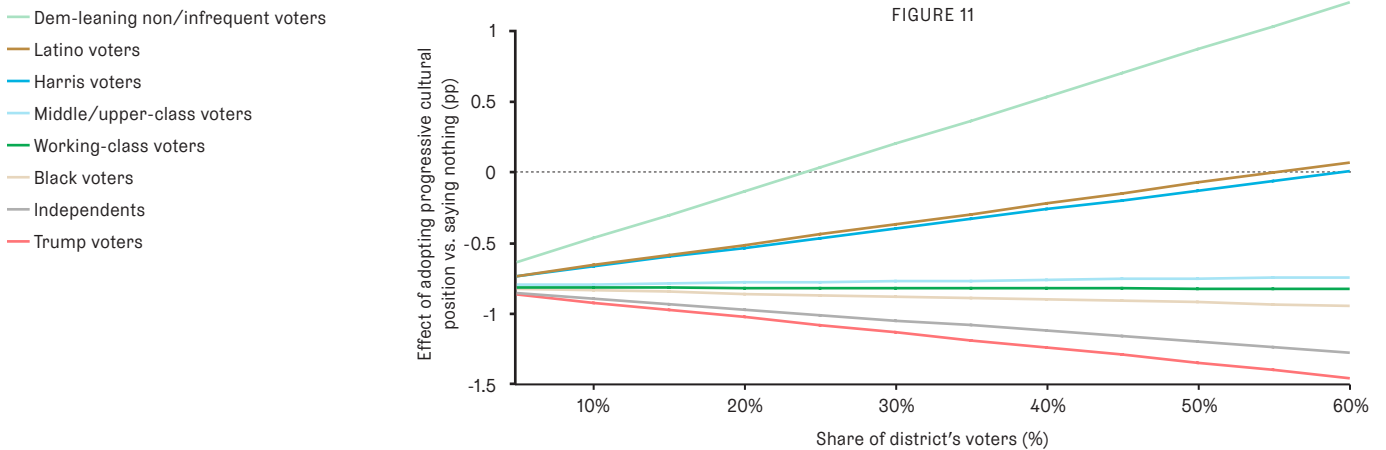
→ Finding 5: The impact of strategies around cultural issues depends on district demographics.

To give a sense of how the impact of different approaches to cultural issues changes with the makeup of a district, we simulated the net effect of each approach as we varied the proportions of demographic groups in a hypothetical district.²³

How progressive cultural positions play as a district's makeup shifts

Simulated net effect of a progressive position vs. saying nothing, as each group's share of the district rises

FIGURE 11



²³ Illustrative simulation: each group's effect is mixed against an otherwise average electorate as its share of the district rises. Because the groups overlap, the lines are directional, not additive.

An explicitly progressive cultural position faces a penalty in the average district, which decreases as a district grows unusually Democratic-leaning or nonvoter-heavy, and decreases in independent or Trump-voting districts. A frame resonant with the working class, by contrast, remains a net positive across district types.

In sum, running on working-class-resonant social policies is a sound strategy across nearly the entire electorate and across district types. The appeal of an explicitly progressive cultural position is far narrower: it increases support only among nonvoters and voters who lean Democratic. Everywhere else, progressive cultural positions yield a net loss, costing swing voters and the swing districts that decide control of Congress as well as the outcome of national elections.

SECTION 6

Explicitly Prioritize Working-Class People

One of the seven items we randomized in our survey was an appeal in which candidates explicitly singled out specific groups they thought politicians should listen to more. The appeal took one of four broad forms: centering working-class people (“Listen more to working-class people”), centering the middle and upper classes, naming a demographic group (for example, women or business leaders), or a neutral appeal to “people from all walks of life.”

→ Finding 1: Foregrounding the working class beats every alternative target.

Having a candidate say they will listen more to working-class Americans raises their support by about 2 points relative to the average of all the other appeals to specific groups we tested — although the neutral appeal to “people from all walks of life” worked just about as well.

The working-class appeal performs better than appeals aimed at the groups Democrats most often name, including the middle class, women, and voters of color, each of which trailed the working-class appeal by roughly 2 to 4 points. The only appeal that performs similarly to a working-class one is the broad, neutral appeal. Interestingly, “working-class people” outpolls “blue-collar workers” by nearly 3 points.

Working-class support by group the candidate centers

TABLE 14

The candidate says they will listen more to ...	Working-class support	vs. working-class appeal
Working-class people	49.5%	—
People from all walks of life	49.1%	-0.4 (n.s.)
The middle class	47.8%	-1.7
Small-business owners	46.8%	-2.6
Blue-collar workers	46.6%	-2.9
Policy experts and scientists	45.5%	-4.0
Women	45.2%	-4.3
Black and Hispanic Americans	45.2%	-4.3
Business leaders	45.0%	-4.5
People with political experience	44.8%	-4.6

Support for Democratic candidates among working-class respondents when the candidate says they will listen more to each group. Every difference from the working-class appeal is statistically significant except where marked n.s.

→ Finding 2: Explicitly prioritizing the working class is especially helpful among critical electoral blocs.

The advantage of the appeal to the working class (over the appeal to the middle or upper class) is positive across nearly every subgroup. It is largest among the key groups Democrats most need to win:

- +4.0 among 2024 nonvoters;
- +2.9 in union households;
- +2.8 among independents;
- +2.5 among moderates;
- +2.1 among rural and small-town voters; and
- +1.7 among non-white voters.

In addition, the appeal offers a substantial bump among certain groups that often veer toward far-right populism:

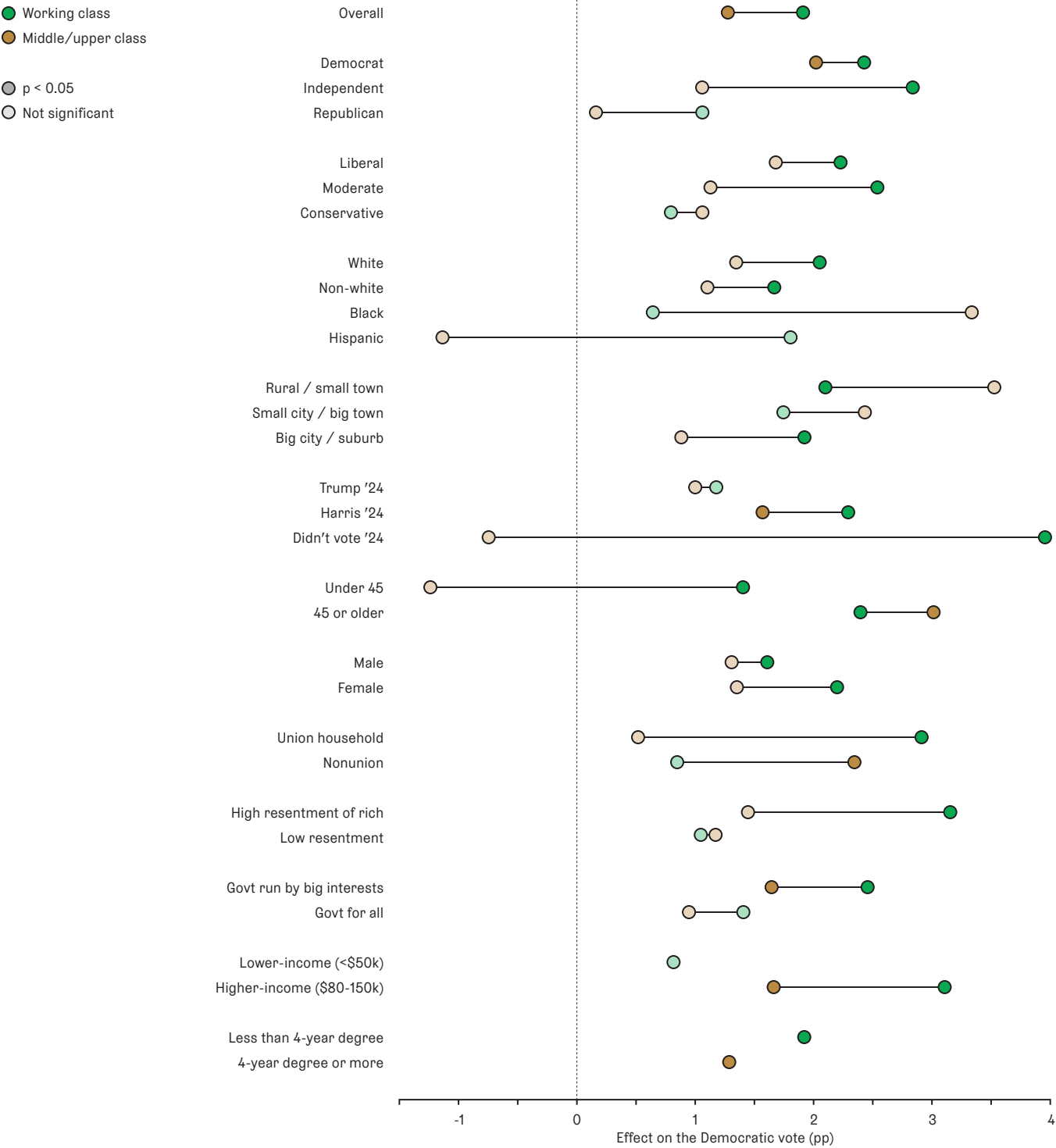
- +3.2 among working-class voters who feel the wealthy hold too much power and do not pay their fair share;
- +2.5 among those who say government is run by a few big interests rather than for the benefit of all.

→ Finding 3: The advantage is broad, and it does not come at the cost of the base's support.

The advantage Democratic candidates gain from centering the working class in their messaging is also strikingly broad demographically. It reaches statistical significance among a range of groups, notably older voters (+2.4 among those 45 and older) and younger ones (+1.4), women (+2.2) and men (+1.6), white voters (+2.0) and non-white voters as a whole (+1.7), and across the geographic divide (+2.1 among rural and small-town voters and +1.9 in big cities and suburbs). The effect of a working-class appeal also holds among the Democratic base itself: +2.4 among Democrats, +2.3 among 2024 Harris voters, and +2.2 among liberals, indicating that a working-class appeal does not come at the cost of alienating the party base.

Which groups does centering working-class people move the most?
Effect of a working-class (vs. middle/upper-class) appeal on Democratic vote by subgroup

FIGURE 12



SECTION 7

Speak to Working-Class Values

Candidates routinely invoke personal values on the campaign trail, signaling a broad worldview beyond any specific policy they may support. Accepting the 2008 Democratic nomination, Barack Obama credited his grandmother as “the one who taught me about hard work,” recalling how she put off buying things for herself so he could have a better life.²⁴ Republicans, of course, do the same: announcing his 1996 presidential bid, Bob Dole told voters that “as a young man in a small town my parents taught me to put my trust in God, not government, and never confuse the two.”²⁵

We wanted to see whether explicitly invoking values central to working-class identity increases a candidate’s support among working-class voters — independent of whether that candidate also backs working-class-resonant policies, emphasizes listening to the working class, uses populist language, or comes from a non-elite background.

By working-class values, we do not mean specific economic or social positions. We mean a broader moral orientation — an emphasis on community, family, country, and security — that distinguishes working-class Americans from their middle- and upper-class counterparts. Rather than assume what those values are, we drew on a core set we derived and validated in our Williams–Abbott *Coalition Crisis* report, where we found that holding such values was strongly correlated with being working class (by education and income), even after accounting for party identification and ideology.

We randomly assigned each candidate to deliver one of two message types: a working-class values message (for example, “Self-discipline, self-reliance, and doing what needs to be done are core values” or “Strong families are the backbone of a strong community”) or one invoking middle- or upper-class values (for example, “Life is about finding your own path and personal fulfillment” or “Our institutions need to be updated to keep up with social change”).²⁶

→ Finding 1: A working-class values message modestly increases working-class support by itself.

In section 5 we saw the combined power of pairing a social policy resonant with the working class with an explicit working-class values message. Here we isolate the values message to test on its own. A message invoking working-class values beats one invoking middle- and upper-class values by 0.7 points among working-class voters. The effect is modest but statistically significant, and as the interaction in section 5 showed, it is substantially amplified when paired with resonant policy.

→ Finding 2: Working-class values messages move voters outside the Democratic coalition the most.

The values message helps most among the voters Democrats most need to reach, and it costs nothing with the base.

- +1.4 among 2024 Trump voters (both working-class and middle- or upper-class voters showed similar effects) and +0.9 among working-class Republicans
- +1.3 among working-class union households

Articulating working-class values did not significantly impact support from the Democrats’ base: working-class Democrats (+0.5 points, not significant), independents (+0.4, not significant), and 2024 Harris voters (–0.2 points, not significant).

24 Barack Obama, “Transcript: Barack Obama’s Acceptance Speech,” 2008 Democratic National Convention, NPR, August 28, 2008.

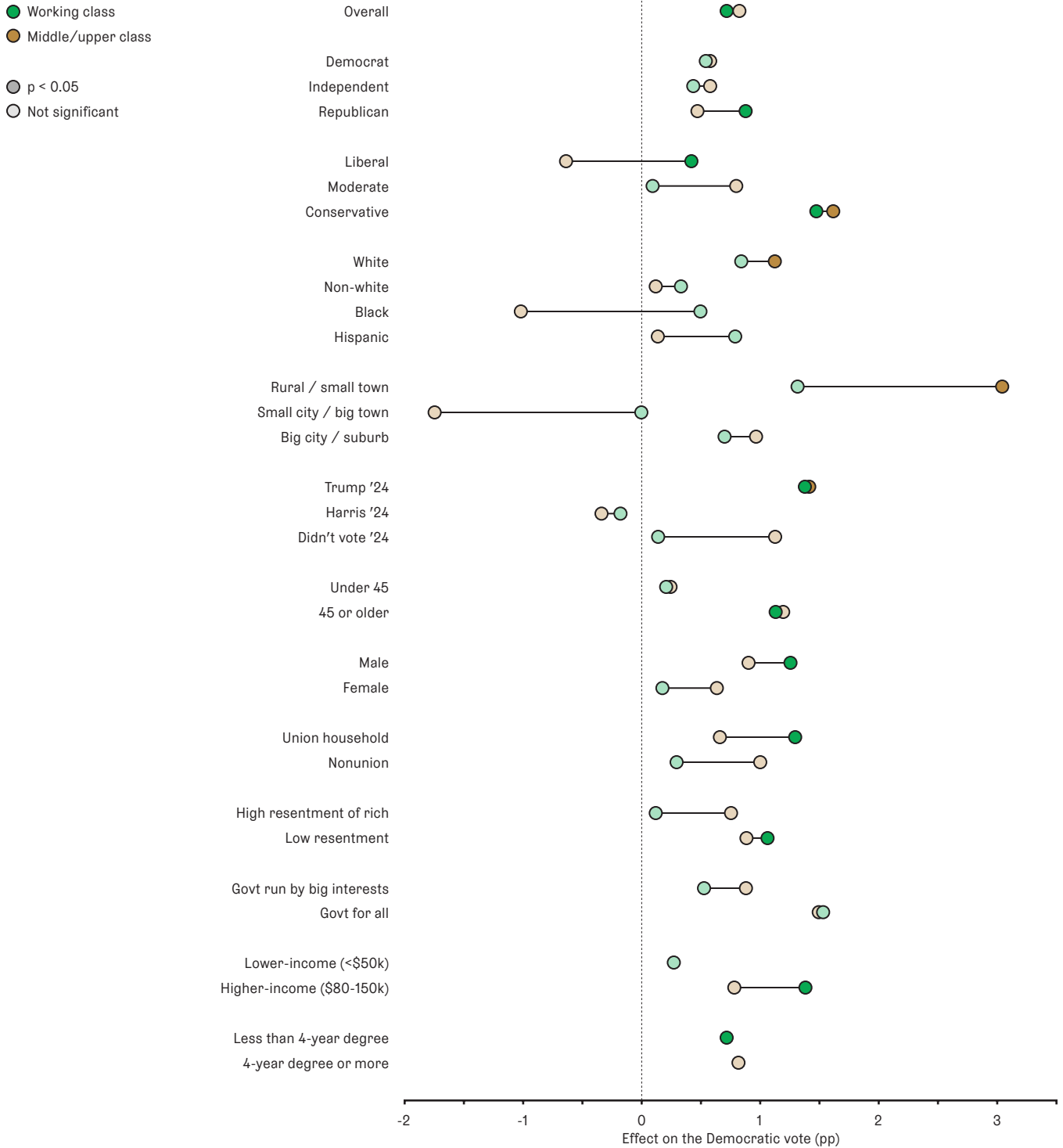
25 Bob Dole, “Remarks Announcing Candidacy for the Republican Presidential Nomination,” American Presidency Project, April 10, 1995.

26 The full list of values messages we tested can be found in the online appendix.

Which groups do working-class values move the most?

Effect of a working-class (vs. middle/upper-class) values message
on Democratic vote by subgroup

FIGURE 13



A couple of further patterns are worth noting. There is a modest gender split (working-class men, +1.3 points; working-class women, +0.2 points, not significant), and the values message performs better among the low-resentment working class (+1.1 points) than the high-resentment segment (+0.1 points, not significant). Notably, working-class values messaging moves middle- and upper-class voters overall (+0.8 points) about as much as the working class, making it the least class-dependent of the dials.

Talking about working-class values, then, reaches the Republican-leaning working class without costing anything with voters who already support the Democrats. While the effect is limited on its own, it is substantially enhanced in combination with social policies that resonate with the working class.

→ Finding 3: The values that win are loyalty, safety, and family — though the ranking complicates easy stereotypes of working-class voters.

The strongest messages foreground the working-class values from section 5: place loyalty (“communities and country first”), safety as a priority (“keeping families and communities safe”), and family (“strong families”). The weakest are mostly middle- and upper-class messages built on self-expression and individuality (“People shouldn’t be defined by traditional family roles,” “Express their individuality”). The ranking, however, is not perfectly clean: one middle- and upper-class message (“America is stronger when we learn from other cultures”) scores near the top, and one working-class message highlighted by ethnographers (“Play by the rules”) appears near the bottom. Both examples suggest that caricatures of working-class Americans as parochial and rule-bound are exaggerated.

Which values win the most working-class support?

Working-class Democratic support when the candidate delivers each values message, ranked top to bottom

FIGURE 14

- Working-class values
- Middle/upper-class values

We should take care of our own communities and country first.	48.1%
Keeping families and communities safe has to be a top priority.	47.5%
America is stronger when we learn from other cultures and ideas.	47.4%
Strong families are the backbone of a strong community.	47.2%
Politicians should tell it like it is and not hide behind fancy words.	47.1%
Life is about finding your own path and personal fulfillment.	46.9%
We should never give up our freedoms in the name of security.	46.6%
Our traditions and values hold us together.	46.6%
Self-discipline, self-reliance, and doing what needs to be done are core values.	46.3%
Our institutions need to be updated to keep up with social change and allow for individuality.	46.2%
It's important to take time to explain the nuances and trade-offs of different policy options.	45.8%
People who play by the rules shouldn't be the ones falling behind.	45.6%
People should be able to express their individuality so they can live up to their potential.	45.5%
People shouldn't be defined by traditional family roles.	44.8%

Read the figure as a ranking of the strongest-testing messages and the underlying values they represent, rather than as a decisive margin for any one message.

→ Finding 4: The defend democracy and hold Trump accountable message plays to the base, but it doesn't pull in swing voters.

This frame is a wash among working-class voters, neither helping nor hurting relative to other Democratic values messages. But this average hides a response sharply polarized by partisanship:

- +2.0 among working-class Democrats (mobilizes the base);
- -1.8 among working-class Republicans (actively repels them); and
- 0.0 among working-class independents, the swing group (neutral).

In other words, an anti-Trump or defend democracy values message backfires with the Trump-curious right and does nothing to increase support among independents. This is the mirror image of the working-class values message (finding 3), which wins the Right at no significant cost to the base. A cost-linked “so working people don’t pay the price” version of the message is not measurably better than a pure “prosecute officials like Trump” one.

SECTION 8

Lean Into Populist Rhetoric, but Pick the Right Enemy

In this report we understand populism narrowly as politicians' claim to stand with ordinary people against elites who are rigging the system for their own benefit. This is what scholars call populism's "thin ideology": a moral framing that pits the people against the elite. It can be attached to policy programs on both the left and the right.²⁷ Varieties of populist messaging are common in US politics and used by both parties, though liberals typically focus their ire on corporate greed and billionaires, while conservatives are more likely to go after Washington insiders and career politicians.²⁸

In our survey, each candidate was randomly assigned a statement that expresses how they position themselves vis-à-vis populism: with the public, against entrenched politicians, against economic elites, or in a more conventional, non-populist register. These statements differ from the working-class values messages tested above: a values message signals a candidate's moral worldview, whereas these statements concern how a candidate positions themselves toward the status quo and elites, whether by saying politicians need to care more about the views of the people, by naming an adversary (populist), or by promising pragmatic, expert-based, balanced governance (establishment alternatives). The two cues were randomized independently, so candidates' rhetoric is measured separately from the values they invoke (working-class versus middle-class, professional values, as described in section 7).

We group the sixteen populist statements into three categories: those focused on making government more accountable to the American people ("Give the American people a real voice" or "Respond to the needs of the American people"); on challenging the influence of political elites ("Take on the lobbyists and Washington insiders who block change"); and on challenging the influence of economic elites ("Challenge wealthy donors and corporate lobbyists who rig the economy against regular people").

The first category casts the speaker as being on the side of the people, but without naming an enemy.²⁹ The statements naming an enemy add a specific antagonist to this broad populist appeal. We built the statements this way because that is how anti-elite rhetoric usually appears. In a Center for Working-Class Politics analysis of more than 13,000 websites of congressional candidates (2010–2024), fewer than 5% of candidates attacked elites without also invoking the people, and more than 90% who attacked elites did both. Building anti-elite rhetoric on a people-centric base tests whether populism's two sides (being *for* the people and being *against* elites) have independent effects and also reflects actual campaign rhetoric.

We compare these populist statements against four establishment or status quo statements to represent technocratic, centrist alternatives such as "Act on practical solutions that deliver results" and "Avoid extreme positions and focus on balanced solutions."³⁰

27 Cas Mudde, "The Populist Zeitgeist," *Government and Opposition* 39, no. 4 (2004).

28 Cas Mudde, *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe* (Cambridge University Press, 2007).

29 Matthijs Rooduijn and Teun Pauwels, "Measuring Populism: Comparing Two Methods of Content Analysis," *West European Politics* 34, no. 6 (2011).

30 The full list of all 20 statements is in the appendix.

→ Finding 1: Any kind of populist language beats establishment language.

Candidates who use populist language win about +1.7 points more overall support than establishment messages, a result that holds for all three flavors of populism: a people-centric message, an anti-political elite message, and an anti-economic elite message. The strategic question, then, is not whether populist messaging is valuable for candidates — it clearly is — but about which types are more or less impactful and among which segments of the electorate.

→ Finding 2: Populist language performs well with every working-class group, and best with 2024 nonvoters and working-class voters of color.

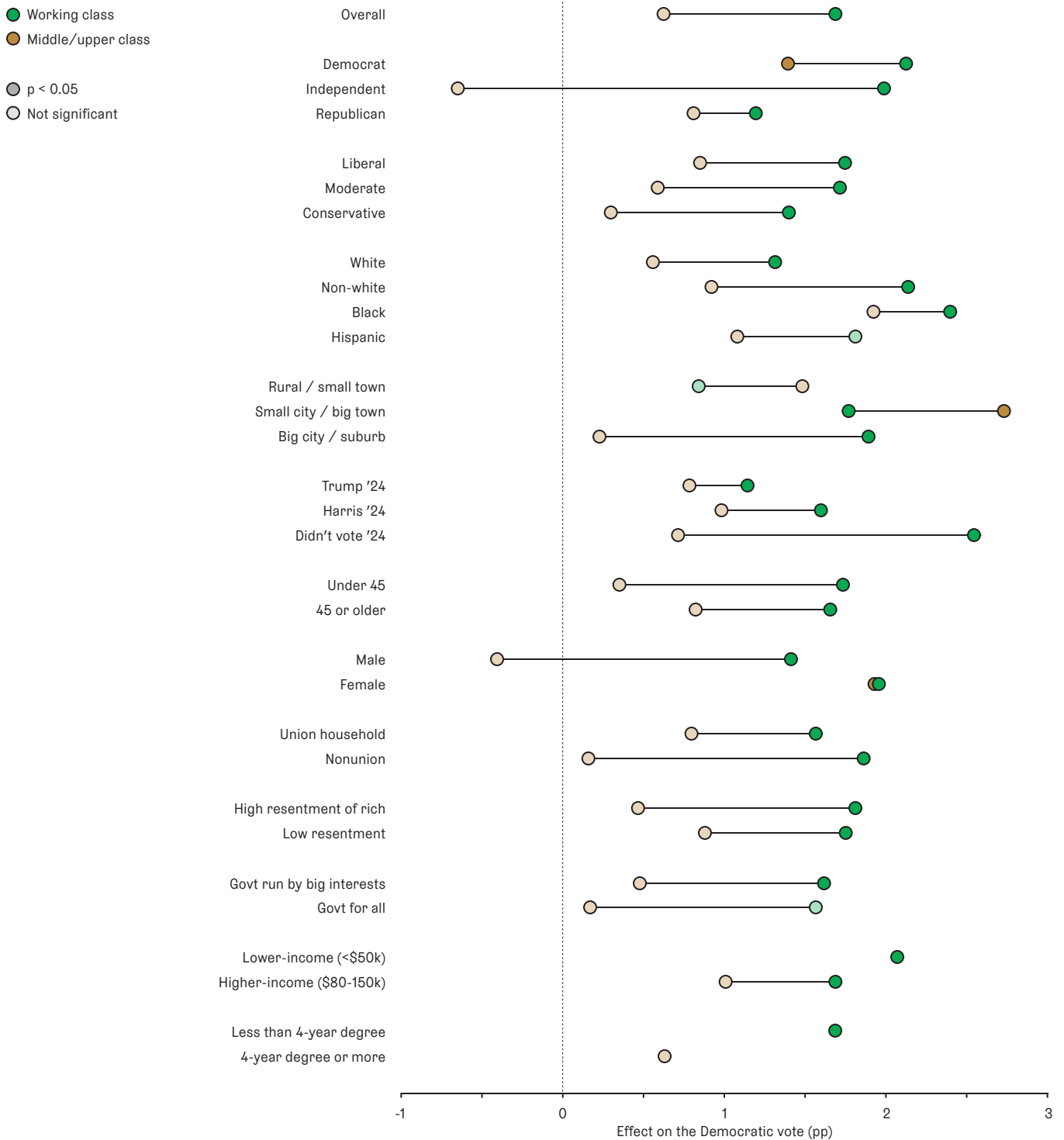
The preference for populist language over establishment language was statistically significant in every working-class group we examined:

- +2.5 among 2024 nonvoters and +2.4 among working-class black voters;
- +2.1 among working-class Democrats and lower-income workers, and +2.0 among working-class women; and
- +1.1 among 2024 Trump voters, +1.2 among working-class Republicans, and +1.3 among working-class whites.

Which groups does populist (vs. establishment) language move the most?

Effect of populist language on Democratic vote by subgroup

FIGURE 15



Importantly, populist language chiefly appeals to the working class. Among middle- and upper-class voters, the populist edge is much weaker and not statistically significant overall (+0.6 points, not significant). Nonetheless, it does add votes among a few middle- and upper-class groups (women, +1.9 points; small-city and large-town voters, +2.7 points; Democrats, +1.4 points). So populist messaging almost never backfires; it is one of the few moves that helps among the Democratic base and swing voters alike.

→ Finding 3: What turns off working-class voters most is credentialism, rather than competence or compromise.

Not every establishment message is viewed equally negatively by working-class voters. The establishment voice is really several voices, and they fare quite differently in our polling. A bipartisan “Work with both parties to get things done” is barely penalized at all (46.4%, just 0.3 points below the people-first average), and “Act on practical solutions that deliver results” performs only moderately worse than the average populist message focused on centering the American people more in US politics (–1 point, marginally significant at $p = .08$).

We observe more substantial negative effects for messaging that centers the role of experts and credentials: “Listen more to experts and evidence” polls at –3.1 points. Interestingly, “Avoid extreme positions and focus on balanced solutions” polls at –1.8 points; perhaps that is read as credentialism too. At any rate, what turns off working-class voters is not competence or compromise but the suggestion that politics is best left to the experts. In sharp contrast, an appeal to bipartisanship (“Let’s get things done across the aisle”) is nearly as acceptable to working-class voters as siding with the people.

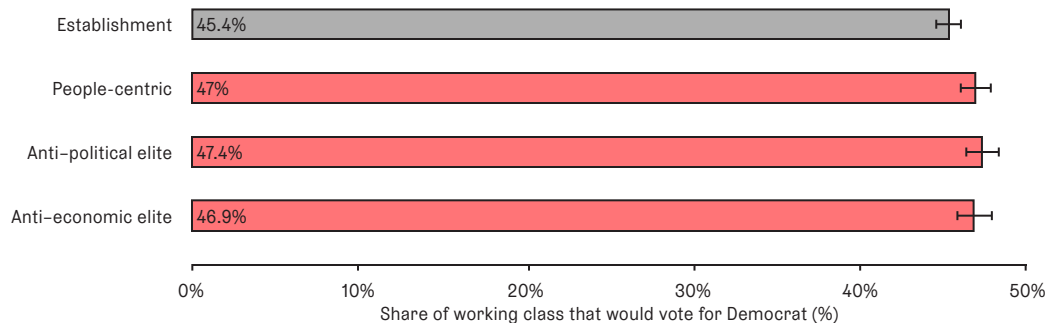
→ Finding 4: Among working-class voters, naming an elite enemy in a people-first message does not change its impact — though across the full electorate, it has a modest positive effect.

As described above, populism has two aspects — siding with ordinary people and naming an enemy — and our design layers each anti-elite clause on a common people-first base message. That lets us cleanly measure whether adding an elite enemy to a people-first message moves the working-class vote. Our results show it does not, though it does produce a positive effect among the larger electorate, where naming a political elite modestly outperforms a plain people-first message by about 0.6 points, a small but statistically significant margin ($p = .05$). This difference is driven by middle- and upper-class voters.

Among working-class voters, support is 45.4% for an establishment message, 47% for a people-first one (+1.6 points), and 47.2% for a people-first message that also names an elite (+1.8 points). On average, working-class voters respond little to adding an enemy to the people-first message; the populist payoff comes mostly from centering the people. But that average hides sharp differences between groups.

All three versions of populism beat establishment messaging, and all perform similarly overall

FIGURE 16



These results are for working-class respondents only. Across the full electorate, however, a people-first message that also names a political elite modestly outperforms a plain people-first message (+0.6 points); the almost negligible difference shown here is specific to the working class.

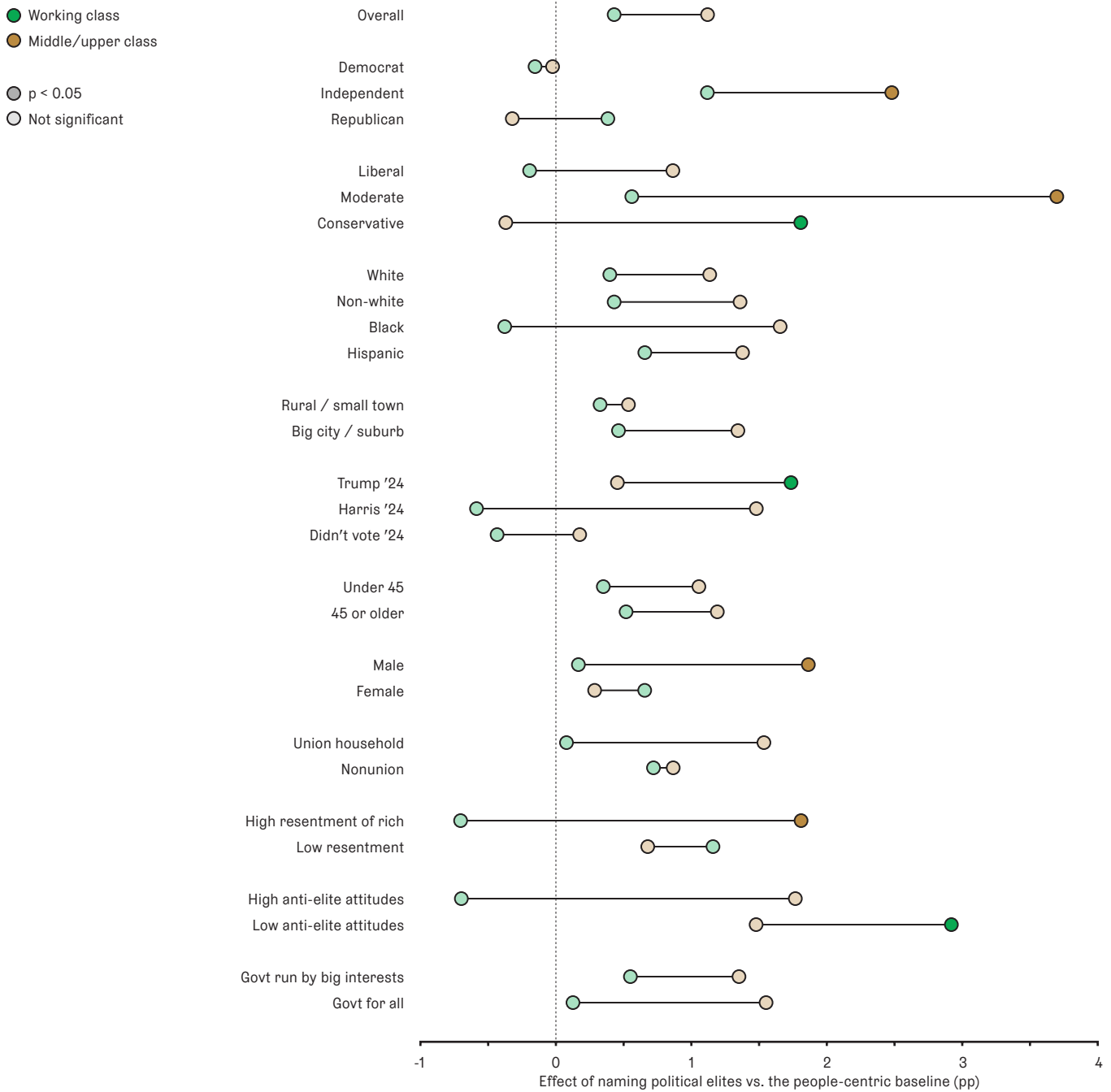
→ Finding 5: Among right-leaning and independent respondents, taking aim at political elites pays off more than people-first rhetoric alone.

Adding a political enemy message beats a plain people-first message by a statistically significant margin in two (overlapping) working-class subgroups: 2024 Trump voters and conservative voters, both by +1.8 points. In every other group of voters, the addition of an enemy adds no significant boost to the people-first populist message. Yet naming a political elite does perform well among middle- and upper-class voters, especially among moderates (+3.7 points) and independents (+2.5 points) — the persuadable center the party needs to win over.

The corporate-elite clause comes closest to increasing support among the base: among liberals and 2024 Harris voters combined, it edges out a plain people-first message by about +1.2 points, though this effect is only marginally significant ($p = .07$) and also falls short of statistical significance in either group on its own (for liberals, +1.3 points, and for Harris voters, +1.0 points, neither significant). For every other group, the corporate clause adds no significant boost beyond the people-first message. Its strength as a populist message, therefore, is carried mostly by the people-first component, giving at most a marginal anti-corporate bonus among the base. In sum, while employing anti-economic elite rhetoric may modestly increase Democrats' support among the base, the only anti-elite rhetoric that significantly improves Democrats' chances aims at political elites — and its benefits are concentrated among right-leaning working-class voters and, in the middle and upper classes, among independents and moderates.

Which groups does naming a political elite move the most?
Effect of naming a political elite over a plain “for the people” message on the Democratic vote

FIGURE 17



→ Finding 6: Not all anti-economic elite messaging is created equal: blaming those who “rig the economy” performs best.

Although the series of messages targeting political elites performs better overall than the other types of anti-elite messaging, the best-performing single message of any type, political or economic, is an anti-economic elite one: “Challenge wealthy donors and corporate lobbyists who rig the economy against regular people” (48.4%, +1.4 points over the pooled people-centric mean of 47.0%). Yet the effectiveness of the anti-economic elite messages varies substantially. “Confront Wall Street interests that gamble with our economy” is the worst-performing anti-elite message we tested (45.6%, -1.4 points below the people-centric message).

These results highlight the importance of how a villain is framed. The strongest message pairs the recognition of concrete culprits (wealthy donors, corporate lobbyists) with the identification of a deliberate injustice done to ordinary people (rigging the economy against regular people). The weakest economic messages are vaguer and more impersonal: Wall Street “gambling with our economy” (–1.4 points), corporations putting “profits ahead of people” (–0.5 points), and even “billionaires who buy influence” (+0.2 points). A vivid enemy is not enough: Wall Street, big corporations, and party bosses are all vivid targets, yet all three scored below plain people-centric framing. We see the same thing on the political side, where framing politicians as serving themselves instead of the public (+1.1 points) or blocking change (+1.2 points) beats process complaints like party bosses rigging the rules to stay in power (–0.8 points). The broad lesson is that an anti-elite appeal lands best when it spells out a concrete harm to ordinary people.

Anti-elite messages ranked by working-class support

TABLE 15

Anti-elite clause	Enemy	Working-class support	vs. people-centric baseline
... challenge wealthy donors and corporate lobbyists who rig the economy against regular people.	Economic	48.4%	+1.4
... take on politicians who serve themselves instead of the public	Political	48.2%	+1.1
... take on the lobbyists and Washington insiders who block change.	Political	48.2%	+1.2
... challenge career politicians who protect insiders over constituents	Political	47.2%	+0.2
... challenge billionaires who buy influence.	Economic	47.2%	+0.2
... take on big corporations that put profits ahead of people.	Economic	46.5%	–0.5
... challenge party bosses who rig the rules to stay in power.	Political	46.2%	–0.8
... confront Wall Street interests that gamble with our economy.	Economic	45.6%	–1.4

Each statement pairs the same people-first opener (“Listen more / Give a real voice / Respond to the needs of the American people”) with the anti-elite clause shown. Read the ranking for common patterns — concrete villain-and-victim messages land, abstract financial jargon does not — rather than as a decisive margin for any single clause.

SECTION 9

Run Candidates With Non-Elite Class Backgrounds

Beyond what candidates say, we also randomized candidates' occupational backgrounds across five broad classes: elite-professional jobs (lawyer, corporate executive, investment banker, management consultant, hospital administrator), middle-class jobs (journalist, software developer, civil engineer, architect, nonprofit manager), small-business owners, pink-collar jobs (nurse, social worker, teacher, librarian), and working-class jobs (factory worker, mechanic, server, retail clerk, bartender, receptionist). The good news for candidates from elite backgrounds is that, although it helps to have a non-elite background, this is the weakest effect among the six Win-O-Meter factors.³¹

→ Finding 1: An elite professional background hurts, and any non-elite background helps.

Giving the Democrat any non-elite occupation rather than an elite professional one is worth +1 point among working-class voters. An elite professional background disadvantages candidates, not the absence of a blue-collar background in particular.

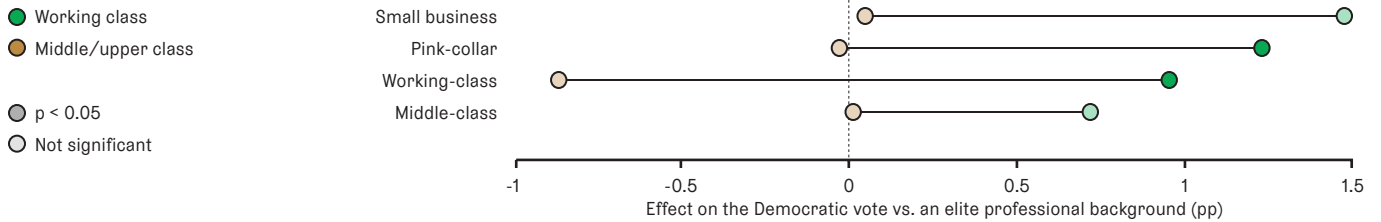
Against an elite professional baseline of 45.8%, every non-elite background does as well or better: pink-collar (47.0%) and working-class (46.7%) beat it significantly (+1.2 and +1.0 points). Small-business owners (47.3%) have the largest single edge over candidates with elite professional backgrounds (+1.5 points), though this effect is only borderline significant ($p = .068$). Middle-class workers (46.5%), by contrast, do not have any statistically significant advantage over those with elite professional backgrounds (+0.7 points, not significant). The differences among the four non-elite backgrounds are small and not statistically significant. The only clear line in the data is between elite professional jobs and other backgrounds.³²

31 The occupation categories follow a two-dimensional view of class associated with the sociologist Daniel Oesch, which sorts jobs both by their skill and credentialing (a vertical ladder) and by their work logic (a horizontal axis — working with things and machines, with rules and paperwork, or with people). (See Daniel Oesch, "Labour Market Trends and the Goldthorpe Class Schema: A Conceptual Reassessment," *Swiss Journal of Sociology* 29, no. 2 [2003].) The two cuts in our scheme line up with the two dimensions. Holding pink-collar apart from working-class is mainly a vertical, credentialing distinction: pink-collar jobs — nursing, teaching, social work, and library work — are trained sociocultural semiprofessionals, a step up in skill from the routine production, service, and clerical jobs (factory worker, mechanic, retail, bartender, clerk) in our working-class category, several of which involve the same people-facing work as pink-collar jobs, but at a lower level of credentialing. The horizontal axis, in turn, separates pink-collar from our middle-class category: both are credentialed, but pink-collar work is interpersonal and sociocultural (care, teaching), whereas the middle-class jobs are largely technical (engineer, software developer, architect). That second horizontal split is the politically charged one: across rich democracies, sociocultural professionals have moved to the cultural left, while technical and managerial professionals and the productive working class have trended the other way.

32 Even if *all* middle-class professional jobs are counted as elite, so that non-elite is limited to small-business owners and pink-collar and working-class workers only, those three still beat the combined elite professional–middle class group by 0.8 points (+0.76) among working-class voters.

The elite professional penalty by class
Effect of each non-elite occupational background vs. an elite-professional one
on the Democratic vote

FIGURE 18



→ Finding 2: The elite professional penalty is concentrated among a surprising mix of non-white, big-city and suburban, younger, male, union-household, and Trump-leaning working-class voters.

Pooling all four non-elite backgrounds, the performance gap between non-elite and elite backgrounds is large and significant in some groups but absent in others.

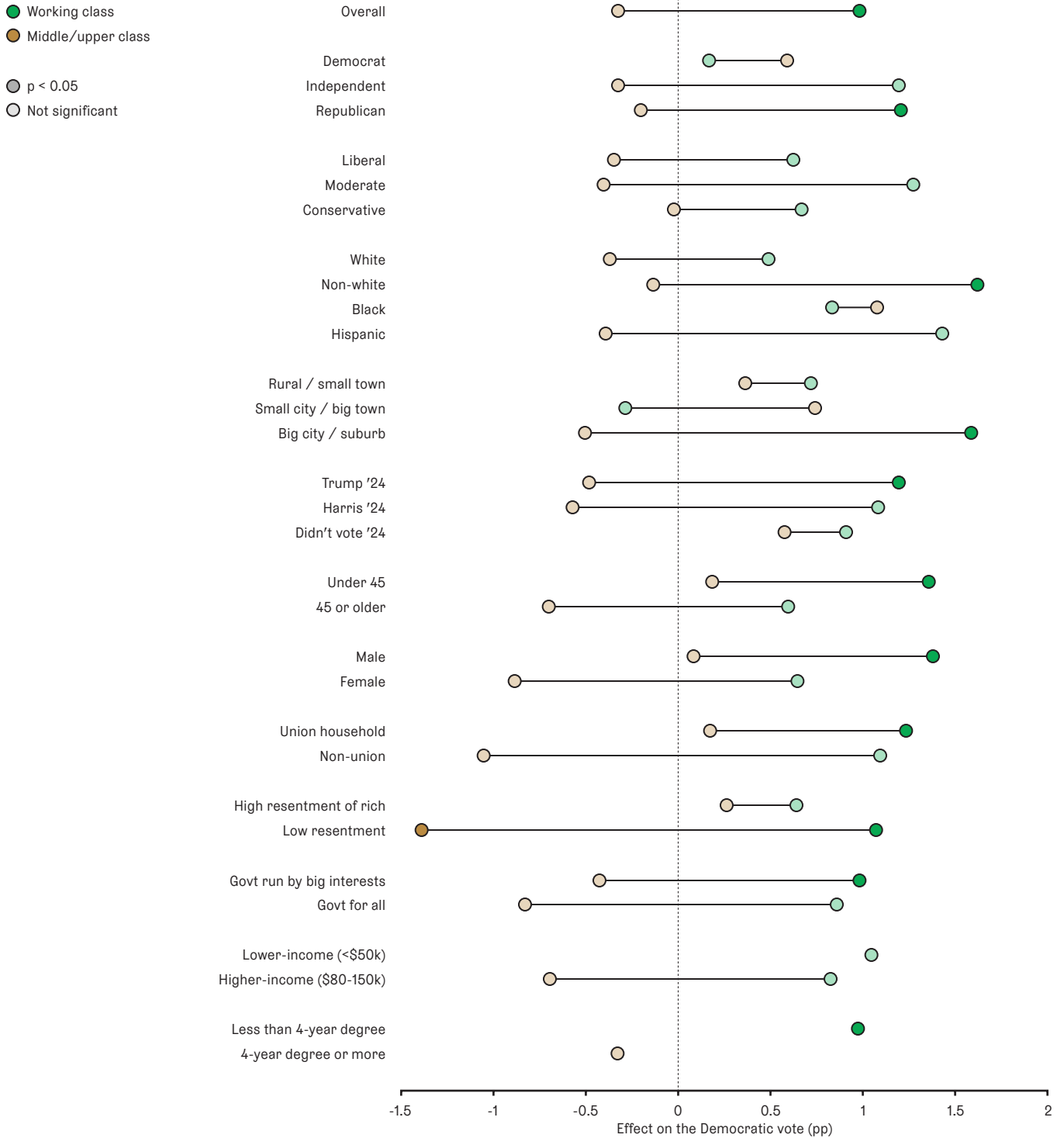
- Largest gaps: Candidates with non-elite backgrounds performed best among working-class non-whites (+1.6 points), big-city and suburban residents (+1.6 points), men (+1.4 points), under-45s (+1.4 points), union households (+1.2 points), and 2024 Trump voters (+1.2 points).
- Smallest or no gaps: Candidates with non-elite backgrounds performed similarly to those with elite backgrounds among working-class Democrats (+0.2 points, not significant) and working-class whites (+0.5, not significant).

This is a telling mix. The elite penalty is strongest among younger, urban, male, and antiestablishment working-class voters, including the Trump-curious right, exactly the voters most primed to read a lawyer or executive résumé as a marker of an establishment they distrust. The effect declines substantially and is not statistically significant among working-class Democrats as a whole or among working-class whites. Interestingly, elite candidate backgrounds make the least difference with rural white working-class voters.

The elite-professional penalty: non-elite vs. elite candidate occupation

Effect of a non-elite (vs. elite-professional) candidate occupation on Democratic vote by subgroup

FIGURE 19



Crucially, the elite-professional penalty is almost entirely a working-class phenomenon: among middle- and upper-class voters, the non-elite advantage is essentially zero (–0.3 points, not significant). Within the working class, the gap concentrates among swing groups — non-white, big-city or suburban, male, under-45, union household, and Trump and Republican voters (+1.2 to +1.6 points) — and disappears among working-class Democrats and working-class whites.

→ Finding 3: Candidate occupation matters, but working-class occupations do not beat non-elite occupations in general.

A working-class occupational background does not outperform pink-collar or small-business-owner backgrounds. Thus, the gain is the elite professional *penalty*, which has roughly the same effect compared to any non-elite background.

→ Finding 4: Small-business owners are read as working-class entrepreneurs.

A small-business owner is not, in the usual sociological sense, a working-class job. We included these owners in the non-elite occupational category deliberately because they occupy a distinctive place in working-class life. The owner of the local garage, salon, or diner is someone working-class voters meet as a neighbor and a self-made worker, not as a distant professional or executive. That intuition is borne out by the results: a small-business background performs as well as a working-class job and, in several of the key groups, slightly better, while clearly beating an elite professional background. It appears working-class voters appraise small-business owners as peers who build things — a livelihood earned through one's own work rather than through credentials, which is exactly the quality for which working-class voters penalize elite professionals.³³

→ Finding 5: Why any non-elite background helps, but a working-class one earns no extra credit: the trade-off between relatability and competence.

To better understand why we don't observe a positive bonus for working-class candidates among working-class respondents, we conducted an additional set of tests. After each matchup we asked respondents how they saw seven distinct traits of the candidates, and the answers show why the expected shared-class bonus is mostly canceled out. Any non-elite background earns an outsider bonus: working-class voters are significantly more likely to view a non-elite Democrat as less like a typical politician (+3.3 points). On a combined relatability index — “understands people like you,” “sincere,” “donor-independent,” and “outsider” — non-elite candidates gain +1.5 points. But that lift is generic to being non-elite; a working-class candidate earns essentially no extra credit on any of these relatability traits over a pink-collar, small-business, or middle-class background.

Where the working class is unique is with respect to perceptions of candidate competence. Working-class candidates — and, to a lesser degree, pink-collar ones — are the only two backgrounds working-class voters rate as *less* qualified than elite professionals, by -1.9 points. Because the relatability upside is shared across every non-elite background, while the competence discount falls specifically on working-class (and pink-collar) candidates, the two effects roughly cancel each other out. A working-class background, though it clearly beats an elite one, therefore nets no distinct advantage over other non-elite backgrounds.³⁴

→ Finding 6: A non-elite background does not amplify the other dials.

We also investigated whether a non-elite occupational background amplifies any of the other working-class appeals we tested — perhaps because messengers with non-elite backgrounds would be viewed as more credible — but we found little evidence for

33 On working-class admiration for the self-made small-business owner — and its distance from the salaried professional-managerial elite — see Joan C. Williams, *Outclassed: How the Left Lost the Working Class and How to Win Them Back* (New York: St. Martin's, 2025).

34 The full perception groupings — by trait and by candidate class — are in the online appendix.

this. Testing each dial for an interaction with the candidate's background (non-elite vs. elite, and working-class vs. elite), none of the five other dials had greater effect for a non-elite candidate than for an elite one (all interactions were not significant). The messenger and the message appear to operate independently and additively: a working-class background does not multiply the other dial effects, nor is it required for them to work. If anything, explicitly prioritizing working-class people adds slightly less advantage for candidates who are already visibly working-class — a hint that a working-class messenger and a working-class appeal partly substitute for one another.

SECTION 10

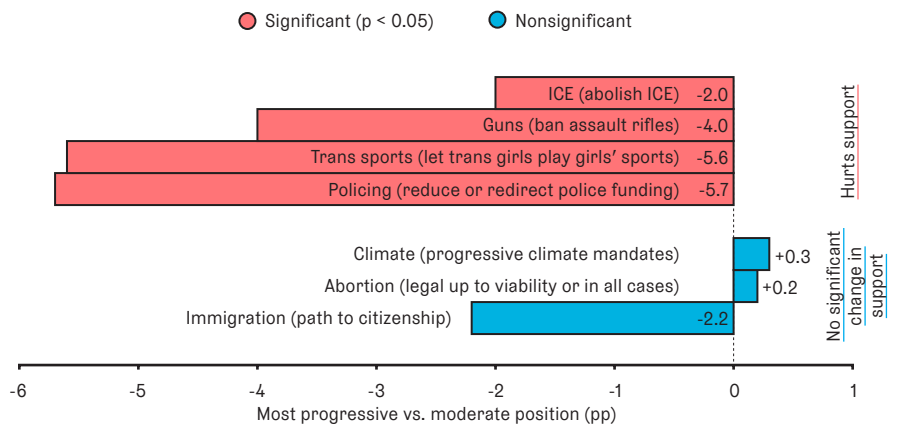
Progressive Positions on Social Issues: Where Moving Left Costs Working-Class Votes and Where It Doesn't

A long-running debate asks whether Democrats must take more moderate positions on culture to win. One camp — Ruy Teixeira and the *New York Times* editorial board — argues that a “purely economic” populism is doomed without “cultural populism,” meaning more conservative stances on immigration, crime, and identity, and points to a roughly +2-point edge for moderate candidates.³⁵ Critics such as Adam Bonica counter that, measured by how voters actually *perceive* candidates, there is no consistent moderation advantage at all.³⁶ A recent conjoint experiment by David Broockman and Joshua Kalla helps reconcile the two sides: moving toward the “elite middle” raises a candidate’s vote share on issues where their party’s usual position is unpopular but backfires where that position already commands majority support, so the small returns on moderation reflect gains on some issues being offset by losses on others, not voters’ indifference to these issues.³⁷

Our own experiment brings this issue-by-issue logic directly to the working-class electorate: because each candidate’s position on every social issue is randomly assigned, we can determine the cost of moving from a moderate stance to the most progressive one directly, issue by issue, holding everything else constant. The next figure presents a left–right axis, distinct from the working-class resonance of positions emphasized earlier; all contrasts are versus the moderate position.

Where moving left does and does not hurt working-class vote share
Effect on working-class support of a candidate taking the most progressive position
on each issue instead of the moderate one

FIGURE 20



Moving to the most progressive position significantly costs working-class votes on four issues. The largest cost is on policing: a candidate who would reduce or redirect police funding runs -5.7 points behind one who pairs body cameras with de-escalation

35 Editorial Board, “The Partisans Are Wrong: Moving to the Center Is the Way to Win,” *New York Times*, October 2025; Ruy Teixeira, “No Populism without Cultural Populism,” *The Liberal Patriot*, February 26, 2026.

36 Adam Bonica, “The New York Times Argues ‘Moving to the Center Is the Way to Win.’ But the Data Shows the Strategy Is Tapped Out,” *On Data and Democracy*, October 20, 2025.

37 David E. Broockman and Joshua L. Kalla, “Should Moving to the Middle Win Candidates Votes? It Depends Where Voters Are,” working paper, March 2026.

training. Transgender youth sports is close behind, and it is the single lowest-scoring position we tested: letting trans girls play girls' sports draws just 38.3% working-class support, -5.6 points below the moderate stance. Calling to ban assault rifles costs -4 points relative to universal background checks, and abolishing ICE costs -2 points relative to reforming it.

On three other issues, the candidate's position makes essentially no difference. On abortion, moving from a fifteen-week with exceptions stance to a viability or legal in all cases stance changed working-class support by just +0.2 points, a difference that is not statistically significant. On climate, the most progressive mandates, written with more-good-jobs language, changed support by +0.3 points (also not significant), no better or worse than a moderate clean energy jobs framing. Immigration sits in between, and the cost depends on the framing: pooled, the two citizenship framings run about -2.2 points behind "secure the border first" (marginally significant, $p = .06$), but that penalty falls entirely on the nonresonant version. A path to citizenship "for those who worked and paid taxes" costs only -1.5 points and is statistically indistinguishable from the moderate stance ($p = .31$), whereas "citizenship for all undocumented immigrants" costs -2.5 points and is the only version that significantly underperforms ($p = .03$).

SECTION 11

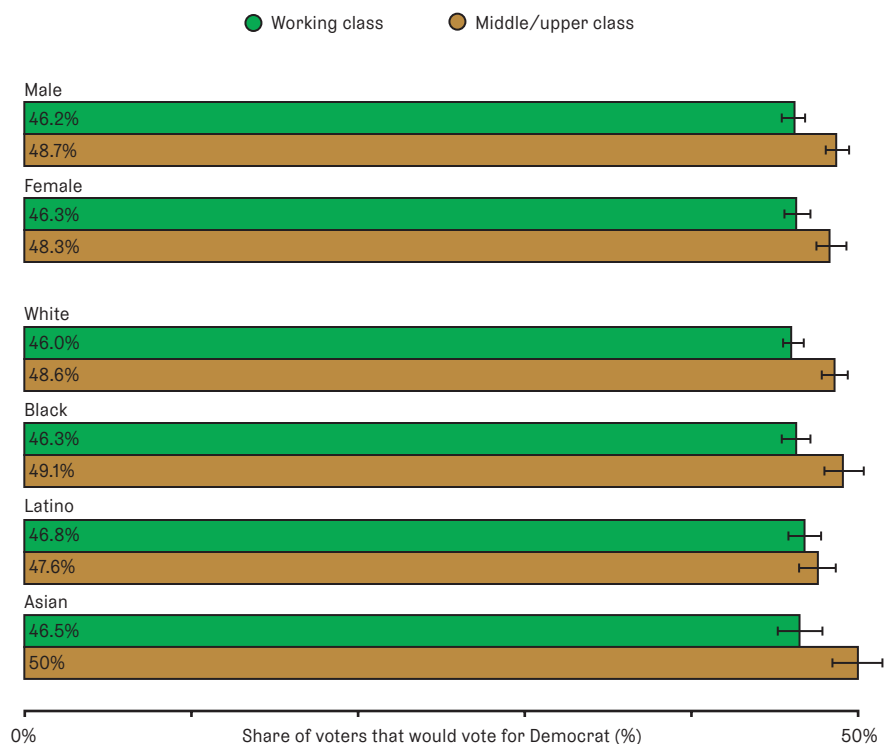
Candidate Race and Gender: Near-Zero Dials, With One Exception

Alongside occupation, we independently randomized each candidate's race (white, black, Latino, Asian) and gender (man, woman). Unlike the message dials, these are fixed facts about who the candidate is, and the headline is that they barely move the vote.

- Race: A white Democrat draws 46.0%, black 46.3%, Latino 46.8%, and Asian 46.5% of the working-class vote. Against a white baseline, none of the gaps was significant: Latino +0.8 (marginal, $p = .09$), black +0.3, Asian +0.5. Across the full electorate, the pattern is the same (black +0.5, marginal, $p = .07$; others not significant).
- Gender: A woman draws 46.3% and a man 46.2% of the working-class vote, a difference of +0.2 (not significant), indistinguishable from zero. The same holds among all voters (+0.0) and among the middle and upper classes (-0.4), neither significant.

Candidate race and gender barely move the vote

FIGURE 21



The one significant effect is co-ethnic affinity. The near-zero averages hide a clean within-group pattern: voters of color reward candidates of their own race, while white voters impose no penalty for candidates of other races.

- A black Democratic candidate gains +3.3 points among black voters (vs. a white candidate).
- A Latino Democratic candidate gains +2.2 points among Hispanic voters.

→ Among white voters, a non-white candidate costs essentially nothing: black -0.2, Latino -0.5, Asian -0.2 (all not significant), so there is no white backlash to offset the affinity gains.

Gender has no analogous affinity effect. A woman candidate gains only +0.3 points among women voters and loses only -0.3 among men (neither significant); among working-class women specifically, the effect is -0.5 points (also not significant). Voters do not reward or punish a candidate's gender the way some of them reward shared race.

On the Republican side, the candidate's demographics are equally inert, with one exception: an Asian Republican loses -2.2 points of the Republican vote among working-class voters relative to a white Republican, and a Republican woman loses -0.6 (not significant). Race and gender, in other words, do slightly more to dent a Republican than to help a Democrat, but both effects are small.

A candidate's race and gender do *not* function to move voters the way message, economics, and position on cultural issues do. On average, they move the working-class vote by a point or less. Yet race does mobilize co-ethnic voters (making it more important for turnout than persuasion). A black or Latino Democrat runs measurably stronger with black or Hispanic voters, respectively, at no measurable cost among white voters, which is an affinity and turnout story, not a trade-off. Gender is close to inert throughout. The co-ethnic black and Latino effects are the most robust.