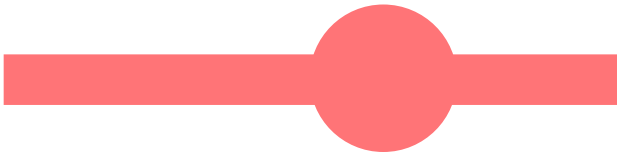
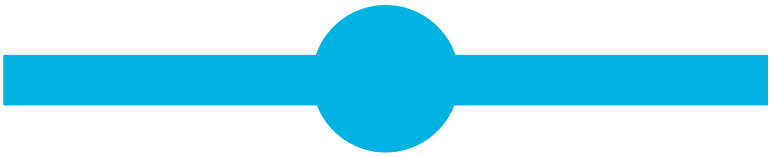
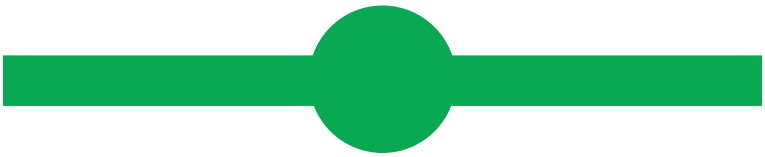
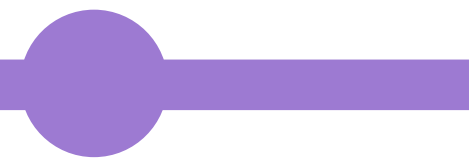
Commonsense Solidarity

How a working-class coalition can be built, and maintained









JACOBIN
CENTER FOR WORKING-CLASS POLITICS
YouGov

INTRODUCTION

In 2021, ***Jacobin***, a New York-based socialist magazine with a print circulation of 75,000 and an online audience of three million a month, collaborated with **YouGov** to survey working-class voting behavior in the United States. The work was done in conjunction with the newly formed **Center for Working-Class Politics**.

The Center for Working-Class Politics is a research institution dedicated to projects including 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. Its core mission is to study the relationship between working-class voters and progressive politics, in the belief that neither can achieve its ends without the other.

A New Progressive Left: Promises and Pitfalls

In the last five years, a rejuvenated progressive left has established itself as a potent force in American politics. Inspired by Senator Bernie Sanders's 2016 presidential run, progressive Democratic challengers have mobilized donors and volunteers around a boldly egalitarian economic platform, winning an impressive array of local, state, and congressional races. From city councils and state legislatures to the halls of Congress, the electoral success of this new left is one of the major political stories of our moment.

And yet for the most part, these progressive triumphs have been concentrated in well-educated, relatively high-income, and heavily Democratic districts. Even when progressives have won primaries in working-class areas, they have generally done so without increasing total turnout or winning over new working-class voters. And in races outside the friendly terrain of the blue-state metropolis, the same progressive candidates have largely struggled, along with the rest of the Democratic Party. Overall, progressives have not yet made good on one key promise of their campaigns: to transform and expand the Democratic electorate itself.

This poses a major challenge to any hope for a national political realignment on progressive terms. Recent victories in places like Chicago, Los Angeles, and New York City suggest that left-wing candidates may continue to replace moderate Democrats in demographically favorable urban districts, which could lead to more progressive policies at the municipal or state level. But the national picture is less promising. There are simply not enough districts of this kind to win control of the U.S. House of Representatives, never mind the Senate. For the kind of majority necessary to pass Medicare for All, or any of the other big-ticket items on the social-democratic agenda, progressive candidates will need to win in a far wider range of places. Until they do, their political leverage will remain sharply limited at the local, state, and national levels.

Why Progressives Need the Working Class

A founding assumption of the Center for Working-Class Politics is that progressives can only expand their appeal — and achieve their political aims — by winning a larger share of support from working-class voters.[1] Two key realities support this point of view.

First, the working class makes up by far the largest share of the American electorate. In 2020, 63% of voters did not have college degrees, and 74% of voters came from households making less than $100,000 a year. For much of the twentieth century, these less-educated, lower-income voters were mostly loyal Democrats. But since the 1970s, and more rapidly in the last decade, large parts of the working class have drifted away from the Democratic Party. Looking to the future, it is difficult to imagine a victorious progressive coalition that does not reverse this trend, and ultimately incorporate a much larger share of working-class voters.

Second, the working class has a special relationship to progressive policy: it stands to benefit most from the egalitarian and redistributive reforms that anchor left-wing politics. Historically, the greatest triumphs of American progressives in the twentieth century — from the New Deal to the Civil Rights Movement and the Great Society — were achieved only with a sturdy base of working-class support. The same is true for social-democratic achievements abroad. A progressive politics that does not expand its strength with working-class voters today risks cutting itself loose from the central force that has propelled egalitarian reforms throughout the world.

This is not a simple problem with a clear solution: in fact, the trends have run in the opposite direction for nearly half a century. It is a problem that calls for focused study.

Specifically, our work asks three basic questions:

1. How can progressives win in working-class America?
2. How can progressives more effectively engage low-propensity working-class voters across lines of race and geography, especially outside large cities?
3. What are the electoral advantages and disadvantages of various kinds of progressive platforms and messaging? Can different progressive messages work in different areas?

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1 For the purposes of this study, we generally measure the working class as individuals without a four-year college degree. We use this standard because non-college-educated voters represent a common shorthand for the working class in media discussions, as well as much academic writing, and because it offers us a clear and simple baseline for assessing working-class attitudes. Of course, we understand the many limitations of this definition, which fails to account for critical differences in income, workplace autonomy, skill level, etc. As a result, in our analyses we also capture the working class using a wide range of alternative measures described later in this report, and report our results using these measures in addition to our primary measure of non-college educated individuals.

Executive Summary

Our experimental study, the first of its kind, offers a new and powerful perspective on working-class political views. In collaboration with the public opinion firm YouGov, we designed a survey to test how working-class voters respond to head-to-head electoral matchups. By asking voters to choose directly between thousands of hypothetical candidates — rather than isolated policies or slogans — we can develop a richer, more realistic portrait of voter attitudes than conventional polls can provide. And by presenting this survey to a representative group of 2,000 working-class voters in five key swing states — a much larger sample of this demographic than appears in most polls — we are able to focus on these voters in much greater depth.

The key takeaways of our survey, listed briefly below and discussed in greater detail in the full report, can inform future progressive campaigns.

Key Takeaways

Working-class voters prefer progressive candidates who focus primarily on bread-and-butter economic issues, and who frame those issues in universal terms. This is especially true outside deep-blue parts of the country. Candidates who prioritized bread-and-butter issues (jobs, health care, the economy), and who presented them in plainspoken, universalist rhetoric, performed significantly better than those who had other priorities or used other language. This general pattern was even more dramatic in rural and small-town areas, where Democrats have struggled in recent years.

Populist, class-based progressive campaign messaging appeals to working-class voters at least as well as other varieties of Democratic messaging. Candidates who named elites as a major cause of America's problems, invoked anger at the status quo, and celebrated the working class were well received by working-class voters — even when pitted against more "moderate" strains of Democratic rhetoric.

Progressives do not need to surrender questions of social justice to win working-class voters, but "woke," activist-inspired rhetoric is a liability. Potentially Democratic working-class voters did not shy away from progressive candidates or candidates who strongly opposed racism. But candidates who framed that opposition in highly specialized, identity-focused language fared significantly worse than candidates who embraced either populist or mainstream language.

Working-class voters prefer working-class candidates. A candidate's race or gender does not appear to matter much to potentially Democratic working-class voters. But candidates with upper-class backgrounds performed significantly less well than other candidates. Class background matters.

Working-class non-voters are not automatic progressives. We find little evidence that low-propensity voters fail to vote because they don't see sufficiently progressive views reflected in the political platforms of mainstream Democratic candidates.

Democratic partisanship does not hurt progressive candidates. Working-class voters prefer progressive candidates running as Democrats to candidates who stress their independence from the party.

Blue-collar workers are especially sensitive to candidate messaging — and respond even more acutely to the differences between populist and "woke" language. Primarily manual blue-collar workers, in comparison with primarily white-collar workers, were even more drawn to candidates who stressed bread-and-butter issues, and who avoided activist rhetoric.

Introduction to the Study

It is no longer controversial to point out that the Democratic Party is losing ground with working-class voters. As many have noted, on different places along the political spectrum — from Thomas Piketty to James Carville — the last several decades have witnessed a major shift in the Democratic electorate, away from its New Deal blue-collar base and toward a new coalition centered on college-educated voters.

In the last decade, as these trends have accelerated, it has also become clear that this class-based shift extends across racial groups. Between 2012 and 2020, the share of college-educated whites in the Democratic camp rose from 46 to 54 percent, while the share of whites without a college degree, already at a historic low, fell from 40 to 37 percent. Working-class voters of color, meanwhile, mostly remain Democrats, but their recent shift away from the party has been just as pronounced: Republican support among nonwhite voters without degrees jumped from 16 percent in 2012 to 25 percent in 2020.[2]

Clearly, it is time for Democrats to reassess their approach to winning working-class voters. In the most recent round of intra-party arguments, after the 2020 election, both sides recognized the urgency of the problem, but came to diametrically opposite conclusions. On the one hand, centrists like Abigail Spanberger and James Clyburn slammed left-wingers for their ideological extremism, citing policies like defunding the police and Medicare for All as major electoral liabilities — especially with the working class. On the other side of the divide, progressive leaders like Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Rashida Tlaib insist that the lack of a bold economic message has hampered the party's ability to inspire working-class enthusiasm.[3]

At first glance, academic research on the subject would appear to back the centrists. Since at least the late 1990s much of the political science literature on the behavior of working-class voters suggests that this group holds broadly moderate political preferences, and tends to punish candidates who take extreme issue positions.[4] For many analysts this remains the prevailing common sense: Democratic candidates who move to the political center will gain support among working-class voters, and especially working-class white voters.

Recent developments should lead us to question this conventional judgment. In the last decade, working-class discontent has roiled politics in advanced and developing economies alike. The rise of populism on the left and right, and the decline in support for establishment parties, has led to questions about the "moderation" of the working class. In recent years, left-leaning polling firms like Data for Progress have presented convincing evidence that many progressive policy ideas are popular among the electorate, including with working-class voters.[5]

More fundamentally, there is reason to question whether working-class voters ever really settled into a uniform political centrism in the first place.

2 These numbers come from the most comprehensive estimates of the Democratic electorate in the 2020 election: Yair Ghitza and Jonathan Robinson, *What Happened in 2020* (Catalist, 2021), https://catalist.us/wh-national/

3 Thomas Edsall. "'The Far Left Is the Republicans' Finest Asset.'" New York Times, November 18, 2020.

4 David Broockman and Joshua Kalla, "Candidate Ideology and Vote Choice in the 2020 US Presidential Election," 2020; Brandice Canes-Wrone, David W. Brady, and John F. Cogan, "Out of Step, out of Office: Electoral Accountability and House Members' Voting," *American Political Science Review*, 2002, 127–40; Andrew B. Hall, "What Happens When Extremists Win Primaries?," *American Political Science Review* 109, no. 1 (2015): 18–42; Seth Masket, *Learning from Loss: The Democrats, 2016–2020* (Cambridge University Press, 2020).

5 For many examples, see https://www.dataforprogress.org/memos

Many studies of voting behavior lump together disconnected policy positions and place them under unruly ideological umbrellas like "liberal," "moderate," and "conservative," or measure political preferences based on a simple left-right spectrum. Such one-dimensional ideological scales often fail to accurately capture the complexity of voter preferences.[6]

In reality, most voters hold a host of seemingly conflicting views simultaneously — liberal on some issues, conservative on others — and the salience of any given issue varies widely. For instance, a Catholic voter could fall on the extreme left of the spectrum on economic issues, but if opposition to abortion is their most important issue, then pro-life candidates might be the most appealing overall. In the models mentioned above, we would be forced to classify this voter as a moderate who prefers centrist or even conservative candidates — yet such a conclusion does not capture the complexity of their political beliefs.

In fact, voters do distinguish between types of policy extremism. Ideological consistency across issues is relatively exceptional and tends to be concentrated among the well-educated and wealthy.[7] As new research makes clear, many working-class voters in advanced economies have actually moved to the left on questions of economic policy (favoring more redistribution, more government spending on public goods, and more taxation of the very wealthy), while remaining culturally or socially moderate.[8] But, at least until the pandemic-induced (and temporary) turn away from austerity politics, many center-left parties, including the Democratic Party in the United States, have moved substantially to the left on cultural issues, while tempering their economic progressivism. This disjunct between center-left policy positions and working-class preferences underscores one of the key tensions in the Democratic Party coalition and helps to explain its lack of success in inspiring working-class support. In effect, an economically progressive but culturally moderate working-class constituency has no substantial representation in most advanced democracies.

To complicate matters further, policy preferences are far from the sum of a candidate's appeal. A candidate's messaging and language can affect how voters perceive any given policy agenda — so much so that a charismatic and skilled candidate can effectively win many over to a policy platform that might otherwise be unappealing to voters. This presents an opportunity for progressive candidates to run campaigns that promote egalitarian economic ideas without triggering a cultural backlash.

Alternatively, political style and messaging can hurt a candidate with an otherwise popular policy agenda. For example, when race-blind progressive policies like raising the minimum wage were presented as a means to address racial inequality, they were significantly less popular than when they were presented as measures that would raise wages for all groups of workers.[9]

In sum, there is reason to suspect that the conventional wisdom about working-class centrism no longer holds, if, indeed, it ever did. Candidates have an opportunity to improve their electoral fortunes by pushing progressive economic policies and carefully crafting their messaging to navigate a highly polarized cultural environment.

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6 Shawn Treier and D. Sunshine Hillygus, "The Nature of Political Ideology in the Contemporary Electorate," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 73, no. 4 (2009): 679–703.

7 Philip E. Converse, "The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics," in *Ideology and Discontent*, ed. David Apter (New York: Free Press, 1964); Michael Barber and Jeremy C. Pope, "Who Is Ideological? Measuring Ideological Consistency in the American Public," in *The Forum*, vol. 16 (De Gruyter, 2018), 97–122.

8 Peter A. Hall and Georgina Evans, "Representation Gaps: Changes in Popular Preferences and the Structure of Partisan Competition in the Developed Democracies," *Manuscript*, 2019.

9 Micah English and Joshua Kalla, "Racial Equality Frames and Public Policy Support: Survey Experimental Evidence," 2021.

Goal of the Study

Despite the many unresolved strategic questions progressives must confront to effectively reach working-class voters, to date, we know relatively little about what types of Democratic candidates perform best among working-class voters, particularly those in red and purple areas. The conventional wisdom is that Democrats can only compete in marginal or Republican-leaning districts when they offer centrist economic policies and steer clear of controversial cultural issues. Democratic House members like Abigail Spanberger, Connor Lamb of Pennsylvania, or Elissa Slotkin of Michigan personify this approach. In many ways this conventional wisdom has been borne out in recent elections. For instance, in the 2018 midterms, moderate Democrats were responsible for the vast majority of the 28 House seats that flipped from Republican to Democrat. By contrast, virtually all the headline progressive victories in 2018 resulted from primary upsets in safe Democratic districts. Progressive Democrats struggled to expand their electoral base in competitive districts.

Is it true that only centrist Democrats can be competitive in marginal or Republican-leaning districts? Does it matter if candidates are centrist on some issues while more progressive on others? For instance, Matt Cartwright, a Democrat from a Trump-voting district in Pennsylvania, won his 2020 race by positioning himself as a moderate on cultural issues while also cosponsoring Medicare for All. Was this a fluke, or is it a signal that only some kinds of progressive messaging are a political liability in competitive districts? Beyond this, what other types of candidate characteristics or messaging appeal most to working-class voters in competitive districts, and how do these vary across voter demographics? In particular, does candidate support among working-class voters diverge based on their support for or messaging around economic and culturally progressive policy positions?

These questions are difficult to answer for several reasons. Among these are the comparatively small number of progressive Democrats who have run serious campaigns in those competitive districts, and the many variations between candidates, races, and electorates that plague any statistical analysis trying to tease out the effect of different characteristics or messaging styles on voting behavior.

We addressed these limitations by conducting a survey that allowed us to compare working-class voters' opinions about thousands of hypothetical congressional candidates. Many surveys ask voters about their preferences for specific policies or test different types of candidate messaging. However, few have used experimental methods to test which hypothetical candidates are preferred by working-class voters when presented to them in head-to-head matchups. In real elections, voters must weigh their partisan loyalties, policy preferences, and the relative competitiveness of the district (among other factors) against a limited choice of candidates (each complete with their own policy preferences, rhetoric, and priorities). In our experiment, we tried to mimic many of these dynamics.

To help readers understand our key findings without reading the entire document, in this section we briefly explain how the survey was constructed and the options given to respondents. For a full description of the survey setup and question wordings, see the detailed analysis of results section later in this report.

Our hypothetical candidate profiles included a variety of demographic characteristics (race, gender, and class) and several attributes that allow us to measure the saliency of policy issues and rhetoric in different ways: bundles

of key policy issues (ranging from progressive to conservative economic, health, and civil rights positions),[10] day-one priorities (including racial justice, health care, economy, jobs, and immigration), and messaging styles (including progressive populist, "woke" progressive, "woke moderate,"[11] mainstream moderate, and Republican messaging).[12]

Each communication style is delivered in the form of a hypothetical soundbite. The soundbites we tested draw on language and themes from actual political messaging, delivered over the last two years, and reflect the most important general strands of contemporary campaign rhetoric. These include (1) the progressive populist, a Bernie Sanders-style message that pits working-class Americans against wealthy elites and emphasizes bread-and-butter economic questions; (2) the woke progressive, which borrows rhetoric from Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Ayanna Pressley, and combines identity-focused, activist-inspired language with a call for social justice; (3) the woke moderate, inspired by Kamala Harris and Kirsten Gillibrand, which combines a softer strand of activist rhetoric with more cautious, incremental policy commitments; (4) the mainstream moderate, a Joe Biden-style message that prioritizes national unity and pragmatic, bipartisan government and support of ordinary, working Americans; and finally (5) the Republican, a message drawn from generic Republican Party rhetoric in the Trump era.

Since candidates in the real world are never assessed in a partisan vacuum, we included Democratic, independent (running on the Democratic Party ballot line), and Republican candidates.[13] We offered a vast range of candidate types (there were 24,000 distinct candidate profiles in total) to potential Democratic voters (including independents and Republican leaners) to assess which Democratic candidates perform best among working-class voters in swing states.[14]

Here is an example candidate pairing that might have been shown to our respondents:

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10 To approximate a realistic policy platform, the key issues are presented as a single candidate characteristic, with one option chosen randomly from each of the three key issue areas (economy, civil rights, and health care). So, for instance, a candidate's key issues might read: "cut government spending, equal rights for all, repeal and replace Obamacare."

11 Woke candidates share a political style more than a set of policy ideas. This style includes a particular emphasis on race and anti-racism and a specialized vocabulary (i.e., "systemic injustice," "cultural appropriation," "equity," "Latinx," and "BIPOC"). These phrases usually denote familiar concepts, but the specialized language has the effect of signaling a particular awareness of or attitudes toward certain group-specific issues or inequalities.

12 We pre-tested each of the five soundbites among 100 MTurk respondents to ensure respondents generally associated each soundbite with prominent Democratic politicians most closely associated with each type of messaging.

13 We opted not to include an option "Independent" without a disclaimer that the candidate is running on the Democratic Party ballot line, as we assumed voters' overwhelming preference for a candidate capable of winning in a general election would bias respondents' opinions of Independents not running on a major party's ballot line.

14 We focus on potential Democratic voters rather than Republican voters because it is unlikely that many Republican voters would ever prefer Democratic candidates of any kind to Republican candidates.

Please choose between the two candidates below.

	Candidate A	Candidate B
Day One Priority	Healthcare	Immigration
Political Affiliation	Independent, but running as a Democrat	Independent, but running as a Democrat
Candidate Soundbite	The people closest to pain should be the people closest to power. In Washington, the wealthy and the privileged make the rules, but if you're poor, or an immigrant, or a person of color in America, then you know how hard it is just to survive in this country. We need courageous leaders who will protect the most vulnerable, fight for justice, and make transformative change.	America is better than this. We have to stop demonizing each other based on which party we support, how much money we make, or the color of our skin -- it's time to heal. We need common-sense leaders who will stick up for working people, listen to the experts, reach across the aisle, and get things done.
Race/Ethnicity	Asian	Black
Occupation Prior to Political Career	CEO of Fortune 500 company	CEO of Fortune 500 company
Gender	Female	Female
Key Issues	◦ Jobs guarantee ◦ Increase access to affordable healthcare ◦ Equal rights for all	◦ Increase access to affordable healthcare ◦ Equal rights for all ◦ Empower small business

○ Candidate A
○ Candidate B

Working-class voters prefer progressive candidates who focus primarily on bread-and-butter economic issues, and who frame those issues in universal terms. This is especially true outside deep-blue parts of the country. Candidates whose campaigns focused primarily on universalist policy issues such as jobs, health care, and the economy performed better than those who focused on group-specific policies, such as racial justice or immigration. In addition, woke messaging decreased the appeal of other candidate characteristics. For example, candidates employing woke messaging who championed either centrist or progressive economic, health care, or civil rights policy priorities were viewed less favorably than their counterparts who championed the same priorities but opted for universalist messaging.

That said, we do not find that progressives must abandon group-specific issues on the campaign trail — far from it. Candidates who included ending systemic racism among their key issues were viewed favorably, or at least not unfavorably, across virtually all demographic groups we compared, including across race: respondents from all racial groups — including whites — were strongly supportive of candidates who included ending systemic racism in their key issues platform. Our findings suggest that struggles for racial justice over the past decade have had such a profound effect on contemporary liberal political thinking that discussions of race and racism on the campaign trail are no longer political liabilities among working-class voters. Yet how politicians frame and discuss these issues is very important. *The primary difficulty for progressive candidates arises not when they address*

group-specific issues, but rather when they make such issues the centerpiece of their campaign messaging.

Centering economics and downplaying woke messaging is particularly important for progressives competing outside of liberal enclaves, where rural/small-town working-class white voters and white voters with low educational attainment wield disproportionate electoral influence. Our results suggest that progressives face challenges among rural/small-town, low-education working-class voters that they do not face in appealing to other working-class voters. For instance, rural/small-town, low-education, low-propensity, and also independent working-class voters in our survey expressed weaker support for (and sometimes opposition to) progressive messaging and policy priorities such as Medicare for All, ending systemic racism, and a jobs guarantee, compared to other respondents.

To attract rural/small-town, low-education, and independent working-class voters, it is especially important for progressives to focus on bread-and-butter economic issues and avoid woke messaging and group-based appeals on the campaign trail. Progressive and centrist candidates who downplayed woke rhetoric performed better among rural/small-town, low education, and independent voters than candidates — either progressive or moderate — who did not. In addition, universalist day-one priorities (economy, jobs, and health care) performed better among these groups compared to group-specific day-one priorities (immigration and racial justice). It may be particularly important for progressives to employ this kind of messaging when running in areas where they face the most competitive challenges.

We also find that focusing on economic issues and steering clear of woke messaging is unlikely to alienate many Democratic working-class voters. For instance, while candidates with progressive economic and civil rights campaign priorities were viewed much more favorably by Democrats than by independents, both independents and Democrats had unfavorable views of candidates who made racial justice their key campaign priority, and both groups were most favorable toward candidates who avoided woke rhetoric. What's more, non-woke messaging was at least as appealing as woke rhetoric across all racial groups, an indication that an avoidance of woke messaging is not a liability among Democrats of color.

Populist, class-based progressive campaign messaging appeals to working-class voters at least as well as other varieties of Democratic messaging.

The progressive populist, Sanders-style soundbite was at least as popular as all other candidate messaging among the entire sample, and across most of the demographic and political differences we explored. Among certain key demographics — including rural/small-town voters, self-identified working-class voters, and voters in blue-collar occupations — the progressive populist campaign messaging also enjoyed more support than all the other candidates, including the mainstream moderate, Biden-style candidate messaging.

The progressive populist soundbite was particularly effective when paired with non-elite candidate backgrounds and bread-and-butter economic day-one issues. For instance, a mainstream moderate military veteran — the kind of Democratic candidate often celebrated by party leaders and the press — received the support of just 51% of the sample; a progressive populist teacher, on the other hand, earned over 65%. A woke

progressive candidate with a focus on racial justice garnered 49% support; a progressive populist with a focus on jobs won 63%. Even non-Democrats, who are generally much cooler toward progressive politics, supported the progressive populist candidate with a focus on jobs 53% of the time. A woke moderate with the same focus won just 38% support.

Working-class voters prefer working-class candidates.

Consistent with recent studies, we found that working-class voters preferred lower status middle- and working-class candidates over business- or professional-class alternatives.[15] In our sample, corporate executives were seen as the least favorable by far, with lawyers the second-least favorable. Teachers, veterans, small business owners, and construction workers were more or less equally popular.

With regard to candidates' gender and race, it is common among Democratic politicians and the media to assume that female candidates and candidates of color are less electable than white and male candidates.[16] As Perry Bacon, Jr. writes "Electability … at times ends up being used as an all-purpose cudgel against female and minority candidates."[17] Especially in light of Hillary Clinton's unpopularity among non-college educated white voters in 2016, many also assume that female and minority candidates are particularly vulnerable among working-class white voters.[18]

To the contrary, our results suggest that any politically damaging prejudices against female and non-white candidates have faded among potential Democratic working-class voters. Overall, we find that female candidates and candidates of color are at least as appealing to working-class voters as white and male candidates. Interestingly, and in contrast to previous studies, black candidates in our study were preferred over white candidates not just among black voters, but also white voters.[19] These results hold even when we compare respondents in competitive versus safe congressional districts (though the respondents' preference for black candidates was reduced in competitive districts).

Consistent with recent scholarship indicating that candidates' gender plays a minimal role in most US elections, our findings indicate that working-class voters care more about the class background than the gender of political candidates.[20] All respondents preferred female over male candidates, though the difference was slight. Similarly, candidates' race played a comparatively small role in respondents' candidate assessments: the only race that impacted respondents' views at all was black candidates, and here the effect was modest (and beneficial to black candidates).

15 Oliver Heath, "Policy Representation, Social Representation and Class Voting in Britain," *British Journal of Political Science*, 2015, 173–93; Paul Marx and Gijs Schumacher, "Do Poor Citizens Vote for Redistribution, against Immigration or against the Establishment? A Conjoint Experiment in Denmark," *Scandinavian Political Studies* 41, no. 3 (2018): 263–82.

16 Kira Sanbonmatsu, *Where Women Run: Gender and Party in the American States* (University of Michigan Press, 2010); Richard L. Fox and Jennifer L. Lawless, "If Only They'd Ask: Gender, Recruitment, and Political Ambition," *The Journal of Politics* 72, no. 2 (2010): 310–26.

17 Quoted in Masket, *Learning from Loss,* 34.

18 Nate Cohn, "The One Demographic That Is Hurting Hillary Clinton," *The New York Times*, July 25, 2016, sec. The Upshot, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/26/upshot/the-one-demographic-that-is-hurting-hillary-clinton.html; William A. Galston, "Gender in the 2020 Election: Have We Gotten the Story Backwards?," *Brookings* (blog), October 9, 2020, https://www.brookings.edu/blog/fixgov/2020/10/09/gender-in-the-2020-election-have-we-gotten-the-story-backwards/.

19 Neil Visalvanich, "When Does Race Matter? Exploring White Responses to Minority Congressional Candidates," *Politics, Groups, and Identities* 5, no. 4 (2017): 618–41; Matthew L. Jacobsmeier, "From Black and White to Left and Right: Race, Perceptions of Candidates' Ideologies, and Voting Behavior in US House Elections," *Political Behavior* 37, no. 3 (2015): 595–621.

20 Danny Hayes and Jennifer L. Lawless, *Women on the Run: Gender, Media, and Political Campaigns in a Polarized Era* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 7.

Working-class non-voters are not automatic progressives.

Progressives in the Democratic Party often assume that low-propensity voters are natural allies based on their disenchantment with "politics as usual." This claim is important for progressive electoral strategy because it suggests that (a) increasing turnout automatically benefits left-wing candidates, and relatedly that (b) to increase turnout, candidates need to present voters with left-wing policy platforms. For instance, in his 2020 bid for the Democratic presidential nomination, Bernie Sanders made increased turnout among low-propensity voters a central feature of his electoral strategy. Sanders made little headway toward engaging non-voters, but that might have been due to the idiosyncrasies of his campaign and/or of a political context in which Democrats prized defeating Trump over all other considerations.[21]

Our experimental results provide little evidence to support Sanders's theory. The evidence suggests that it is unlikely that low-propensity voters fail to vote because they don't see their progressive views reflected in the political platforms of mainstream Democratic candidates. While non-voters in the sample did express positive views of candidates who included progressive policies among their key issues, their support for such policies was weaker than that expressed by voters. This suggests that if non-voters came into the electorate, they would be no more attracted to progressive candidates than current voters. In sum, turning working-class non-voters into voters is likely to help Democrats, but there is no obvious reason to think it will be particularly beneficial to progressive Democrats.

Democratic partisanship does not hurt progressive candidates.

A related argument on the Left is that progressives are hindered by their association with the Democratic Party. According to this view, many otherwise progressive voters are so disillusioned with the Democratic Party — seeing it as tied to the interests of corporate executives and the superrich — that they refuse to vote for its candidates. Proponents of this opinion point to the popularity of Sanders's 2016 insurgent campaign in the Democratic presidential primary,[22] as well as public opinion polls suggesting widespread popular support for a third party, as evidence that progressive candidates would fare better if they distanced themselves from the Democratic Party.[23]

We find little evidence to support the theory that working-class voters are turned off by Democratic politicians, or that they would be more likely to vote for progressive candidates who rhetorically distanced themselves from the Democratic Party. Indeed, independent candidates were viewed slightly less favorably than Democrats among survey respondents, though this difference was not statistically significant. Further, we observe no meaningful differences in support for independent versus Democratic candidates across differences in geography, income, race, and class. The only group for which there is a meaningful difference between preferences for independent versus Democratic candidates is self-identified independents, suggesting that it is right-leaning swing voters, rather than disaffected low-propensity progressive voters, who are most attracted to independent candidates.

Blue-collar workers are especially sensitive to candidate messaging — and respond even more acutely to the differences between populist and woke language.

21 Masket, *Learning from Loss.*

22 https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/aug/29/demexit-peoples-convention-leftwing-alternative-democrats-republicans

23 https://peoplesparty.org/our-plan/the-case/ For polling on Americans' support for 3rd Parties, see https://news.gallup.com/poll/329639/support-third-political-party-high-point.aspx.

Most surveys of political behavior rely exclusively on a single measure of the working class: whether respondents have a college education or not. While our survey also uses this standard as its general definition, we also know that different groups within the working class often have very different political perspectives due to a range of reasons, including their level of education, skill level, level of supervision at work, or whether they perform primarily manual or mental tasks. As a result, unlike most analyses, we utilize seven distinct measures of the working class (which are detailed later in this report).

One of the most interesting differences we found across these measures was between blue-collar and white-collar workers in the working class. While both groups showed similar preferences for candidates overall, blue-collar workers' candidate assessments proved much more sensitive to differences in candidates' campaign messaging. Specifically, using progressive populist rhetoric instead of woke progressive messaging was associated with an eleven percentage point increase in support among mostly manual blue-collar workers, and only a six percentage point increase among mostly mental white-collar workers. Likewise, candidates who listed the economy (most popular) instead of immigration (least popular) as their top campaign issue received an eight percentage point increase in support among blue-collar workers, and only a two percentage point increase among white-collar workers.

What Style of Campaign Rhetoric is Most Effective for Progressive Candidates?

Key Takeaways

1. Campaign messaging that avoids woke rhetoric is popular among many working-class voters.
   - Given a choice between five different styles of political rhetoric, the progressive populist soundbite — which pitted "people who work for a living" against "the superrich"— was at least as, if not more popular than, the four other options (woke progressive, woke moderate, mainstream moderate, and Republican). The progressive populist and mainstream moderate choices consistently fared better than either of the woke options.
2. Explicitly populist[24] and class-based rhetorical appeals are popular with working-class voters — and may be especially important for candidates aiming to win blue-collar workers to a progressive platform.
   - Among certain key demographics — including rural/small-town voters, self-identified working-class voters, and voters in blue-collar occupations — the progressive populist candidate enjoyed more support than all the other candidates, including the mainstream moderate.
3. When combined with a candidate from a non-elite background and a political platform focused on economics, populist rhetoric proved even more attractive to our respondents.

Does Geography Affect Working-Class Voters' Views of Progressive Candidates?

Key Takeaways

1. Suburban and urban respondents were more favorable than rural/small-town respondents toward candidates who focused on racial justice, highlighted progressive issues such as Medicare for All and a jobs guarantee, and employed woke messaging.
2. Rural and small-town respondents viewed progressive populism more favorably than other candidate messaging, while suburban and urban respondents were most favorable toward mainstream moderate messaging.
3. Our results suggest that progressive candidates face a clear tradeoff when appealing to rural/small-town vs. suburban/urban voters, though the tradeoff can be mitigated by focusing primarily on economic issues and downplaying woke rhetoric.

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24 By populist, we simply mean rhetoric that explicitly pits two competing groups in society against each other, one representing "elite" interests vs. another representing the interests of "ordinary," "common," and "working" Americans, and claims that problems faced by the latter are caused by the former.

Which Progressive Candidates Appeal Most to Low-Propensity and Swing Working-Class Voters?

Key Takeaways

1. Non-voters favored more conservative candidates than voters in terms of partisan preferences and key policy issues. Overall, we find little support for the idea, suggested by progressive candidates like Sanders, that increasing turnout among low-propensity voters will naturally benefit progressive politicians.
2. Our findings suggest that contrary to the claims of many progressive pundits, disaffection with the two major parties is not an important motivating factor keeping non-voters from the polls. Non-voters are less favorable to independents running as Democrats than voters, and marginally prefer Democratic candidates to independent candidates.
3. Swing voters in the 2020 election leaned toward candidates who are conservative in terms of partisan preferences, candidate messaging, and policy priorities, and pose difficulties for candidates employing progressive messaging and policy platforms.

Should Progressive Candidates Distance Themselves from the Democratic Party?

Key Takeaways

1. We find no evidence to support the theory offered by many progressives that working-class voters are turned off by Democrats and would prefer to vote for independent candidates. Our survey respondents showed no difference in preferences for Democratic candidates compared to independents running on the Democratic Party ballot line.
2. We observe no meaningful differences in support for independent vs. Democratic candidates across differences in geography, income, race, or class. The only group for which there is a meaningful difference between preferences for independent vs. Democratic candidates is self-identified independents, suggesting that it is right-leaning swing voters, rather than disaffected low-propensity progressive voters, who are most likely to be attracted to independent candidates.

Do Different Definitions of Class Affect Our Understanding of Working-Class Attitudes Toward Progressive Candidates?

Key Takeaways

1. Candidates who invoked progressive populist messaging were viewed just as favorably as candidates who used other types of campaign messaging, while candidates who opted for woke messaging were typically viewed less favorably than other Democratic candidates. This was true across virtually all our measures of the working class. The pattern mostly held across racial groups as well. This suggests that while there is a considerable risk of alienating sections of the working class by employing woke talking points, there is no similar risk posed by avoiding them — those sections of the working class that prefer woke messaging are not alienated by populist progressivism.

2. Working-class views of progressive candidates depend on how you measure the working class.
   - Based on our multidimensional measure of class, we find that respondents who are classified as working class may be marginally more progressive than middle-/professional-class respondents with respect to candidate messaging and policy priorities. That said, when we examine each dimension of class individually (manual vs. mental work, routine vs. creative work, and supervised vs. independent work), no consistent picture emerges. There is no one-size-fits-all policy approach that appeals to working-class voters as a whole.
3. The educational attainment of respondents' parents is a strong predictor of candidate preferences. Respondents who reported that their parents achieved a four-year college degree or more consistently favor more progressive candidates than other respondents.

Does Gender Affect Working-Class Attitudes Toward Progressive Candidates?

Key Takeaways

1. Women are more likely to support progressive policy priorities than men.
2. Running female candidates is slightly advantageous for getting working-class support.
3. Our results challenge caricatures of the American working class as chauvinistic and culturally conservative.
4. Candidates' gender plays little role in respondents' evaluation of candidates.
5. In general, men and women view a candidate's gender, race, and class through a similar lens, though female respondents were marginally more supportive of female candidates, candidates of color, and some working-class candidates (such as teachers) compared to male respondents.

Does Race Affect Working-Class Voters' Views of Progressive Candidates?

Key Takeaways

1. Respondents from all racial groups were equally or more favorable toward female and minority candidates than white candidates.
2. Respondents from all racial groups were strongly supportive of progressive civil rights and health care positions, but whites were less supportive than other racial groups.
3. Woke candidates were viewed less favorably than other candidates by whites, but not by respondents of color.
4. Significant differences between black and Latino respondents indicate that similar electoral appeals by Democratic candidates are not likely to yield consistent results across these voter blocs.

What We Did

For this survey, we drew upon YouGov's online panel of two million respondents in the United States. YouGov's sample is a nonrandom, opt-in pool of respondents. To approximate a random sample of the United States population, YouGov employs a statistical procedure to identify individuals in the panel that are as similar as possible to randomly chosen individuals from the US population. Since we are interested in working-class voters in politically competitive states, we sampled 400 individuals each from five states: Nevada, Michigan, Wisconsin, Pennsylvania, and North Carolina. To ensure we only surveyed working-class individuals, we screened respondents based on their level of education, and only included respondents with less than a four-year college education. Since we are primarily interested in the effect of variation in Democratic candidate profiles, we further restricted our sample to individuals who do not identify as Republicans (though we included respondents who identified as "lean Republican"), since it is unlikely that these voters would ever prefer Democratic candidates of any kind to Republican candidates.

In the experiment, we showed respondents the details of pairs of candidates that vary across nine design features, and asked them to report their relative support for each candidate.[25] The results allow us to assess a range of questions related to working-class voter behavior, including: the effects of variation in ideological extremism across policy areas, the effects of prioritizing economic vs. cultural issues in campaign rhetoric, the effects of occupational status on support for candidates, and the effects of anti-establishment and populist messaging. We asked each respondent to evaluate six pairs of candidates, giving us a total of 24,000 combinations of candidate characteristics to compare. Below is the experimental setup we presented to respondents.

Each candidate profile consists of randomly chosen characteristics from among the following possible options for each characteristic:

25 We first asked respondents to report which candidate they would rather vote for, and we then asked them to score each candidate on a scale of zero to ten.

In today's survey you will be asked to read some information about different candidates running for US Congress.

You will be shown several pairs of candidates. For each pair, we will ask you to indicate which candidate you prefer. You will be shown six (6) pairs of candidates.

The next page shows an example pairing.

›

	Candidate A	Candidate B
Occupation Prior to Political Career	Candidate A's Prior Job	Candidate B's Prior Job
Day One Priority	Candidate A's Day 1 Priority	Candidate B's Day 1 Priority
Race/Ethnicity	Candidate A's Race	Candidate B's Race
Gender	Candidate A's Gender	Candidate B's Gender
Political Affiliation	Candidate A's Party	Candidate B's Party
Key Issues	Candidate A's Key Issues	Candidate B's Key Issues
Candidate Soundbite	Candidate A's Soundbite	Candidate B's Soundbite

After reading each pair of profiles, you will be asked to indicate which candidate you would prefer to vote for if you were choosing between only these two candidates.

a. Candidate A

b. Candidate B

After you select your preference, we will also ask you to rate each candidate on how favorable you find them.

Do you understand these instructions?

- ○ Yes
- ○ No

CANDIDATE CHARACTERISTICS	VALUES
Race/Ethnicity	White
	Black
	Latino
	Asian
Gender	Male
	Female

Day one priority	Health Care
	Economy
	Racial Justice
	Immigration
	Jobs
Key Issues: Economy	Jobs Guarantee
	Empower Small Business
	Cut Government Spending
Key Issues: Civil Rights	End Systemic Racism
	Equal Rights for All
	Protect our Law Enforcement
Key Issues: Health care	Medicare for All
	Increase Access to Affordable Health care
	Repeal and Replace Obamacare

CANDIDATE SOUNDBITES

"This country belongs to all of us, not just the superrich. But for years, politicians in Washington have turned their backs on people who work for a living. We need tough leaders who won't give in to the millionaires and the lobbyists, but will fight for good jobs, good wages, and guaranteed health care for every single American."	Progressive Populist
"The people closest to pain should be the people closest to power. In Washington, the wealthy and the privileged make the rules, but if you're poor, or an immigrant, or a person of color in America, then you know how hard it is just to survive in this country. We need courageous leaders who will protect the most vulnerable, fight for justice, and make transformative change."	Woke Progressive
"Our unity is our strength, and our diversity is our power. But for too long, special interests have blocked critical progress in addressing systemic racism, climate change, and access to affordable health care. We need creative leaders who will fight for our values, listen to the experts, and make real change happen."	Woke Moderate

"America is better than this. We have to stop demonizing each other based on which party we support, how much money we make, or the color of our skin – it's time to heal. We need common-sense leaders who will stick up for working people, listen to the experts, reach across the aisle, and get things done."	Mainstream Moderate
"What makes America great is the freedom of the American people. But today, our freedom is under threat from radical socialists, arrogant liberals, and dangerous foreign influences. We need strong leaders in Washington to protect conservative values and defend the Constitution against those who want to destroy the greatest country in the world."	Republican

Political Affiliation	Democrat
	Republican
	Independent, but running as a Democrat

Occupation Prior to Political Career	Teacher
	Construction Worker
	Small Business Owner
	CEO of Fortune 500 Company
	Lawyer
	Veteran

How to Interpret the Results

In the analysis below, we include figures presenting estimates of a quantity known as the "marginal mean."[26] We use the marginal mean to describe how favorable respondents were toward candidate profiles that contained a particular candidate characteristic, averaging across all other characteristics. For instance, the figure below presents marginal means for each candidate characteristic in our survey. Values to the right of .5 indicate that survey respondents had an overall net positive opinion of a given characteristic, and values to the left indicate a net negative opinion. So, for example, the dot corresponding to "Republican" (the fifth dot from the top) indicates that survey respondents had a net negative opinion of Republican candidates (candidate profiles with Republican candidates were chosen around 37% of the time). By contrast, the dot corresponding to "black" (the seventh dot from the top) indicates that survey respondents had a net positive opinion of black candidates (candidate profiles with black candidates were chosen more than 50% of the time).

The bars around each dot indicate how confident we are that a given value is correct. Each bar to the left and right of the dot indicates the margin of error for a given estimate. For instance, the bars around the dot corresponding to "Republican" in the figure below range from .35 to .39, indicating that respondents' "true" favorability rating for Republican candidates is between those two values. It is important to note that if the bars overlap with the vertical line at .5, we cannot conclude that respondents had a net positive or net negative opinion of that characteristic (since there is no statistical difference between the value of the dot and .5).

Similarly, if the bars around one dot overlap with the bars around another dot, we cannot conclude that there is any statistical difference between the two characteristics. For instance, while the dot for black candidates is to the right of the dot for Latino candidates (indicating that black candidates were viewed more favorably than Latino candidates), the bar to the right of the Latino dot overlaps with the bar to the left of the black dot, meaning that we cannot conclude there is a statistically significant difference between the values of the two dots. To indicate which estimates should be taken with a grain of salt in the analyses below, we indicate cases where there is not a statistically significant difference between values.[27]

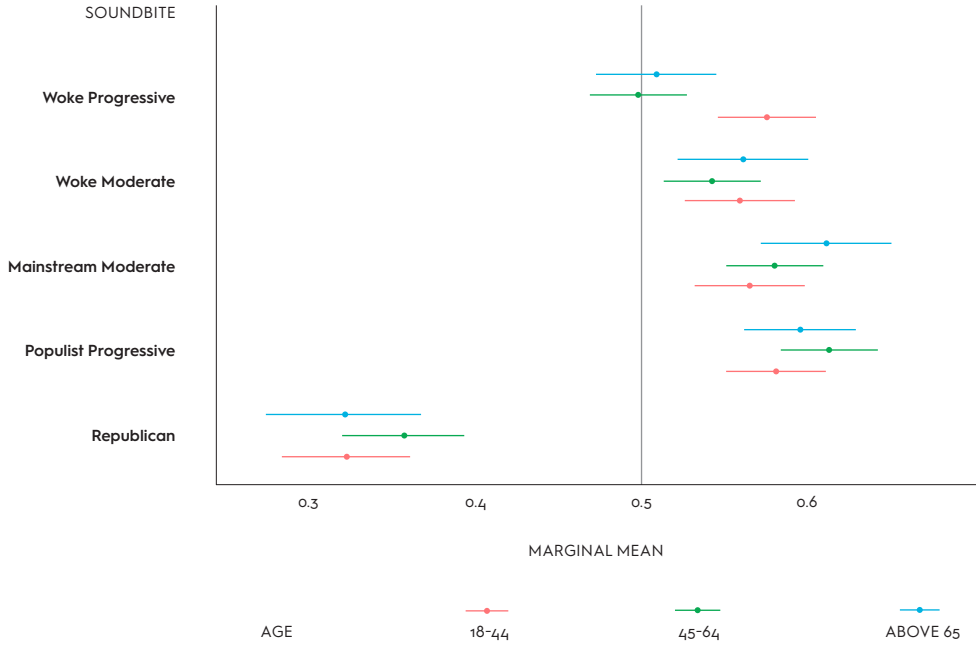
26 For technical details of how this quantity is estimated, see https://s3.us-east-2.amazonaws.com/tjl-sharing/assets/MeasuringSubgroupPreferences.pdf. The replication code for all figures presented in this report is included on our GitHub page.

27 In some cases, however, the lack of statistical significance is caused not by the lack of a real difference between two estimates, but rather because we only have a small number of respondents for a given demographic group, which makes our confidence in the estimates for that group lower. In these cases we can often draw useful conclusions from estimates that are not statistically significant, even as we recognize that we should not draw strong conclusions from such estimates.

Working-Class Preferences for Political Candidates

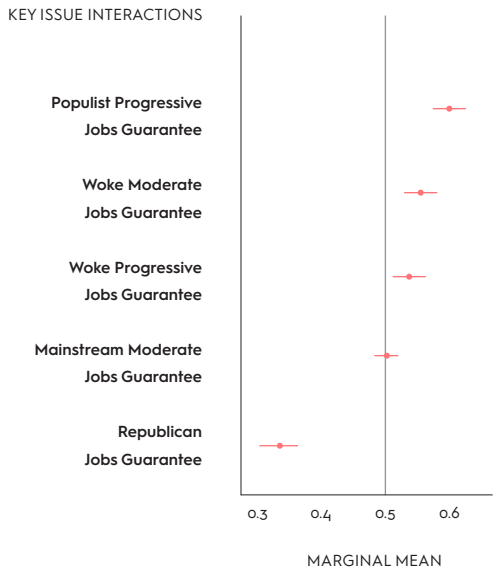
In many cases, we want to know how specific respondent subgroups viewed a given candidate characteristic, rather than respondents as a whole. In these cases, we present figures like the one below, which presents respondents' views of the five candidate soundbites broken down by age group. In this case, there are dots estimating the favorability of each soundbite for each of the three age groups.

Working-Class Preferences for Candidate Soundbites by Respondent Age Group



Finally, in some cases we are interested in understanding respondents' opinions of one candidate characteristic *in combination* with another characteristic. For instance, rather than examine whether female candidates are more popular than male candidates, we may be interested in looking at whether female, working-class candidates are more popular than female candidates with a middle-class background. In these cases, we present figures similar to the one below, which shows the favorability of candidates who included a jobs guarantee among their key policy priorities in combination with different candidate soundbites. In this case, the results show that a jobs guarantee combined with progressive populist messaging was viewed more favorably than any of the other combinations, and that a jobs guarantee combined with Republican messaging was viewed less favorably than any of the other combinations.

Working-Class Preferences for Candidate Soundbites When Paired with a Jobs Guarantee as a Key Campaign Issue



What Style of Campaign Rhetoric Is Most Effective for Progressive Candidates?

Key Takeaways

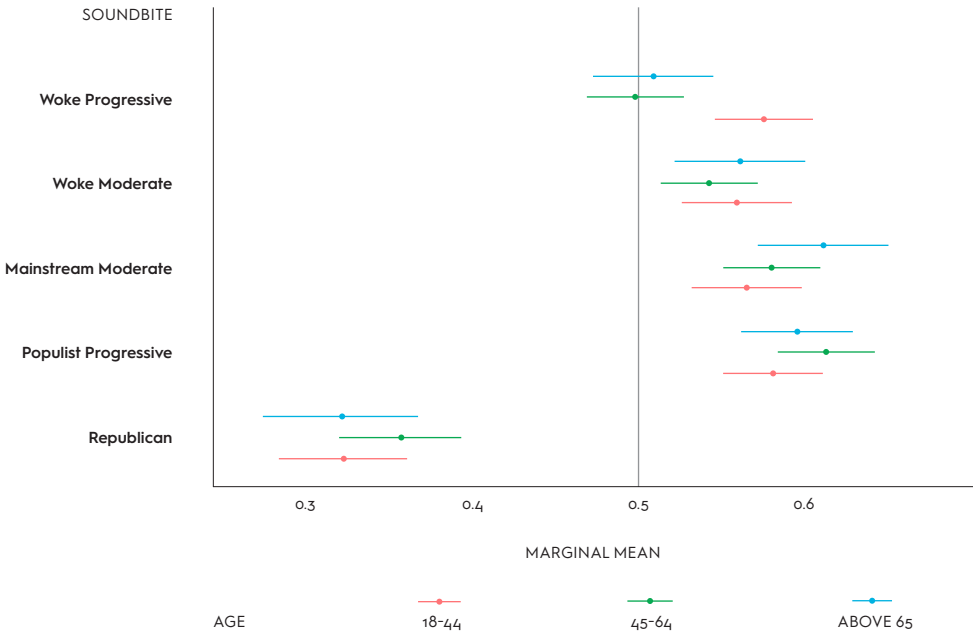
1. Campaign messaging that avoids woke rhetoric is popular among many working-class voters.
   - Given a choice between five different styles of political rhetoric, the progressive populist soundbite — which pitted "people who work for a living" against "the superrich" — was at least as, if not more popular than, the four other options (woke progressive, woke moderate, mainstream moderate, and Republican). The progressive populist and mainstream moderate choices consistently fared better than either of the woke options.
2. Explicitly populist[28] and class-based rhetorical appeals are popular with working-class voters — and may be especially important for candidates aiming to win blue-collar workers to a progressive platform.
   - Among certain key demographics — including rural/small-town voters, self-identified working-class voters, and voters in blue-collar occupations — the progressive populist candidate enjoyed more support than all the other candidates, including the mainstream moderate.
3. When combined with a candidate with a non-elite background and a political platform focused on economics, populist rhetoric proved even more attractive to our respondents.

28 For technical details of how this quantity is estimated, see https://s3.us-east-2.amazonaws.com/tjl-sharing/assets/MeasuringSubgroupPreferences.pdf. The replication code for all figures presented in this report is included on our GitHub page.

Unpacking the Results

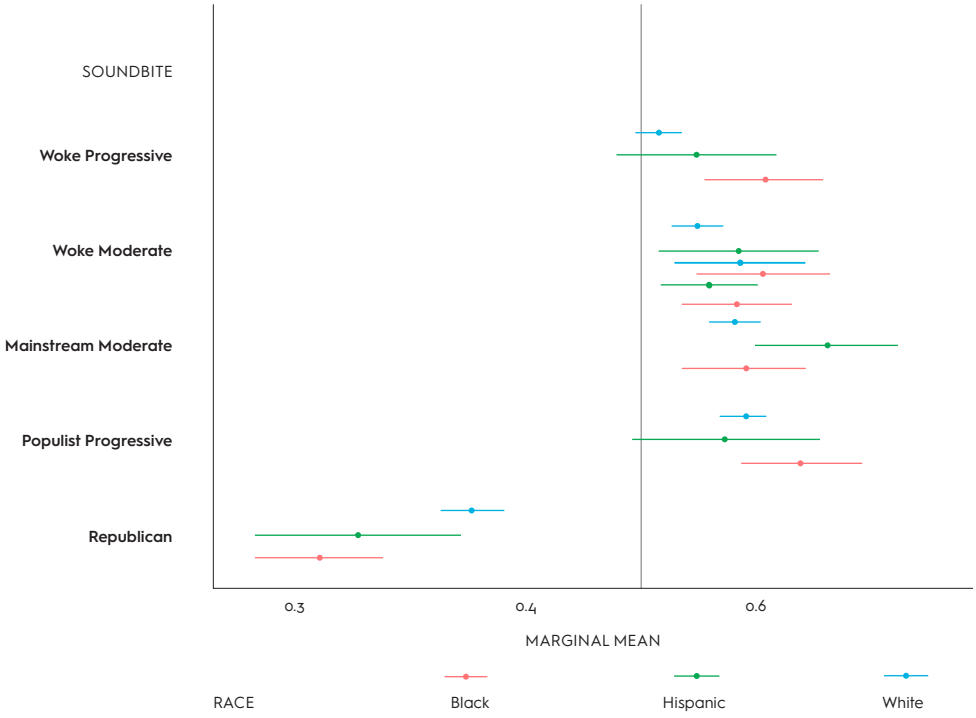
In the national media, left-wing populism is frequently associated with younger voters, who supported Sanders's presidential campaigns in overwhelming numbers. But our survey did not produce anything like those dramatic results. As shown in the figure below, younger respondents did tend to prefer progressive soundbites over their moderate counterparts (though only slightly), while older survey takers showed a marked distaste for "woke" progressive rhetoric. Yet support for progressive populist messaging was strong in all age groups, and actually fared best among respondents between age 45 and 64. These results suggest that the enormous age splits associated with Sanders may have been specific to his campaigns, rather than a necessary product of his populism. A different candidate with a similarly class-conscious populist message may be able to win support from a broad swathe of working-class voters.

Working-Class Preferences for Candidate Soundbites When Paired with a Jobs Guarantee as a Key Campaign Issue



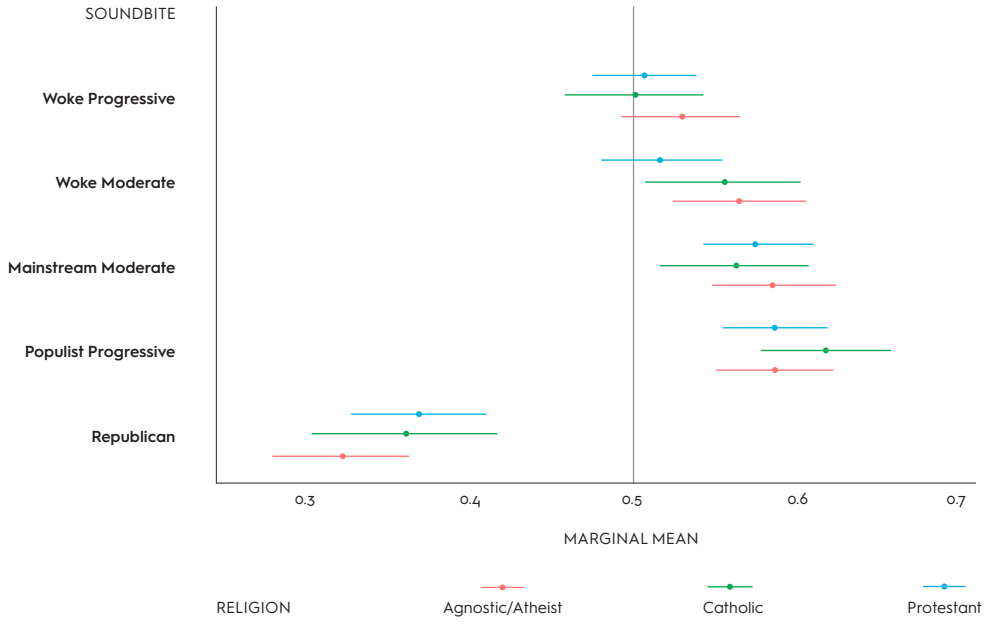
Populist rhetoric did not produce very large differences among racial or ethnic groups. White respondents narrowly preferred the progressive populist soundbite over the mainstream moderate, with the woke soundbites considerably behind; black respondents narrowly preferred the progressive populist messaging over the woke progressive and the woke moderate soundbites; and Latino respondents preferred the mainstream moderate rhetoric, with the progressive populist soundbite coming in second. But these differences were all relatively small; overall, the progressive populist soundbite performed well with all racial/ethnic demographics.

Working-Class Preferences for Candidate Soundbites by Respondent Race/Ethnicity



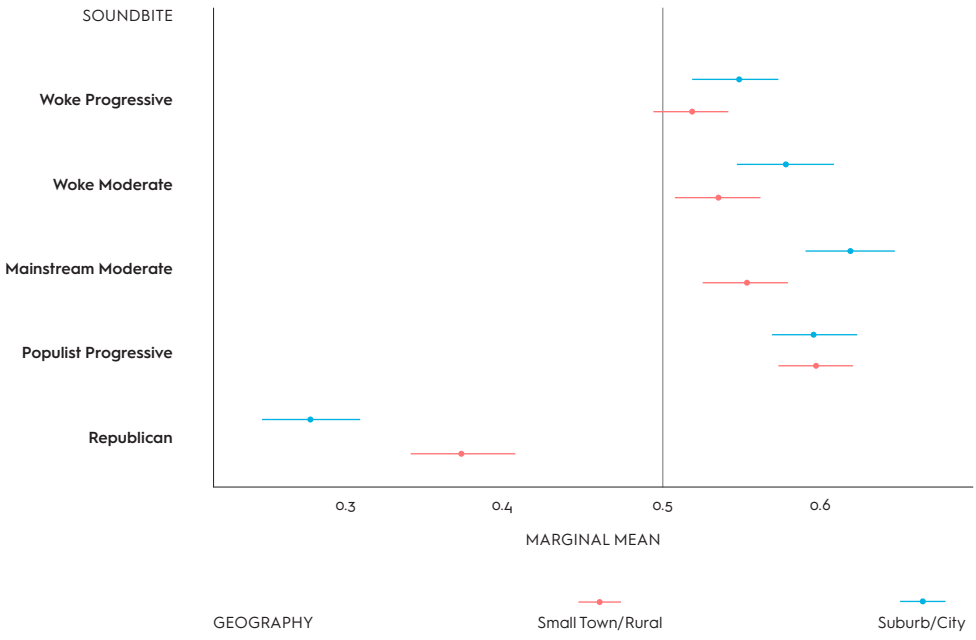
Among religious groups, there was one striking split. Catholic, Protestant, and agnostic or atheist respondents all preferred the progressive populist messaging — but Catholic respondents' preference for the progressive populist messaging compared to other candidates was the strongest. Among Catholics, progressive populist rhetoric not only fared substantially better than mainstream moderate rhetoric, but it performed dramatically better compared to the woke progressive soundbite (Catholics favored the progressive populist soundbite 62% of the time, compared to only 50% of the time for the woke progressive soundbite).

Working-Class Preferences for Candidate Soundbites by Religion



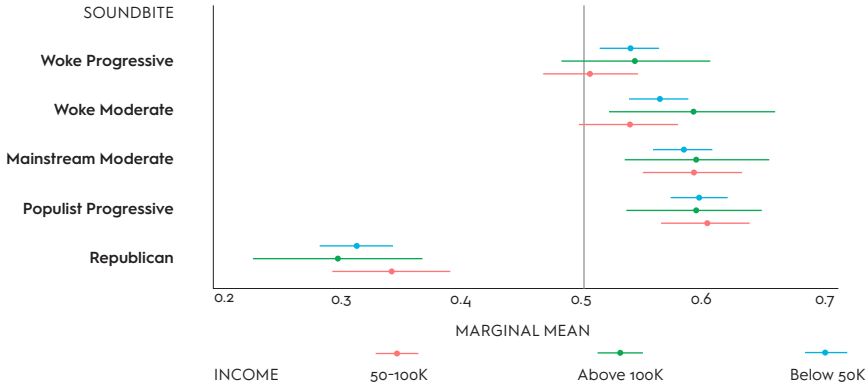
The progressive populist soundbite fared well in all geographic areas, including large cities and suburbs. But in both relative and absolute terms, it performed strongest with respondents in rural/small towns. Considering small towns and rural areas as a whole, progressive populist messaging was more popular than any of the other soundbites. Among suburban/urban respondents, by contrast, the mainstream moderate soundbite outperformed the progressive populist soundbite. This suggests that in many of the rural and small-town precincts where Democratic candidates have most struggled in recent years, populist rhetoric can help them appeal to working-class voters.

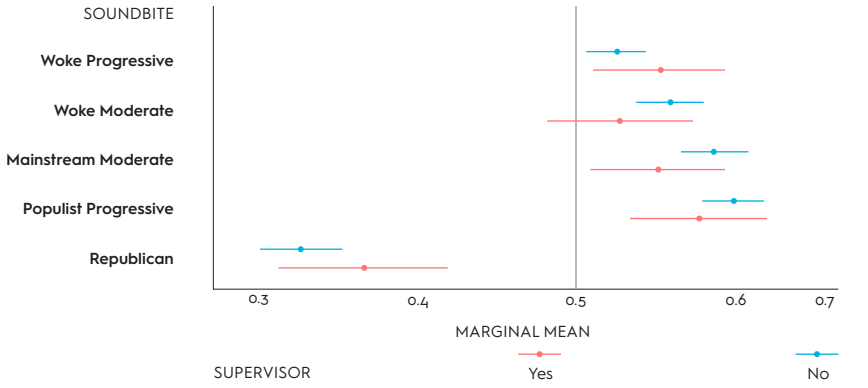
Working-Class Preferences for Candidate Soundbites by Respondents' Geography

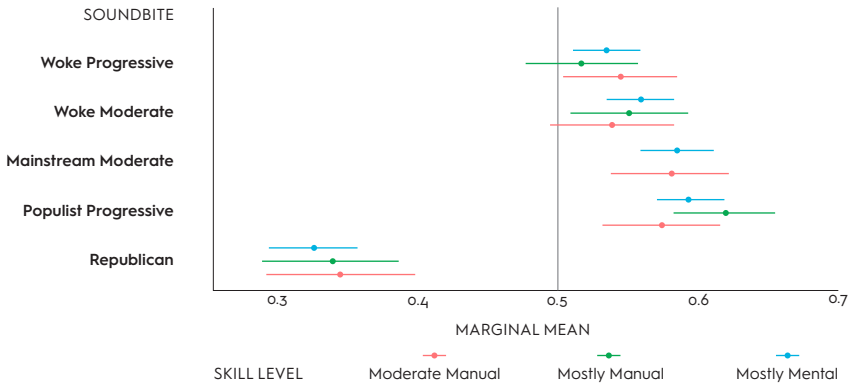


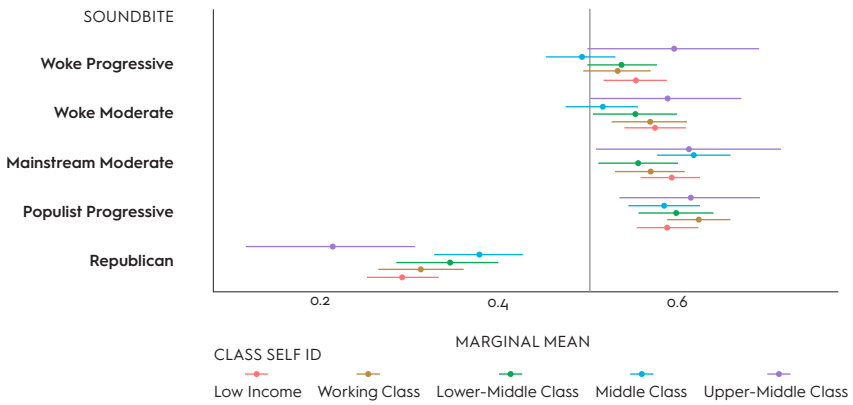
Some of our most striking results involve a closer look at the class positions and identities of respondents. Perhaps unsurprisingly, populist rhetoric proved particularly strong compared to other types of campaign messaging among respondents who make less money, are not supervisors, perform manual labor, and who self-identify as working-class. Though scholars and media analysts alike often cast doubt on the significance of class relations in American politics, our results show that these working-class subgroups preferred a class-based appeal with considerably more enthusiasm than other respondents.

Working-Class Preferences for Candidate Soundbites by Respondents' Economic Status









Among voters with a family income of under $50,000 a year, the progressive populist soundbite was equally as popular as the mainstream moderate soundbite, and significantly outperformed the woke progressive soundbite. The pattern was similar among voters making between $50,000 and $100,000 a year. Voters making above $100,000 a year, meanwhile, were also receptive to the progressive populist soundbite, though in this group there was not a statistically significant difference in support for the progressive populist soundbite compared to the other Democratic candidate soundbites.

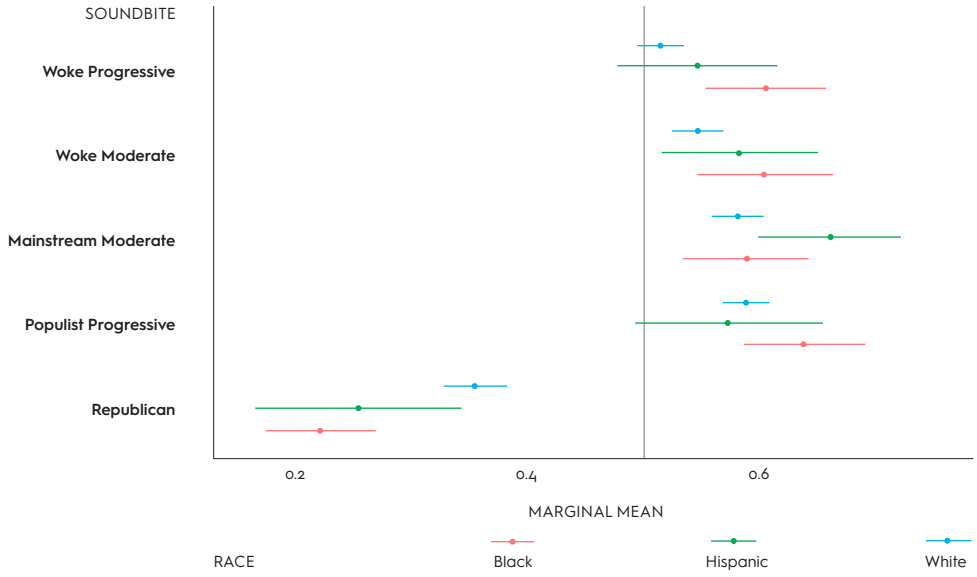
Respondents who were not supervisors, meanwhile, also gravitated toward class-based rhetoric — progressive populist messaging was the most popular with this group, while the woke progressive was the least popular. The same pattern held among workers in jobs requiring mostly manual tasks: the progressive populist soundbite was more popular than the mainstream moderate and the woke progressive ones. On the other hand, while supervisors also liked progressive populist messaging, there was no statistical difference in their support for progressive populist compared to woke progressive messaging.

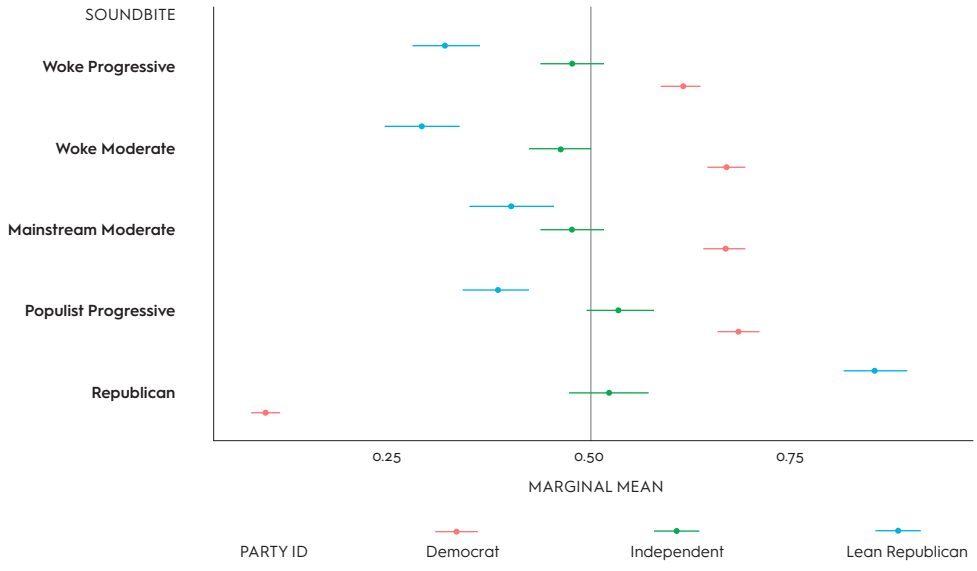
Finally, respondents who identified themselves as working class preferred populist rhetoric over alternative soundbites by a larger margin than any other group, whether low income or some level of middle class. Again, it should be noted that the progressive populist soundbite also fared well among self-identified upper-middle-class respondents, though these respondents were most favorable toward the woke progressive soundbite.

On the whole, these findings suggest that populist rhetoric is not likely to hurt Democratic candidates with working-class voters of any stripe, and it may benefit them among a range of more class-conscious voting groups, especially lower-income, blue-collar workers.

A closer look at the findings in partisan terms suggests that progressive populist messaging can help Democratic candidates among independent voters. While independents, as we would expect, were less favorable toward all Democratic candidates compared to Democratic respondents, they still preferred the progressive populist soundbite over all the others. Among Republican-leaning respondents, the progressive populist framing was slightly less popular than mainstream moderate messaging, and both were significantly more popular than either kind of woke messaging.

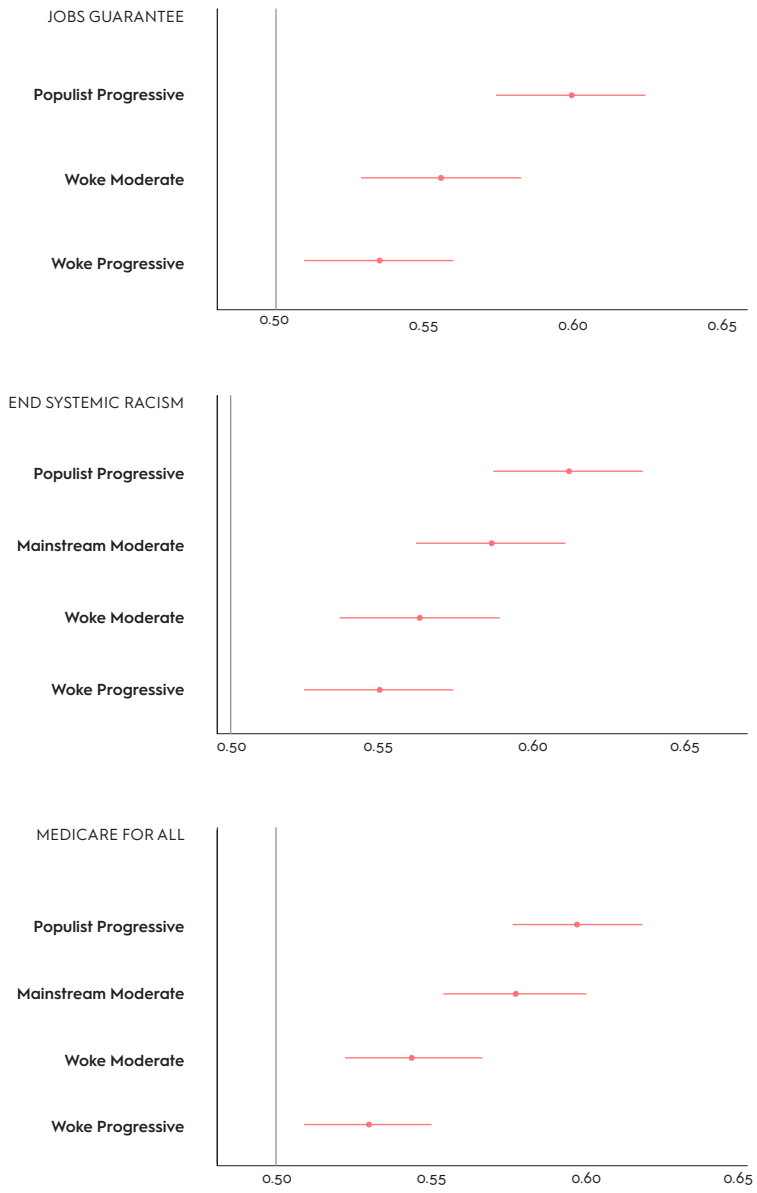
Working-Class Preferences for Candidate Soundbites by Respondents' Partisanship





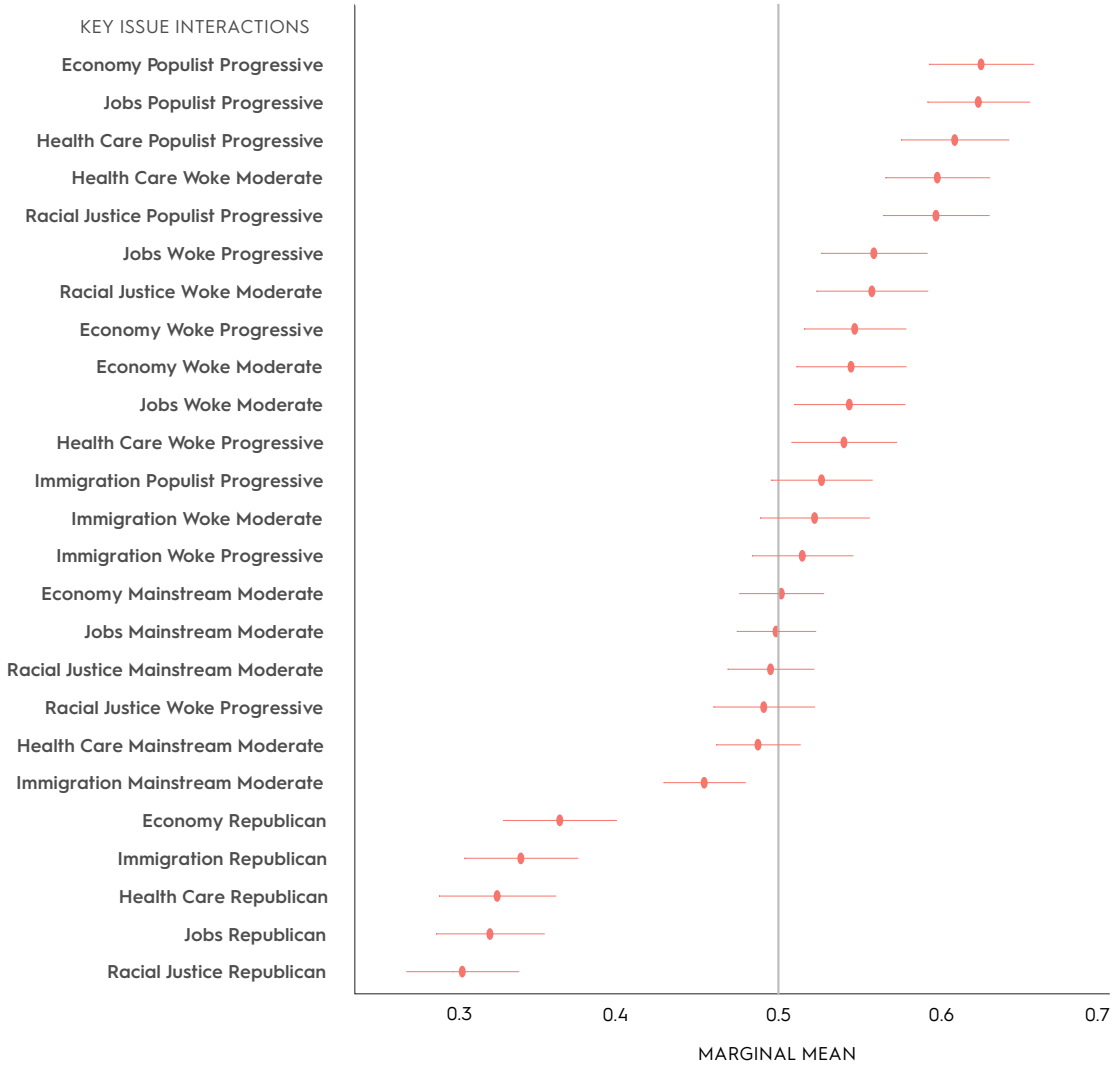
Piecing together the interactions between soundbite preferences and other parts of the survey, a larger version of this pattern emerges: populist, class-based rhetoric seems to offer progressive candidates the best available means of promoting their policy agenda with working-class voters. Candidates who delivered the progressive populist soundbite and listed Medicare for All as a key issue, for instance, received 60% favorability, while candidates who backed the same policy but delivered a woke soundbite saw their favorability drop to under 54%.

Working-Class Preferences for Candidate Soundbites When Paired with Different Key Campaign Issues



On the whole, populist rhetoric proved most appealing when combined with a progressive, economically-centered agenda, and when delivered by a candidate with a non-elite background. Progressive populist candidates who touted a jobs guarantee as a key issue, or who listed jobs or the economy as their day-one priorities, won the support of over 60% of the sample. Progressive populist candidates with a background as a teacher or construction worker, meanwhile, were preferred by nearly two-thirds of all respondents — notably higher than any other combination of soundbite and occupation.

Working-Class Preferences for Candidate Soundbites When Paired with Different Day-One Priorities



Working-Class Preferences for Candidate Soundbites When Paired with Different Candidate Professions

These findings further underline the appeal of economic populism among working-class Democrats and independents. Some of the specific differences are quite striking. A mainstream moderate military veteran — the kind of Democratic candidate often celebrated by party leaders and the press — received the support of just 51% of survey participants; a progressive populist teacher, on the other hand, earned over 65%. A woke progressive candidate with a focus on racial justice garnered 49% support, while a progressive populist with a focus on jobs won 63%.

Even non-Democrats, who are generally much cooler toward progressive politics, supported the progressive populist with a focus on jobs 53% of the time. A woke moderate with the same focus won just 38% support.

These differences are large and striking. On the whole, our findings suggest that a significant number of working-class voters are drawn to populist, class-conscious rhetoric. While economic populism is not a silver bullet to win over non-Democratic voters, it does appear to be one of the strongest weapons in Democrats' rhetorical arsenal. For progressive candidates especially, a class-based populist appeal would seem to be an essential part of any strategy aimed at working-class voters.

Does Geography Affect Working-Class Voters' Views of Progressive Candidates?

Key Takeaways

1. Suburban and urban respondents were more favorable than rural/small-town respondents toward candidates who focused on racial justice, highlighted progressive issues such as Medicare for All and a jobs guarantee, and employed woke messaging.
2. Rural and small-town respondents viewed progressive populism more favorably than other candidate messaging, while suburban and urban respondents were most favorable toward mainstream moderate messaging.
3. Our results suggest that progressive candidates face a clear tradeoff when appealing to rural/small-town vs. suburban/urban voters, though the tradeoff can be mitigated by focusing primarily on economic issues and downplaying woke rhetoric.

Unpacking the Results

Recent examinations of political geography suggest that centrist Democrats have maintained or gained strength in suburbs and cities relative to rural areas and small towns. Yair Ghitza and Jonathan Robinson emphasize in their autopsy of the 2020 presidential election that "The urban-rural voting divide continues to be immensely important, with suburbs growing more Democratic … Rural areas continued to vote strongly for Trump, while Biden continued to enjoy dominant support levels in cities."[29] In *Jacobin*, Matt Karp, who analyzes Sanders's loss to Biden in the 2020 Democratic primary, highlights how Sanders "was swamped by a massive turnout surge from the Democratic Party's fastest-growing demographic: former Republican voters in overwhelmingly white, wealthy, and well-educated suburban neighborhoods."[30] While each is instructive, neither analysis focuses on *working-class* Democratic voters, and neither is able to disaggregate which

29 https://catalist.us/wh-national.

30 https://www.jacobinmag.com/2020/08/bernie-sanders-five-year-war.

types of progressive candidates are likely to perform better or worse across different geographies.

Our findings suggest that an urban-rural divide exists among working-class potential Democratic voters who are deciding between centrist and progressive Democratic candidates for office. This divide is most stark when candidates use woke language to talk about race and health care. For instance, among suburban/urban, working-class voters, candidates for whom ending systemic racism is a key issue won 60% of all head-to-head contests. Among rural/small-town, working-class voters, these candidates won 56% of all contests. Encouragingly, both subsets of working-class voters viewed candidates who included ending system racism as one of their key issues favorably, but suburban/urban voters viewed them significantly more favorably.

We observe a similar pattern regarding health care. Among suburban/urban working-class voters, candidates for whom Medicare for All is a key issue won 59% of all head-to-head contests. Among rural/small-town, working-class voters, these candidates won 54% of all contests.

A similar pattern emerges when we inspect how working-class voters respond to candidates whose day-one priority is racial justice. While rural/small-town, working-class voters viewed these candidates unfavorably, suburban/urban, working-class voters viewed them favorably. Rural/small-town, working-class voters chose racial justice candidates in only 47% of all contests, while suburban/urban, working-class voters chose them in 51% of all contests.

With respect to candidates whose day-one priority is jobs or the economy, the preferences of rural/small-town and suburban/urban, working-class voters were inverted. Rural/small-town respondents viewed these candidates favorably, while suburban/urban respondents viewed them unfavorably: rural/small-town, working-class voters chose candidates with a day-one priority of jobs in 52% of all matchups, and suburban/urban working-class voters chose them in 49% of all matchups.

Meaningful geographical differences also appear in subjects' views of progressive candidates' rhetorical styles. Wokeness creates a slight division between suburban/urban, working-class voters and rural/small-town, working-class voters, with the former preferring woke progressives in 55% of all contests and the latter preferring woke progressives in 52% of all contests (the difference between these two percentages is not statistically significant). A similar pattern is evident in subjects' views of woke moderate campaign messaging, with suburban/urban, working-class voters choosing these candidates in 58% of all head-to-head matchups and rural/small-town, working-class voters choosing them in 54% of all matchups.

However, an absence of wokeness unites these two sets of working-class voters. There is no difference between suburban/urban and rural/small-town, working-class voters' responses to non-woke progressives, with both subgroups preferring them in 59% of all contests.

In addition to differences between suburban/urban and rural/small-town respondents, we also observed several interesting trends within each of these groups. In particular, we noted that rural/small-town, working-class voters view progressive populist candidates much more favorably than woke progressive candidates. Rural/small-town, working-class voters chose progressive populist candidates in 60% of head-to-head contests. By contrast, they chose the woke progressive candidate in 52% of contests. A somewhat smaller non-woke vs. woke favorability gap exists among suburban/urban,

working-class voters, with the progressive populist candidate preferred in 60% of all matchups and woke progressive candidates preferred in 55% of all matchups. Unlike rural and small-town respondents, however, suburban and urban respondents were more favorable to mainstream moderate messaging than progressive populist messaging, preferring the former 62% of the time.

These results suggest that wokeness may decrease working-class voters' support for candidates in both rural/small-town and suburban/urban areas, but that while progressive populist messaging is the most promising antidote to woke messaging in rural/small-town areas, mainstream moderate messaging is likely more effective in suburban/urban areas.

Working-Class Preferences for Political Candidates by Respondents' Geography

Which Progressive Candidates Appeal the Most to Low-Propensity and Swing Working-Class Voters?

Key Takeaways

1. Non-voters favored more conservative candidates than voters in terms of partisan preferences and key policy issues. Overall, we find little support for the idea, suggested by progressive candidates like Sanders, that increasing turnout among low-propensity voters will naturally benefit progressive politicians.
2. Our findings suggest that contrary to the claims of many progressive pundits, disaffection with the two major parties is not an important motivating factor keeping non-voters from the polls. Non-voters are less favorable to independents running as Democrats than voters, and marginally prefer Democratic candidates to independent candidates.
3. Swing voters in the 2020 election lean toward candidates who are conservative in terms of partisan preferences, candidate messaging, policy priorities, and pose difficulties for candidates employing progressive messaging and policy platforms.

Unpacking the Results

Despite record turnout, roughly eighty million eligible voters did not show up at the polls in the 2020 presidential election. Non-voters continue to be a persistent topic of political commentary, being particularly central to insurgent candidate narratives. For instance, in his 2020 bid for the Democratic presidential nomination, Sanders made increasing turnout among low-propensity voters a central feature of his campaign. Sanders made little headway toward engaging non-voters, but that may have been due to the idiosyncrasies of his campaign and/or of a political context where Democrats prized defeating Trump over all other considerations.[31] As we describe below, however, our results provide little evidence to support the theory that many low-propensity voters don't vote because they don't see their progressive views reflected in the political platforms of mainstream Democratic candidates.

Who Are the Non-voters?

As the table below shows, non-voters in our sample have a distinct set of demographic characteristics. Non-voters, on average, are slightly less likely to be Republicans or Democrats and more likely to be independents, more likely to be Latino and less likely to be white, more likely to be female, more likely to be low-income, less likely to be interested in the news, slightly more likely to be from suburban or urban areas, and tend to be significantly younger (the average age of voters in our sample was fifty-two years old, vs. forty years old among non-voters).

31 Masket, *Learning from Loss*.

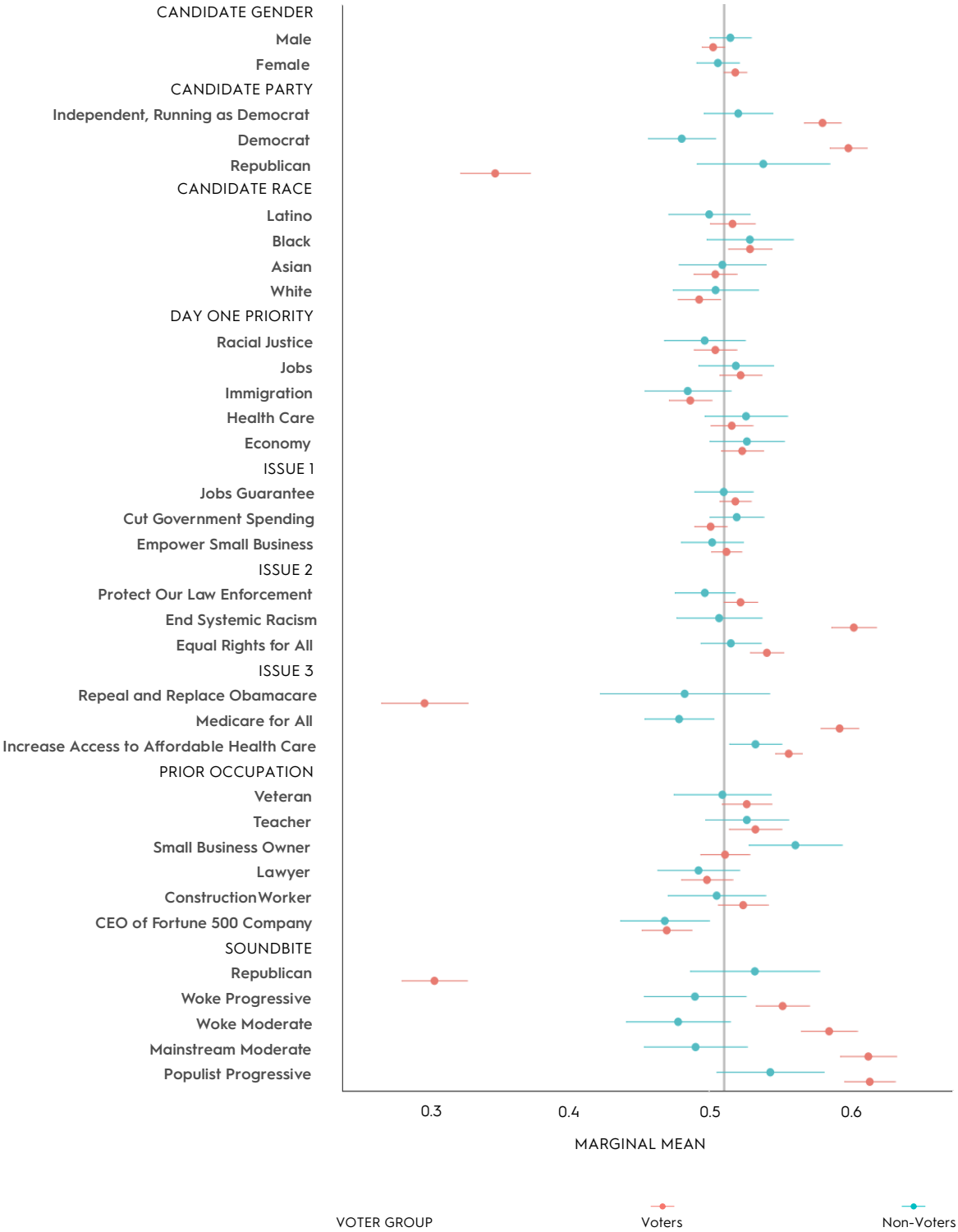
Voting and Non-Voting Respondents by Demographic Groups

Demographic	Non-Voters	Voters
Democrat	0.25	0.53
Lean Republican	0.09	0.14
Independent	0.46	0.18
White	0.68	0.80
Latino	0.11	0.05
Black	0.12	0.11
Female	0.64	0.57
Male	0.36	0.43
Low income	0.45	0.30
News Interest Low	0.48	0.16
Small Town/Rural	0.49	0.53
City/Suburb	0.51	0.47
Birth Year	1980	1968

Note: Values indicate the average proportion of each demographic group among non-voters and voters in our sample with the exception of birth year, which indicates the average birth year of respondents in each group.

We find a range of other important differences between voters and non-voters in the sample. First, non-voters prefer more conservative candidates than voters. Not only are they more favorable toward Republican candidates and Republican messaging compared to voters (though still holding a net-negative opinion of Republican candidates), but they are also less favorable toward Democratic candidates, Medicare for All, ending systemic racism, and a jobs guarantee (though, likely due to our relatively small sample of non-voters, these differences are not statistically significant). Non-voters were also much more favorable toward repealing and replacing Obamacare compared to voters. Finally, contrary to the expectations of some progressive politicians and pundits that many non-voters are simply disaffected with the two major parties and would become politically engaged if they were offered an independent alternative, we find that voters in the sample were more favorable toward independents running as Democrats than non-voters (though the difference is not statistically significant).

Working-Class Preferences for Political Candidates by Voter Status



Swing Voters

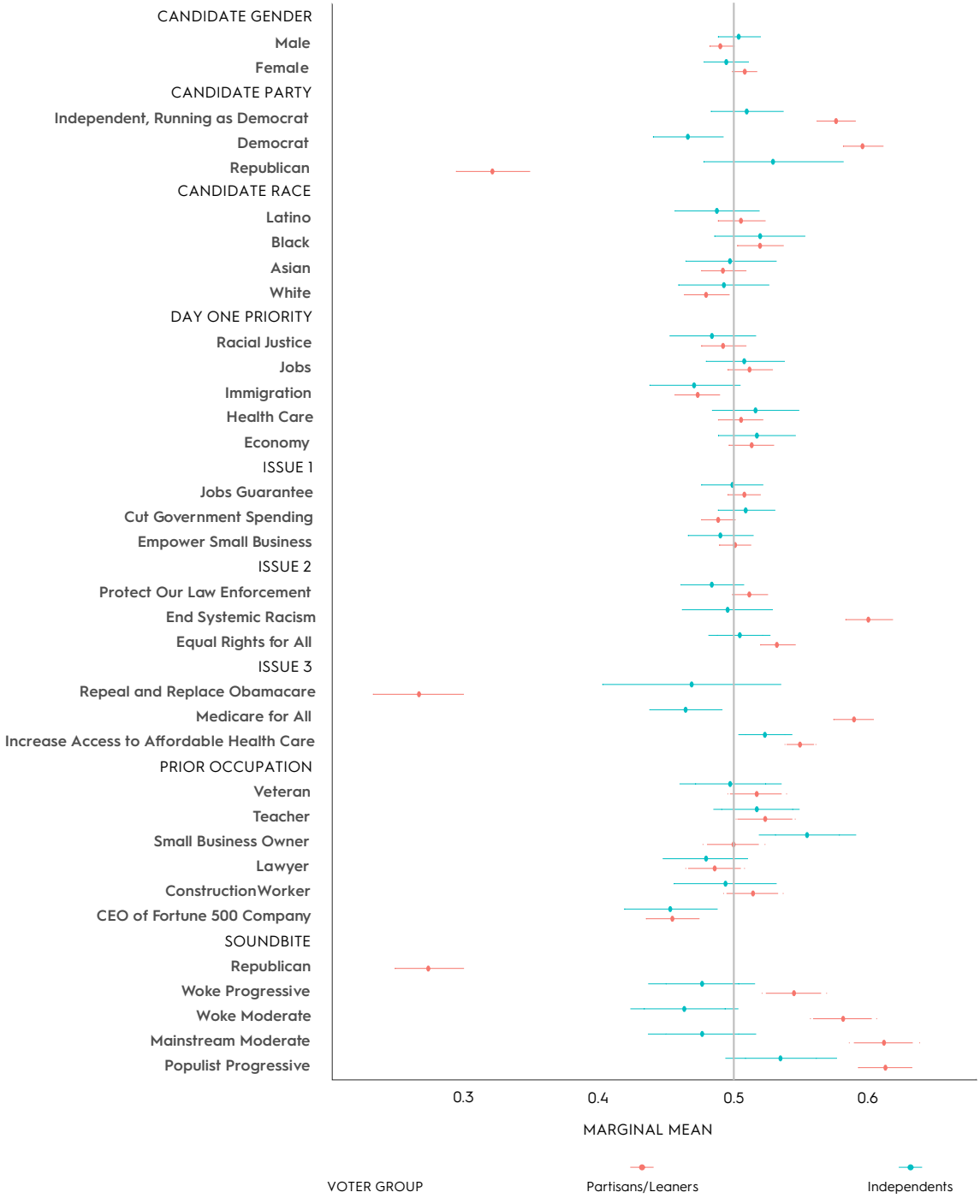
Of our survey respondents, 23% identified as independents who do not lean toward the Democrats or the Republicans. That said, only a small fraction reported changing their presidential votes between parties — from 2016 to 2020, less than 3% of all respondents did so. This is consistent with mountains of political science research showing that the partisan preferences of US voters are quite stable.[32] As a result, even under the most optimistic assumptions, candidate characteristics or messaging are likely to have at best a modest impact on swing voters' choices at the ballot box.

That said, we find sharp differences in candidate preferences between independents and Democratic partisan respondents. Given that independents in our survey were much more likely to vote for Trump than Biden (33% vs. 22%, with nearly 40% not voting at all), it should not be surprising that independent voters have generally conservative preferences relative to partisans and partisan-leaners. Compared to other respondents, independents were less favorable toward Democratic candidates and much more favorable toward Republican candidates. Similarly, independents were less favorable than partisans and leaners to all Democratic messaging and much more favorable toward Republican messaging. That said, progressive populist messaging performed equally well among independents as Republican messaging, while all other Democratic messaging styles performed worse.

On policy priorities, independent voters had similar preferences as other voters on economic issues, but vastly different preferences with respect to civil rights and health care issues. On civil rights, independents make little distinction between the three policy options mentioned in the survey (protect our law enforcement, equal rights for all, and ending systemic racism), while the difference between partisans' and leaners' favorability toward ending systemic racism and protecting our law enforcement was substantial (60% vs. 51% favorability, respectively). Independents have draw stronger distinctions between different health care policies, favoring the middle-of-the-road policy of increasing access to health care over Medicare for All by a substantial margin (52% vs. 46%, respectively). As in the case of racial justice issues, however, partisans had much stronger preferences on health care policies than independents: among partisans, moving from the least to most popular health care policy was associated with an increase in support of thirty percentage points vs. only six percentage points among independents.

32 Angus Campbell et al., *The American Voter* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980); Donald Green, Bradley Palmquist, and Eric Schickler, *Partisan Hearts and Minds* (Yale University Press, 2008).

Working-Class Preferences for Political Candidates by Respondents' Partisanship



Should Progressive Candidates Distance Themselves from the Democratic Party?

Key Takeaways

1. We find no evidence to support the theory offered by many progressives that working-class voters are turned off by Democrats and would prefer to vote for independent candidates.
2. Our survey respondents showed no difference in preferences for Democratic candidates compared to independents running on the Democratic Party ballot line.
3. We observe no meaningful differences in support for independent vs. Democratic candidates across differences in geography, income, race, or class. The only group for which there is a meaningful difference between preferences for independent vs. Democratic candidates is self-identified independents, suggesting that it is right-leaning swing voters, rather than disaffected low-propensity progressive voters, who are most likely to be attracted to independent candidates.

Unpacking the Results

Is close identification with the Democratic Party a liability for Democratic candidates in competitive districts? The conventional wisdom suggests that it is. Right-wing voters view the Democratic Party as very liberal and punish centrist candidates associated with the party as a result. This was precisely the position taken by a range of centrist Democratic congresspeople in the wake of the Democrats' disappointing showing in 2020 House races. As Kurt Schrader, a Democratic congressman from Oregon, explained: "Democrats' messaging is terrible; it doesn't resonate …When [voters] see the far left that gets all the news media attention, they get scared. They're very afraid that this will become a supernanny state, and their ability to do things on their own is going to be taken away."[33] By distancing themselves from the party, centrists hope to diminish the negative fallout they expect from swing voters' association of the Democratic Party with far-left policy positions.

A quite different argument for distancing candidates from the Democratic Party comes from the other side of the ideological spectrum within the party. These are progressive Democrats who argue that many otherwise progressive voters are disillusioned with the Democratic Party, seeing it as tied to interests of corporate executives and the superrich. They point to the success of Sanders's 2016 insurgent campaign in the Democratic presidential primary, as well as public opinion polls suggesting widespread popular support for a third party as evidence that progressive candidates would fare better if they put space between themselves and the Democratic Party.[34]

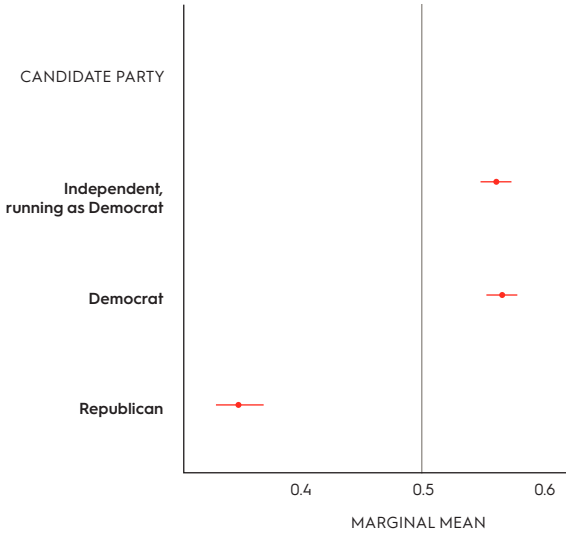
We tested these two propositions by varying candidates' party affiliations across three options: "Republican," "Democrat," and "Independent running as a Democrat." We opted not to include an "Independent" option as we assumed voters' overwhelming preference for a candidate capable of winning in a general election would bias respondents' opinions of independents not running on a major party's ballot line.

We find that working-class voters' candidate preferences are generally not impacted by candidates' attempts to distance themselves from the Democratic Party. First, in the full sample, Independents running as Democrats performed no better or worse than Democratic candidates.

33 https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/house-democrats-pelosi-election/2020/11/05/1ddae5ca-1f6e-11eb-90dd-abd0f7086a91_story.html

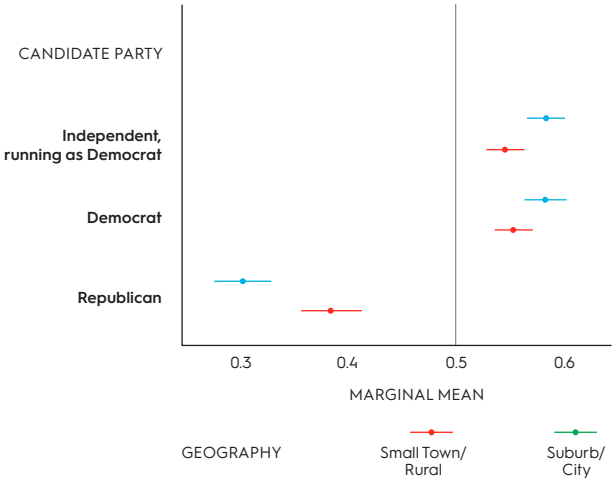
34 For polling on Americans' support for third parties, see https://news.gallup.com/poll/329639/support-third-political-party-high-point.aspx.

Working-Class Preferences for Candidate Partisanship



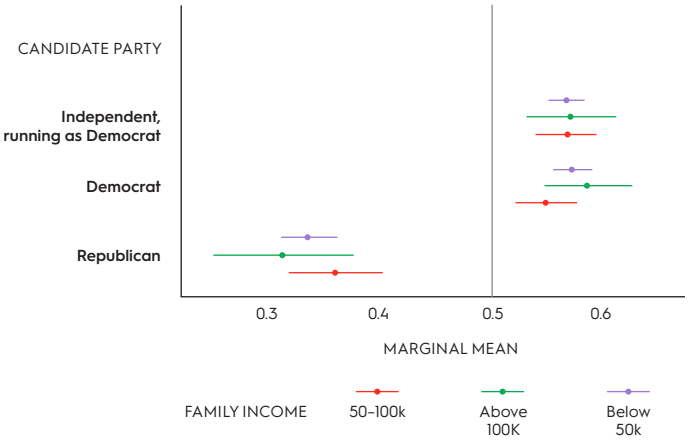
Next, we find, unsurprisingly, that suburban and urban respondents were more favorable to both independents and Democrats than rural/small-town respondents (who were more likely to prefer Republican candidates), but we observe no difference in support for Democratic vs. independent candidates among either suburban/urban or rural/small-town respondents. This suggests that distancing oneself from the Democratic Party is not likely to yield significant benefits in small-town/rural areas. There is little evidence that people in "left behind" areas would be swayed by candidates explicitly distancing themselves from the Democratic Party.

Working-Class Preferences for Candidate Partisanship by Respondents' Geography



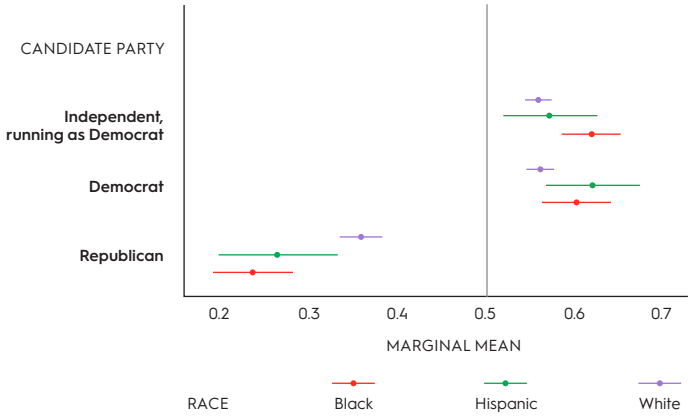
We see similar patterns across income levels. There was a slight preference for independents running as Democrats relative to Democrats among middle-income respondents ($50,000 – $100,000 in yearly family income), but this difference is not statistically significant. Similarly, there are no differences in support for independent vs. Democratic candidates within other income brackets. Less affluent working-class voters, then, are not particularly disillusioned with Democratic Party candidates.

Working-Class Preferences for Candidate Partisanship by Income



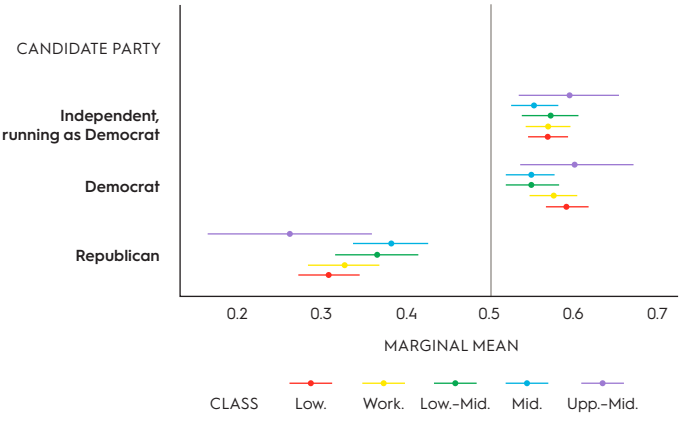
While we find a slight preference for independents among blacks compared to other racial groups (though this difference is not statistically significant), there is no difference in support for independents or Democrats among whites, and among Latinos there is a slight (also not statistically significant) preference for Democrats over independents.

Working-Class Preferences for Candidate Partisanship by Respondents' Race



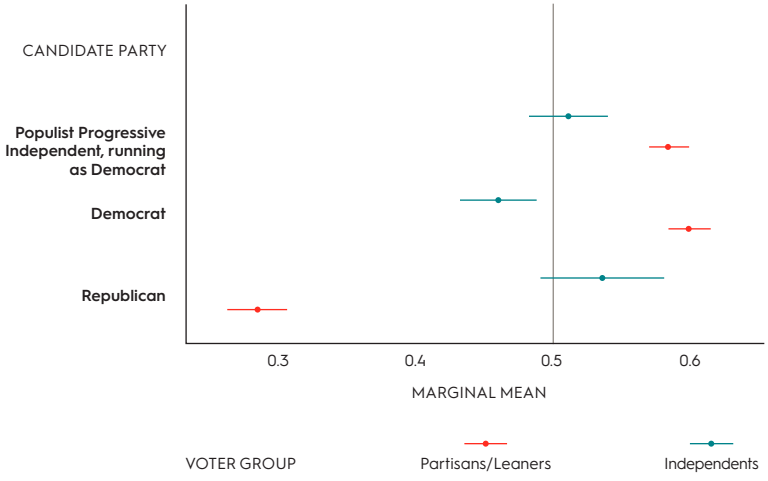
Next, we look at respondents' views of independent vs. Democratic candidates based on their self-identified class. We find a very slight (not statistically significant) preference for independents over Democrats among lower-middle-class respondents, and a similarly slight preference for Democrats over independents among lower-income respondents. Beyond this there are no differences in preference for independents vs. Democrats within any class identification. This suggests, again, that working-class Americans are unlikely to be swayed by candidates distancing themselves from the Democratic Party.

Working-Class Preferences for Candidate Partisanship by Respondents' Class Self-Identification



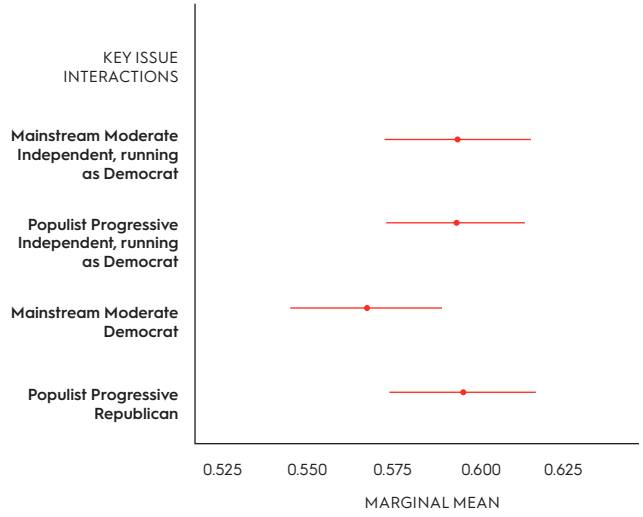
The only meaningful difference in respondent preferences across candidate partisanship was observed between self-identified independents who do not lean toward either major party. Independent voters preferred independents running as Democrats over Democrats by a margin of 51% to 46%, though this difference fell just short of statistical significance ($p = .08$). This finding essentially supports the logic of centrists in marginal districts who believe distancing themselves from the Democratic Party can be helpful to attract right-leaning swing voters. On the other hand, however, since the impact of this distancing is relatively modest, our results should also temper the contentions of centrist Democrats that the party brand is being irrevocably damaged in marginal districts by its association with figures like Democratic Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez of New York.

Working-Class Preferences for Candidate Partisanship by Respondents' Partisanship



Finally, we examined whether running as an independent can reinforce the impact of populist messaging. To the contrary, we find that candidates who employed progressive populist messaging did no better or worse when running as an independent compared to running as a Democrat. That said, candidates who employed mainstream moderate messaging did fare better when running as independents rather than Democrats (about 3% better, though the difference is not statistically significant). This suggests that it is centrist voters, rather than disaffected progressive voters, who view independence from the Democrats as a political asset. In other words, our results offer no support to the "disaffected progressive" argument that progressive candidates' connection to the Democratic Party is keeping otherwise progressive voters away from these candidates.

Working-Class Preferences for Candidate Partisanship When Paired with Different Candidate Soundbites



Do Different Definitions of Class Affect Our Understanding of Working-Class Attitudes Toward Progressive Candidates?

Key Takeaways

1. Candidates who invoked progressive populist messaging were viewed just as favorably as candidates who used other types of campaign messaging, while candidates who opted for woke messaging were typically viewed less favorably than other Democratic candidates. This was true across virtually all our measures of the working class. The pattern mostly held across racial groups as well. This suggests that while there is a considerable risk of alienating sections of the working class by employing woke talking points, there is no similar risk posed by avoiding them — those sections of the working class that prefer woke messaging are not alienated by populist progressivism.
2. Working-class views of progressive candidates depend on how you measure the working class.
   - Based on our multidimensional measure of class, we find that respondents who are classified as working class may be marginally more progressive than middle-/professional-class respondents with respect to candidate messaging and policy priorities. That said, when we examine each dimension of class individually (manual vs. mental work, routine vs. creative work, and supervised vs. independent work), no consistent picture emerges. There is no one-size-fits-all policy approach that appeals to working-class voters as a whole.
3. The educational attainment of respondents' parents is a strong predictor of candidate preferences. Respondents who reported that their parents achieved a four-year college degree or more consistently favor more progressive candidates than other respondents.

Unpacking the Results

One of the priority goals of our research is to capture a fuller picture of the preferences, interests, and political priorities of working-class voters in the United States. To do that effectively we wanted to capture a multidimensional view of social class.

American sociologists and demographers are famously allergic to the concept of social class, and some have even suggested that "classes" — as understood by European theorists like Max Weber or Karl Marx — simply do not exist in the United States.[35] Other social scientists have argued that America's social hierarchy is not filled with classes but with "status groups" that signal their position through their cultural consumption. This latter understanding has led to constructions, like the "white working class," which are more distinguishable by habits and aesthetic than by their economic position in society.[36] Still, others maintain that if there are classes in the United States then they are "micro-classes" (occupational groups, clusters of shared cultural mores, and skills-based affinity groups).[37] Political scientists have also struggled to make sense of the class system in the United States. Even as pluralism gave way to more nuanced understandings of American domestic power relations, the question of social class was, again and again, reframed and redefined: instead of a ruling class America has a "power elite," and instead of a laboring working class and a professional middle class, we simply have blue and white collars.[38]

For most researchers and journalists trying to make sense of voting patterns and political choices, the preferred shorthand for social class is educational attainment. Substituting educational attainment for social class provides a neat solution to a messy problem. Consider that most opinion surveys do not ask respondents what class they consider themselves a member of and, even if they did, there is plenty of evidence that Americans' *subjective class identification* differs significantly from their *objective position*.[39] Further, on the researchers' side, defining the "objective" boundaries of different classes has proven conceptually tricky, typically resulting in overbroad categories or ultra-fine groups. Educational attainment, however, provides a nice objective gradation that correlates to plenty of social outcomes, income levels, cultural preferences, occupations, and types of work.

Socially, culturally, and politically there can be little doubt that one of the largest divides in America is between those with a college degree and those without. In terms of income, life expectancy, rates of poverty, occupational categories, political priorities, and more, the gap between those with and without a college degree has widened considerably.[40] In short, non-college-educated workers have witnessed a major decline in their standards of living across the board, and while college-educated workers (especially younger ones) have also struggled to cope with low wages and an unstable economy, they have fared considerably better. Indeed, "education" is now

35 Terry Nichols Clark and Seymour Martin Lipset, "Are Social Classes Dying?," *International Sociology* 6, no. 4 (1991): 397–410; Jan Pakulski and Malcolm Waters, *The Death of Class* (Sage, 1996).

36 Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1984).

37 David B. Grusky and Jesper B. Sørensen, "Can Class Analysis Be Salvaged?," *American Journal of Sociology* 103, no. 5 (1998): 1187–1234.

38 C. Wright Mills, *White Collar: The American Middle Classese* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1951); C. Wright Mills, *The Power Elite* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1956); G. William Domhoff, *Who Rules America? Englewood Cliffs, NJ, Prentice-Hall* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1967).

39 Benjamin Sosnaud, David Brady, and Steven M. Frenk, "Class in Name Only: Subjective Class Identity, Objective Class Position, and Vote Choice in American Presidential Elections," *Social Problems* 60, no. 1 (2013): 81–99.

40 John Goldthorpe and Michelle Jackson, "Education-Based Meritocracy: The Barries to Its Realisation," *Stato e Mercato*, no. 1 (2008): 31–60; Dani Rodrik, *Straight Talk on Trade: Ideas for a Sane World Economy* (Princeton University Press, 2017).

seen by many as synonymous with "class": those with a four-year degree are middle-class and those without are working-class.

This neat division is useful, and it has gotten a lot of attention recently, but it is not without its shortcomings. For example, a person's education alone cannot tell you if they work under a supervisor, if they are a professional free from supervision, or if they directly supervise other workers. And while a four-year degree is often a route to white-collar office work, it is not uncommon today for such degree holders to make significantly less in income than their blue-collar counterparts in certain trades. Many young degree holders also work in low-wage service sector jobs while others without a degree have enjoyed relatively comfortable lives as inheritors of family businesses. With this in mind, we can see how different definitions of class provide different images of working-class political preferences and how different objective statuses within the working class affect political preferences.

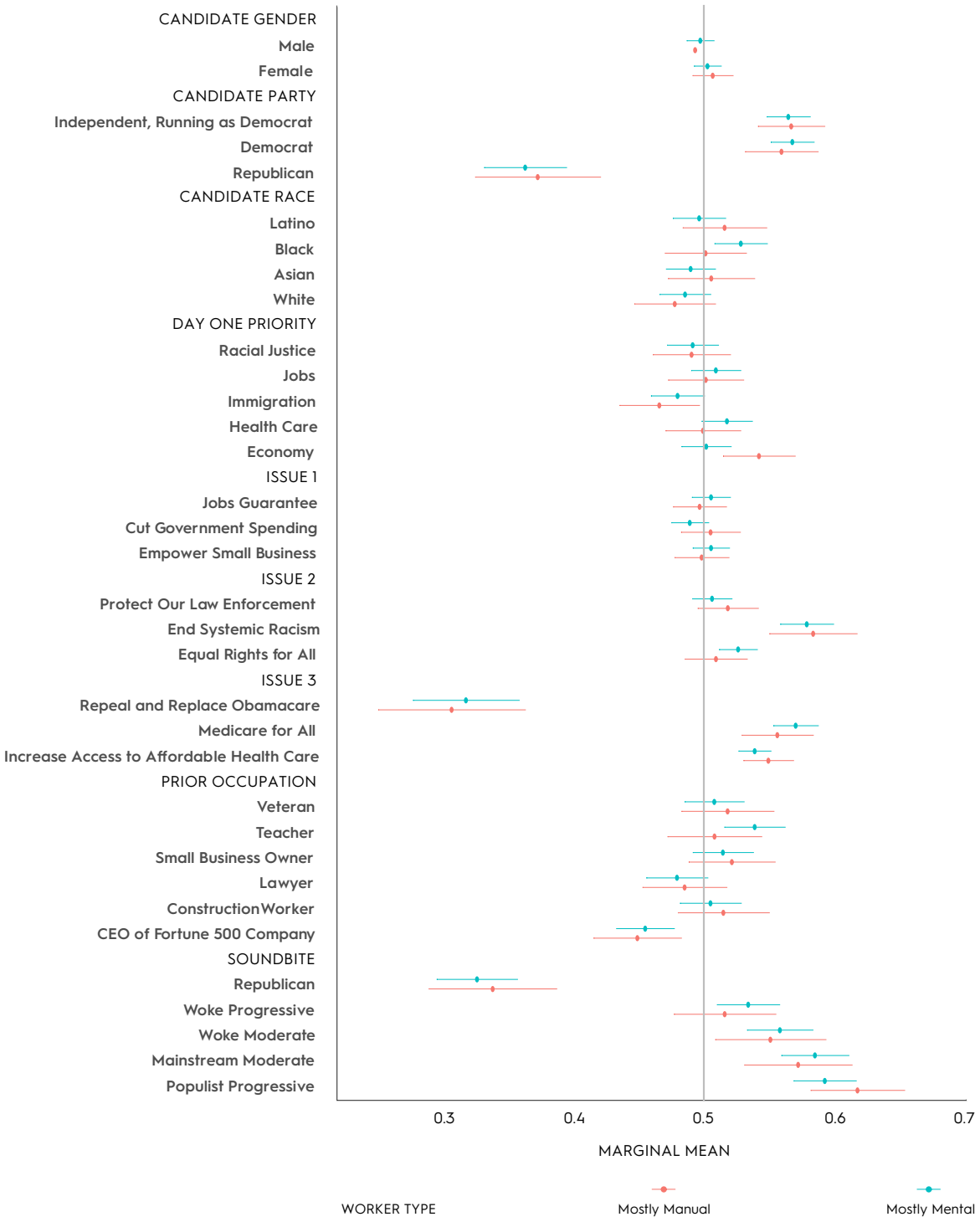
We attempted to build a more robust measurement of social class by asking respondents about their educational attainment, whether they perform mostly manual or mostly mental labor, whether they are supervised or supervise others, how they define their own class position, what their parents' level of education was, whether they perform mostly routine or creative tasks at work, and what degree of autonomy they have at work. We also developed a three-dimensional class variable that combines some of this information. Specifically, following Hall and Evans (2019) we created a measure of worker skill-level based on respondents' self-assessments of the degree of mental vs. manual labor they perform, whether they primarily perform creative or routine tasks, and the degree of independence they reported having in the workplace.[41]

The Mental/Manual Divide

Our findings suggest there are few differences in preferences between mental and manual workers in terms of issue priorities and day-one priorities. Indeed, the only clear divergence between the two groups is that manual workers prioritized the economy as a day-one priority more strongly than mental workers. Both groups were strongly favorable toward progressive policy issues such as Medicare for All and ending systemic racism. There were noticeable, but not strong differences with respect to candidate professions, with mental workers most favoring teachers, and manual workers showing little difference in preferences across all working-class and small business owner professions. Fortune 500 CEOs and lawyers were the least appealing candidates overall for manual workers.

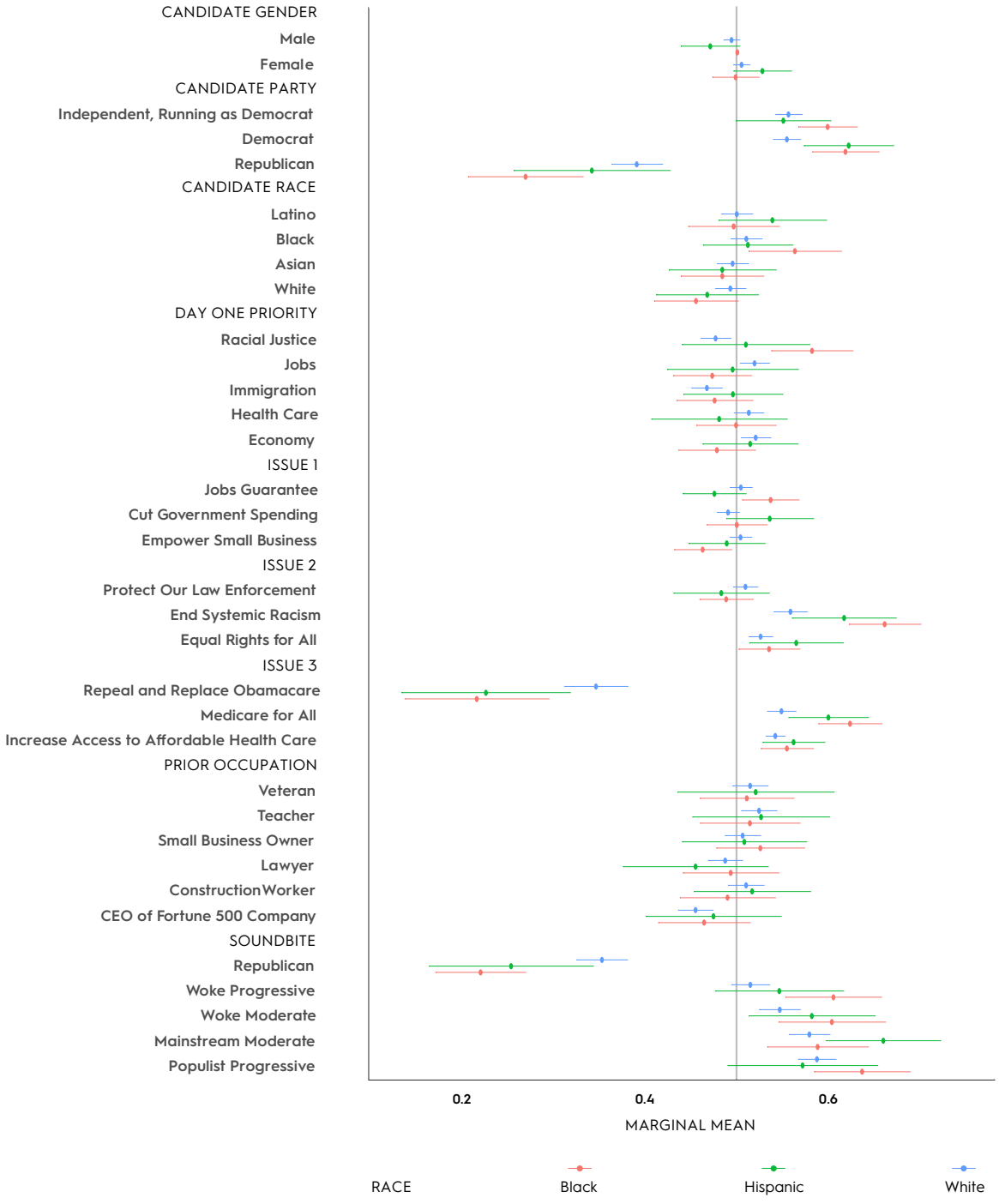
41 Details of how we operationalize these variables can be found in the supplementary materials on Github.

Working-Class Preferences for Political Candidates by Respondents' Class (Manual vs. Mental Work)



Breaking down manual workers by race/ethnicity, we find that non-woke candidate messaging was preferred by white manual workers, but there was no meaningful difference in support for any Democratic candidates among their black counterparts. Latino manual workers found mainstream moderate messaging the most appealing, though due to the small number of Latinos in our survey the difference between their support for mainstream moderate and other Democratic messaging was not statistically significant. Ending systemic racism and Medicare for All were popular among all manual workers, though least among whites, while a jobs guarantee was viewed favorably by white and especially black, but not Latino manual workers.

Working-Class Preferences for Political Candidates by Respondents' Race (Manual Workers Only)

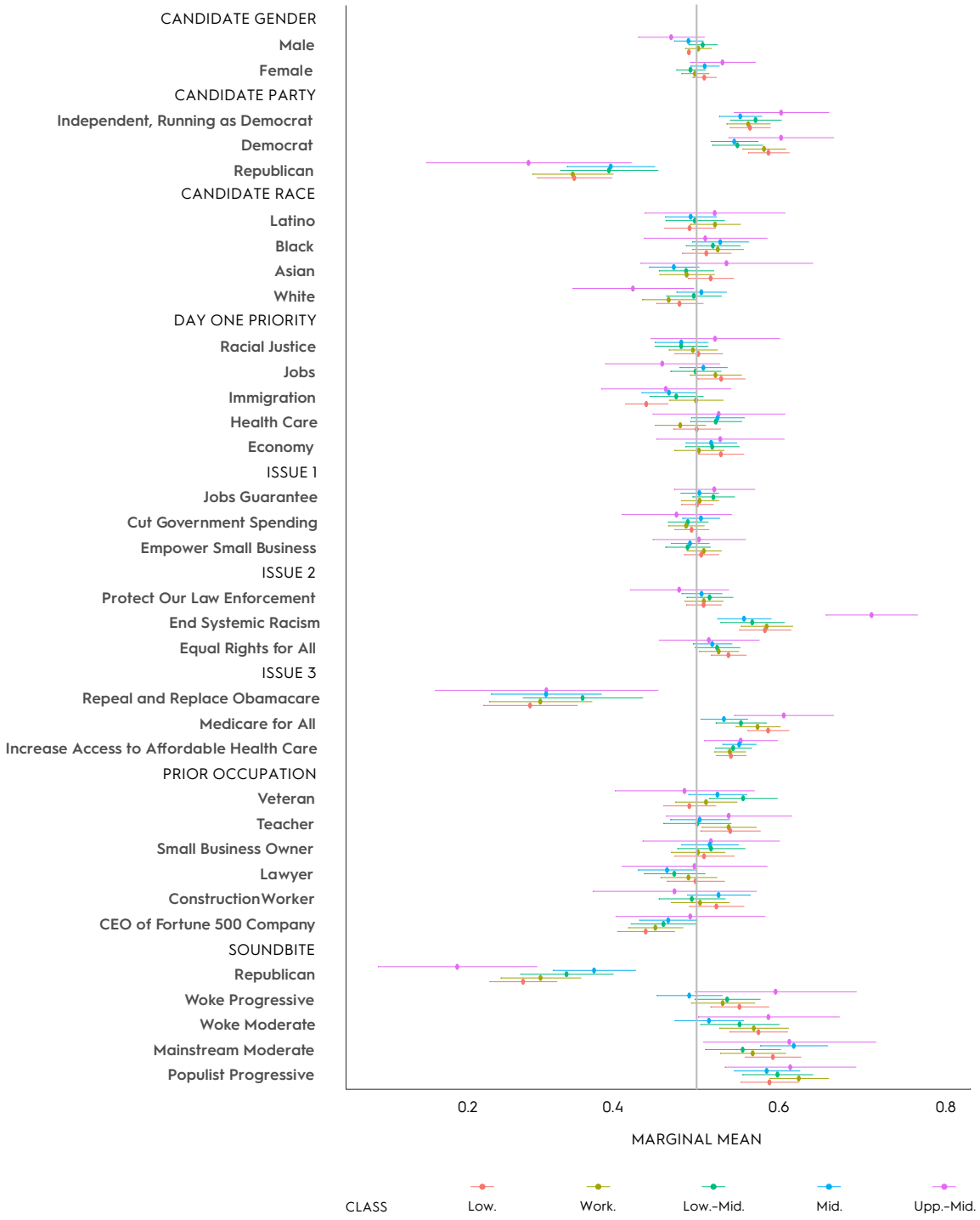


Class Self-Identification

We also asked respondents their subjective understanding of their social class position. Respondents were asked to choose between five class categories: low income, working class, lower-middle class, middle class, and upper-middle class. While few stark differences emerge, we do find some evidence that upper-middle-class respondents were most favorable toward woke messaging and progressive policy stances, particularly around racial issues. Upper-middle-class voters were least favorable toward white candidates and most favorable toward racial justice as a day-one priority (note that these differences were not statistically significant due to the small number of self-identified upper-middle-class respondents in our sample). Self-identified upper-middle-class respondents also demonstrated dramatically higher levels of support compared to other respondents for candidates who included ending systemic racism as a key policy issue — upper-middle-class respondents backed candidates who supported ending systemic racism 70% of the time. The woke progressive and woke moderate messaging styles were also the most popular with this group. By contrast, ending systemic racism was favored 58% of the time among self-identified working-class respondents, whose most favored messaging style was progressive populism.

Beyond the woke tendencies of upper-middle-class respondents, however, we find little evidence of consistent subjective class-based preferences across candidate characteristics. For instance, while self-identified upper-middle-class respondents were least favorable toward construction worker candidates (even slightly preferring CEOs to construction workers), they also strongly supported Medicare for All and progressive populist messaging. Similarly, while working-class respondents viewed jobs as a day-one priority and progressive populist messaging favorably, they did not show a positive preference for candidates that supported a jobs guarantee (indeed, upper-middle-class respondents were more favorable toward a jobs guarantee than self-identified working-class respondents).

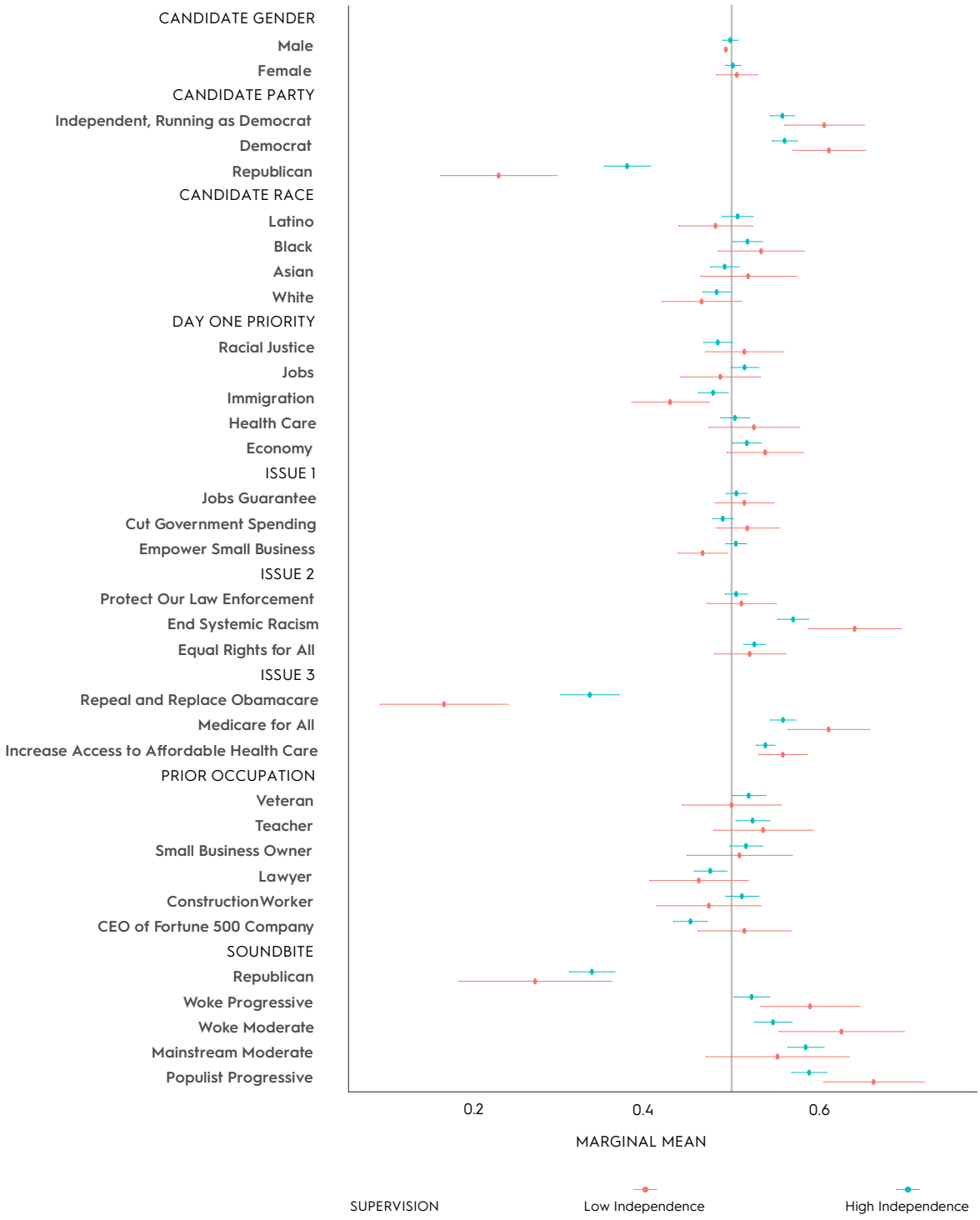
Working-Class Preferences for Political Candidates by Class Self-Identification



Supervision at Work

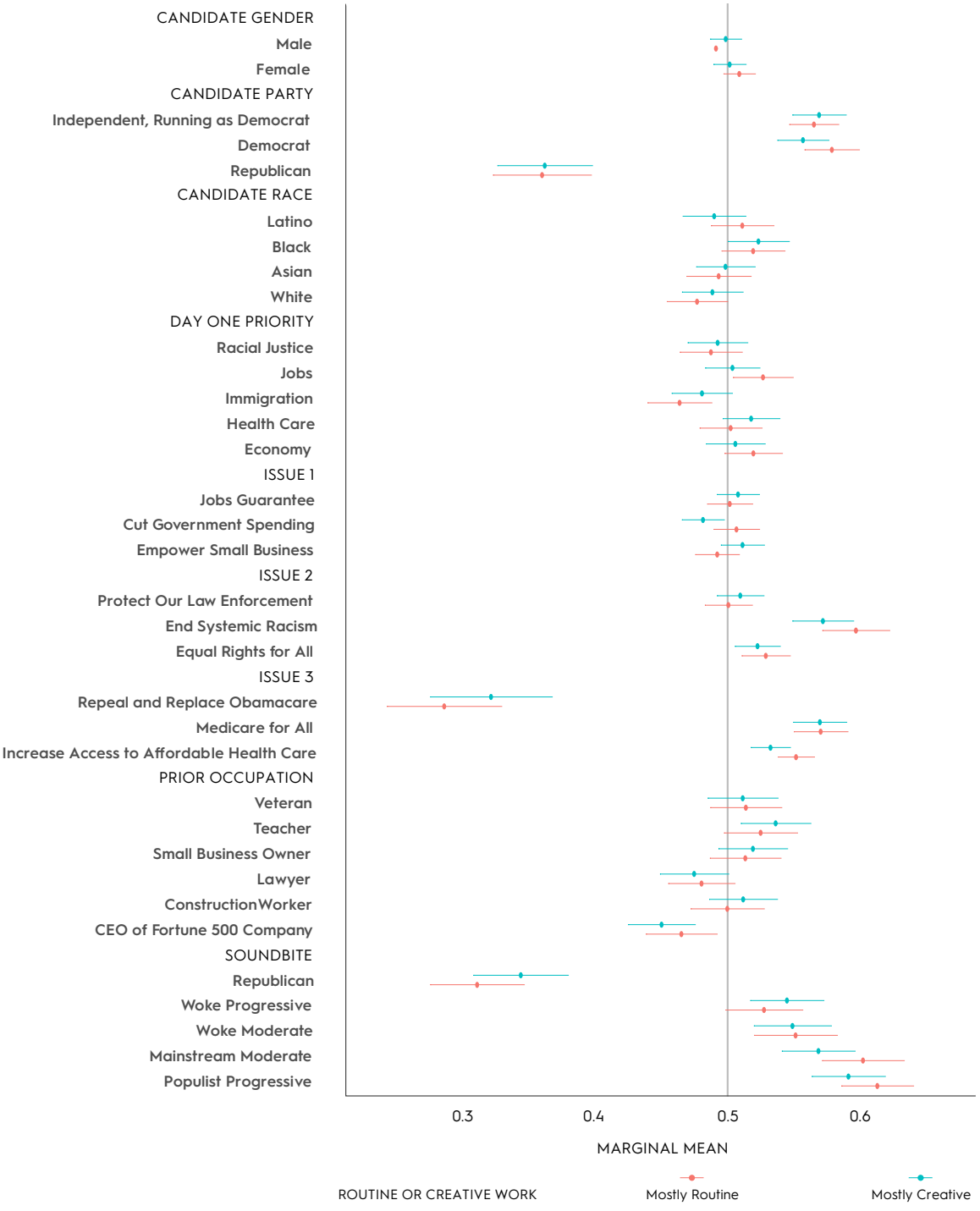
Next, we asked respondents the extent to which they are supervised on the job. Less supervision suggests respondents have a greater degree of independence at their place of work, and as a result face different working conditions than other respondents whose day-to-day activities are more closely monitored by supervisors. We find significant differences across supervisory status, with low-independence respondents generally preferring more progressive candidates compared to high-independence respondents. Low-independence respondents were more favorable than high-independence respondents to Democratic candidates, progressive policy positions such as ending systemic racism and Medicare for All, and all Democratic soundbites except the mainstream moderate soundbite (there was not a significant difference between low- and high-independence respondents' views of mainstream moderate messaging). Interestingly, however, low-independence respondents were much more favorable toward CEO candidates and were much less supportive of candidates focusing on immigration as a day-one priority than high-independence respondents.

Working-Class Preferences for Political Candidates by Respondents' Class (Level of Supervision at Work)



Routine vs. Creative Work

We also look at differences in candidate preferences between respondents who reported performing primarily routine work vs. those who perform mainly creative work. In this case, there are few statistically significant differences across types of work, though there are some interesting patterns, particularly around candidates' policy priorities, where differences across types of workers do not follow consistently liberal or conservative lines. For example, while routine workers were more favorable than creative workers toward cutting government spending, they were also more favorable toward ending systemic racism (though this difference was not statistically significant), and both creative and routine workers showed a clear preference for ending systemic racism over the other two civil rights policy options. Finally, routine workers were more favorable to progressive populist and mainstream moderate messaging than creative workers, though the differences were not statistically significant, and both groups viewed these two soundbites more favorably than the other three alternatives.


CANDIDATE GENDER
Male
Female
CANDIDATE PARTY
Independent, Running as Democrat
Democrat
Republican
CANDIDATE RACE
Latino
Black
Asian
White
DAY ONE PRIORITY
Racial Justice
Jobs
Immigration
Health Care
Economy
ISSUE 1
Jobs Guarantee
Cut Government Spending
Empower Small Business
ISSUE 2
Protect Our Law Enforcement
End Systemic Racism
Equal Rights for All
ISSUE 3
Repeal and Replace Obamacare
Medicare for All
Increase Access to Affordable Health Care
PRIOR OCCUPATION
Veteran
Teacher
Small Business Owner
Lawyer
ConstructionWorker
CEO of Fortune 500 Company
SOUNDBITE
Republican
Woke Progressive
Woke Moderate
Mainstream Moderate
Populist Progressive
0.3
0.4
0.5
0.6
MARGINAL MEAN
ROUTINE OR CREATIVE WORK
Mostly Routine
Mostly Creative

Three-Dimensional Class

Next, we tried to address the conceptual problems posed by using any single-dimensional view of class — like income or education or supervisory position — by constructing a three-dimensional variable for class position. Based on the work of Erik Olin Wright, we combined respondents' answers to questions about their skill level (which we capture as the routine vs. creative work category discussed above), level of independence on the job, and type of work (which we capture as the manual vs. mental work category discussed above) to form a richer social class variable.[42] Those respondents who are lower skilled, have less autonomy at work, and perform mostly manual tasks are those most commonly understood as working class, while those who have high degrees of autonomy, skills, and perform mostly mental tasks are understood as professional or middle class.

Here, again, we see few statistically significant differences. There are some suggestions that working-class respondents tended to support more progressive candidates (they were more favorable toward Democrats over Republicans, racial justice as a day-one priority, ending systemic racism, and progressive populist messaging), but these differences were slight, and none were statistically significant. The only interesting and statistically significant differences we observe are that working-class respondents by this measure preferred female over male candidates while there was no difference among middle-class respondents, and middle-class respondents preferred Medicare for All over increasing access to affordable health care, whereas there was no difference in working-class respondents' support for candidates who varied across progressive health care policy options.

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42 Erik Olin Wright, "The Continuing Relevance of Class Analysis—Comments," *Theory and Society* 25, no. 5 (1996): 693–716; Erik Olin Wright, *Class Counts: Comparative Studies in Class Analysis* (Cambridge University Press, 1997).

Working-Class Preferences for Political Candidates by Respondents' Class

Family Class Background[43]

Since important class differences may be obscured by the measures discussed above, we also look at differences in candidate preferences based on respondents' class background, rather than their current class identification. In particular, we look at differences between respondents who reported that their parents attained a four-year college degree or more compared to respondents whose parents received less education. Here we find major differences, with respondents whose parents were highly educated showing stronger preferences for progressive candidates virtually across the board. For instance, respondents with highly educated parents were much more favorable than other respondents toward Democratic candidates and progressive policy positions such as Medicare for All and ending systemic racism. Similarly, while both groups favored progressive populist messaging over all other options, respondents with highly educated parents favored all progressive candidates more than other respondents (though the differences were not statistically significant), and respondents with parents of modest educational attainment were more favorable toward Republican messaging than other respondents. Finally, with respect to candidates' gender and race, respondents with highly educated parents strongly preferred female candidates over male candidates and candidates of color over white candidates (for instance, these respondents preferred white candidates 43% of the time, and black candidates 53% of the time). Differences across candidates' gender and race were much less important for other respondents, among whom we observe no statistically significant differences in preferences regarding candidates' race or gender, except that they preferred black over white candidates by a three-point margin.

43 Note that lack of statistical significance between estimates across family class background in many cases is indicative of the small number of respondents who reported having highly-educated parents, rather than the absence of meaningful differences across groups.

Working-Class Preferences for Political Candidates by Educational Attainment of Respondents' Parents

Does Gender Affect Working-Class Attitudes Toward Progressive Candidates?

Key Takeaways

1. Women are more likely to support progressive policy priorities than men.
2. Running female candidates is slightly advantageous for getting working-class support.
3. Our results challenge caricatures of the American working class as chauvinistic and culturally conservative.
4. Candidates' gender plays little role in respondents' evaluation of candidates.
5. In general, men and women view a candidate's gender, race, and class through a similar lens, though female respondents were marginally more supportive of female candidates, candidates of color, and some working-class candidates (such as teachers) compared to male respondents.

Unpacking the Results

We examine the role of gender in working-class politics in two ways: the gender of the voter and the gender of the candidate. Scholars have long debated whether men and women exhibit distinct political preferences and opinions.[44] Our study supports those who have highlighted important gender-based differences.

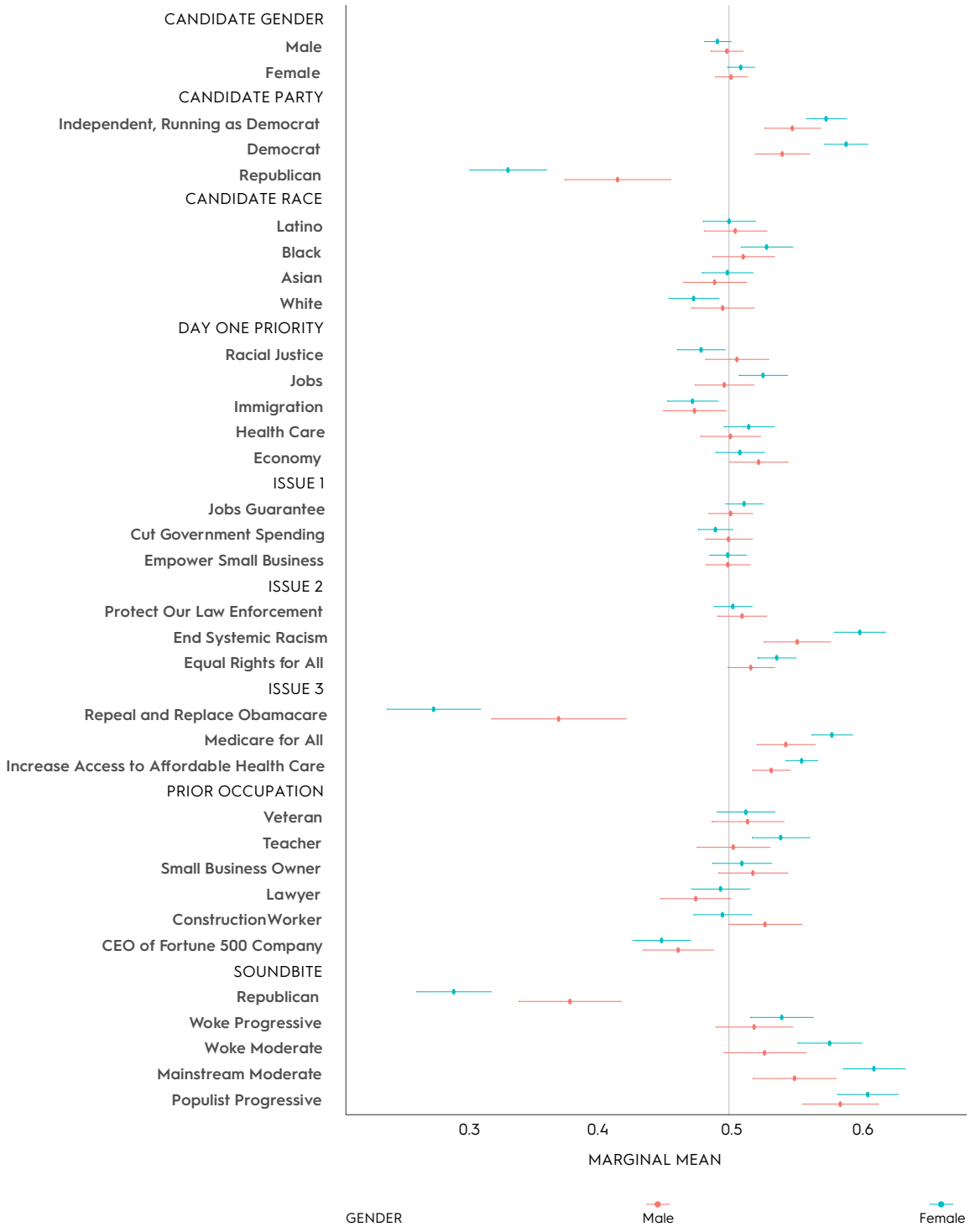
Respondents' gender plays a clear role in explaining patterns of working-class support for progressive candidates, with working-class women generally showing a stronger preference for progressive policy issues compared to male respondents. For instance, female working-class respondents were more likely to prefer a candidate who prioritizes a jobs guarantee and less likely to prefer a candidate who wants to cut government spending, though these differences are not statistically significant. On health care, working-class women respondents were more progressive than their male counterparts, supporting Medicare for All at a higher rate than men, though, like men, they show a stronger favorability toward Medicare for All compared to increasing access to affordable health care. Working-class men were more likely to prefer repealing Obamacare. Women were also much more likely than men to support candidates who included ending systemic racism as a key campaign issue.

Woke rhetoric, however, complicates the picture. Progressive populist messaging strongly outpaces woke progressive messaging. Both men and women favor soundbites from both types of non-woke Democratic candidates, whether progressive or moderate. But progressive populist messaging performed better relative to mainstream moderate soundbites among male respondents. On the other hand, female respondents preferred non-woke progressive and moderate rhetoric equally or more than any other style. In addition, female respondents were more favorable to all Democratic candidates than men, who had a much stronger (though still net negative) preference for Republican messaging compared to women.

Regarding partisanship, both male and female respondents dislike Republican candidates, with female respondents showing a particularly strong aversion. Both male and female respondents also showed an equal preference for Democratic candidates and independent candidates running as Democrats.

44 Leonie Huddy, Erin Cassese, and Mary-Kate Lizotte, "Gender, Public Opinion, and Political Reasoning," *Political Women and American Democracy*, 2008, 31–49; Mark Schlesinger and Caroline Heldman, "Gender Gap or Gender Gaps? New Perspectives on Support for Government Action and Policies," *Journal of Politics* 63, no. 1 (2001): 59–92.

Working-Class Preferences for Political Candidates by Gender

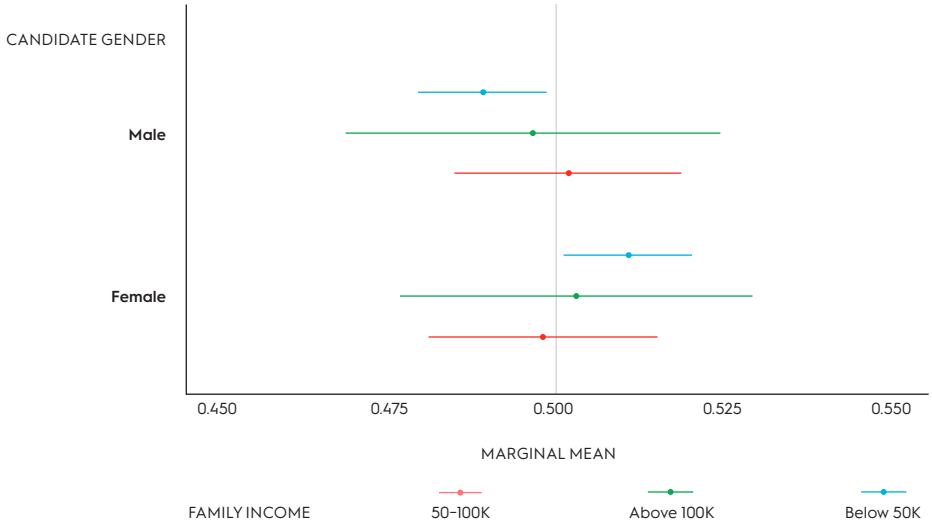


Candidate gender plays a relatively small role in working-class voters' preferences. Our results are notable not for any major findings but for their general insignificance. Among all survey respondents and among many subgroups, there was a small, negligible preference for female candidates.

Our results are notable primarily because of misguided narratives that dominate US politics. Given the media portrayals of working-class voters as ignorant, backwards citizens who are easily manipulated by Trump and other far-right politicians, we might expect chauvinist preferences to rise to the surface when working-class voters choose a candidate. However, our respondents show mild to strong support for female candidates, challenging this caricature of the American working class.

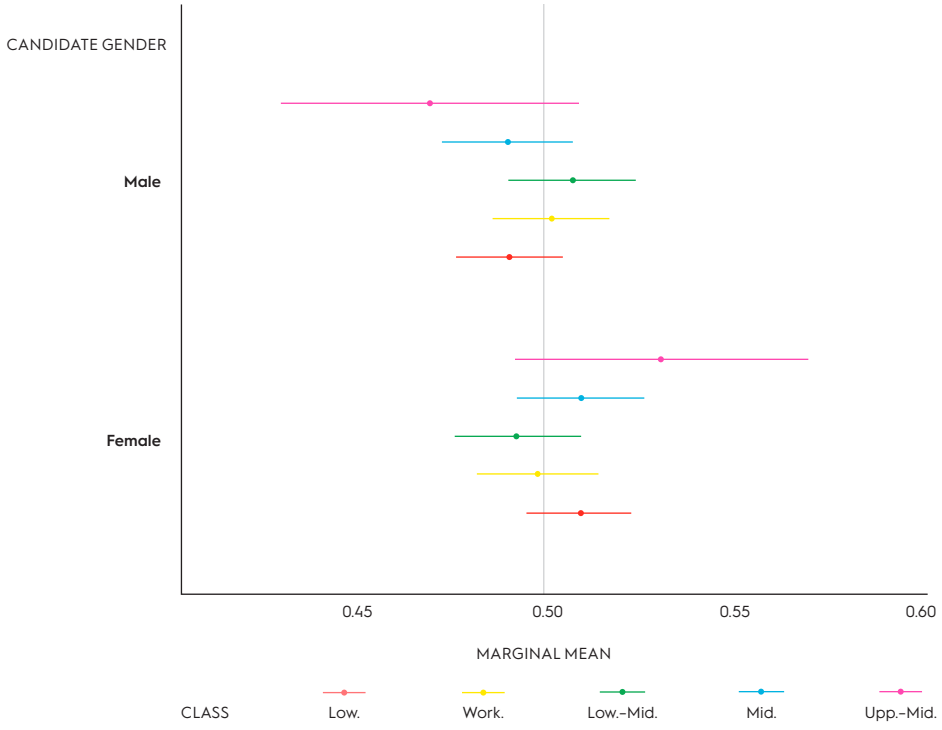
Some of the support for female candidates that we observed among the full sample may be driven by the large number of low-income respondents in our sample. Low-income respondents (with a family income of less than $50,000 annually) preferred female candidates over male candidates, while among middle- and high-income respondents we see no difference. Union members and non-union members alike show no difference in preferences across candidate gender.

Working-Class Preferences for Candidate Gender by Respondents' Income



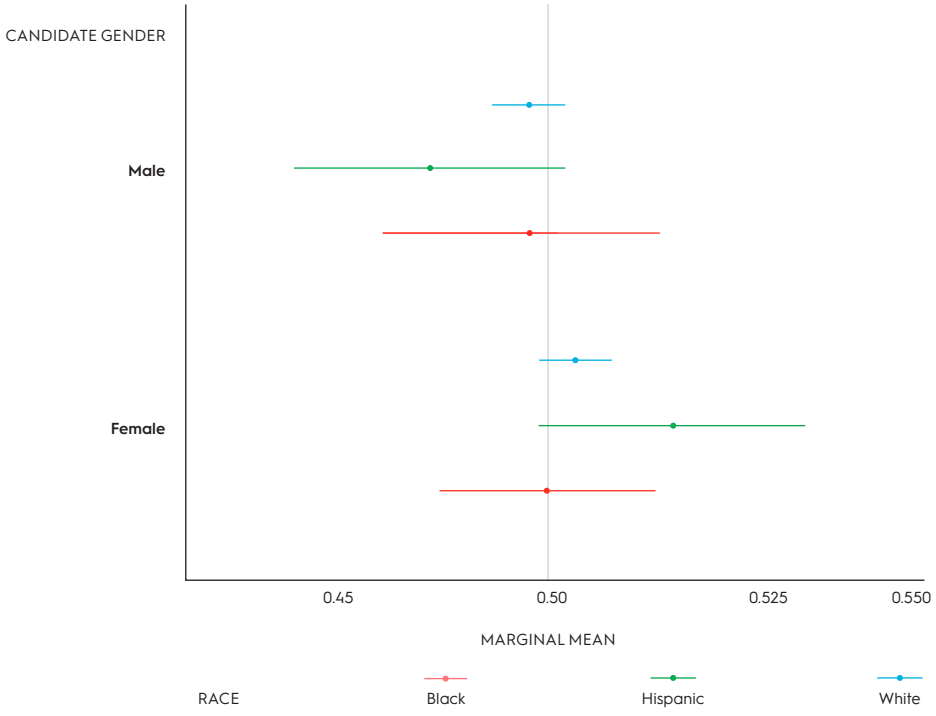
More interestingly, a respondent's class self-identification is important in understanding how candidate gender affects his or her political preferences. Self-identified upper-middle class respondents have a strong preference for women over men. In a rare finding among our results, one group — lower-middle-class respondents — show greater support for male candidates than female candidates, though the difference is slight. All other self-identified classes — middle class, working class, and low income — align with our general finding that candidate gender plays little role in respondents' candidate evaluations.

Working-Class Preferences for Candidate Gender by Class Self-Identification



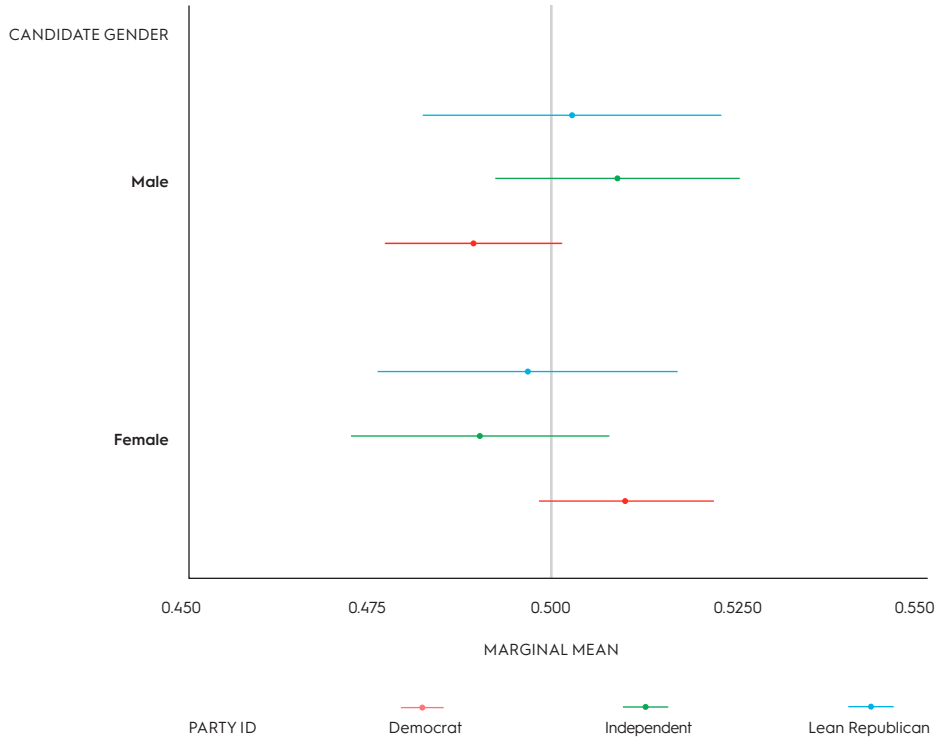
Despite some claims in the mainstream media about their cultural conservatism and deeply held Catholic values, Latinos preferred female candidates more often than either white or black respondents. Both Democratic and Republican party leaders acknowledge that this subgroup is a growing share of the population, but the question of how to appeal to them remains. Our results suggest that running more female candidates may be part of the answer.

Working-Class Preferences for Candidate Gender by Respondents' Race



Respondents' political ideology and partisanship have some effect on their views of a candidate's gender. Democratic voters and Biden 2020 voters favor female candidates over male candidates, but only marginally. Voters with Republican leanings, Trump 2020 voters, and independents slightly prefer male candidates.

Working-Class Preferences for Candidate Gender by Partisanship



Does Race Affect Working-Class Voters' Views of Progressive Candidates?

Key Takeaways

1. Respondents from all racial groups were equally or more favorable toward female and minority candidates than white candidates.
2. Respondents from all racial groups were strongly supportive of progressive civil rights and health care positions, but whites were less supportive than other racial groups.
3. Woke candidates were viewed less favorably than other candidates by whites, but not by respondents of color.
   - Significant differences between black and Latino respondents indicate that similar electoral appeals by Democratic candidates are not likely to yield consistent results across these voter blocs.

Unpacking the Results

Respondents across racial/ethnic groups responded favorably to female candidates and candidates of color. Black and Latino candidates were more popular than white candidates among all three racial/ethnic groups analyzed. Consistent with social scientific findings about the importance of representation for electoral choices,[45] black and Latino respondents were the most supportive of candidates that matched their racial group. However, white respondents were slightly more supportive of black and Latino candidates over white candidates. Female and male candidates fared quite similarly with white and black respondents, however female candidates were significantly more popular among Latino respondents.

While much of the literature has focused on the significance of identity and representation for voters of color,[46] our study adds significantly to an understanding of substantive issues that resonate with voters across racial groups. Black, white, and Latino respondents all viewed progressive policies such as ending systemic racism and Medicare for All positively, though whites were less supportive than other groups in both cases. Black respondents were the most supportive of both priorities. Black respondents were also the most supportive of racial justice as the day-one priority for candidates, while whites viewed this priority negatively overall. Two other notable findings were that black respondents had the most favorable view of a jobs guarantee and Latino respondents had the most favorable view of cutting government spending.

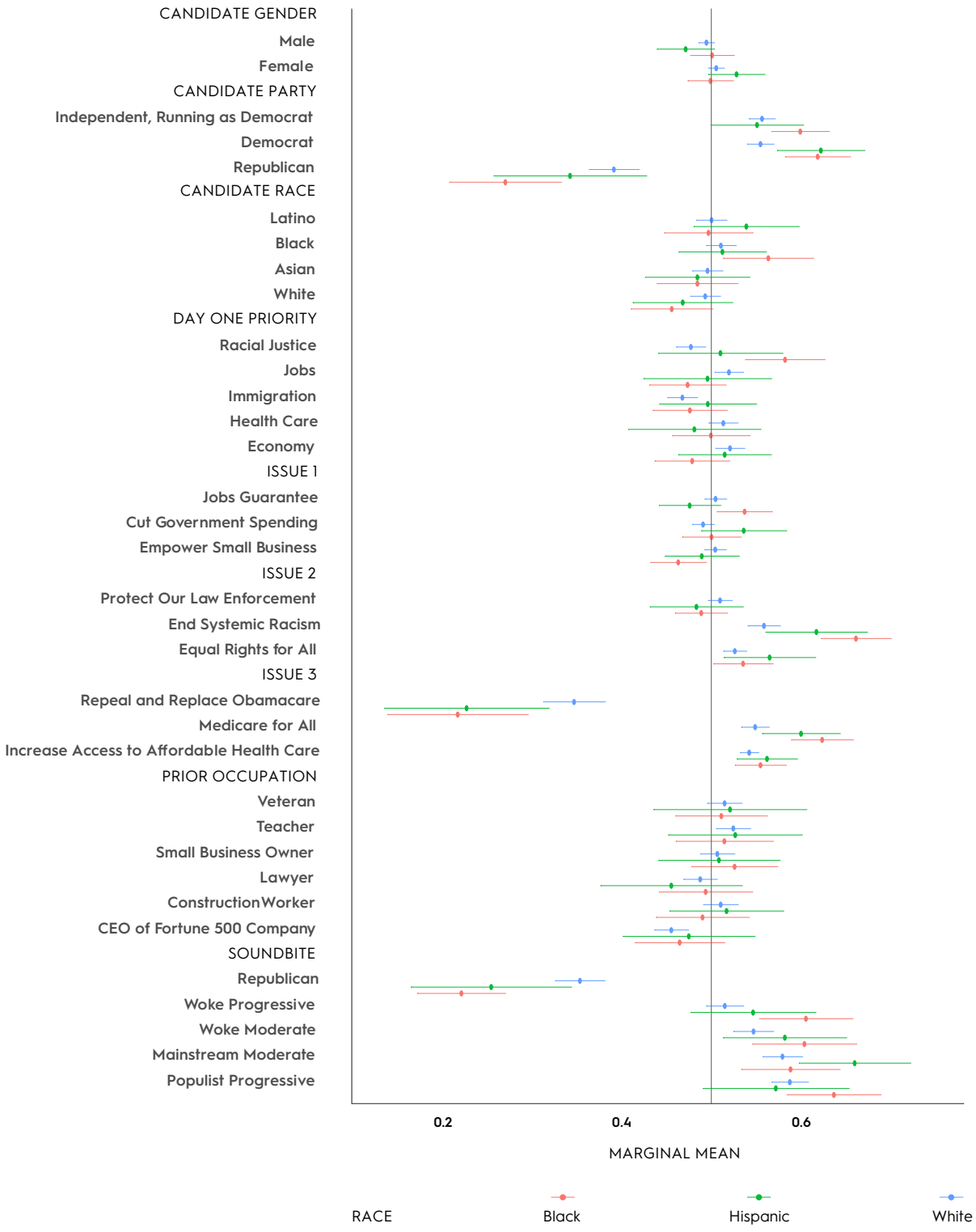
Overall, non-woke candidates fared better than woke candidates among whites, who were equally positive toward progressive populist and mainstream moderate messaging. By contrast, blacks were roughly equal in their support for all Democratic candidates. Latino respondents were the most supportive of mainstream moderate rhetoric, the least supportive of woke progressive messaging, and had similar levels of support for woke centrist and progressive populist rhetoric.

In terms of the relationship between partisanship and race, our findings are consistent with the idea that black voters are strong Democratic partisans — there was the least support for Republican candidates among black respondents, and blacks showed no preference for independents over Democrats. In turn, Latino respondents were equally strong Democratic partisans, and, unlike blacks, showed a substantively large (61% vs. 52%), though not statistically significant (due to the small number of Latinos in our sample), preference for Democrats over independents running as Democrats. White respondents were the most moderate group — with more support for Republicans and less for both Democratic candidates and independents running as Democrats than black and Latino respondents.

45 Katherine Tate, *From Protest to Politics: The New Black Voters in American Elections* (Harvard University Press, 1994).

46 Lisa Garcia Bedolla et al., "Indelible Effects: The Impact of Women of Color in the US Congress," in *Women and Elective Office: Past, Present, and Future*, vol. 2 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); Claudine Gay, "Spirals of Trust? The Effect of Descriptive Representation on the Relationship between Citizens and Their Government," *American Journal of Political Science* 46, no. 4 (2002): 717–32.

Working-Class Preferences for Political Candidates by Respondents' Race



Authorship & Methodology

Authors

Jared Abbott, Leanne Fan, Dustin Guastella, Galen Herz, Matthew Karp, Jason Leach, John Marvel, Katherine Rader, Faraz Riz

Methodology

YouGov interviewed 2,617 respondents who are residents of Nevada, Michigan, Pennsylvania, North Carolina, or Wisconsin; who are over the age of 18; who are not Republican; and who have an educational attainment less than a four-year college degree. Respondents were then cut to a sample of 2,000 (400 from each state) to produce the final data set. In order to do this, the respondents from each state were matched to a sampling frame on gender, age, race, and education. The frame was constructed by stratified sampling from the Cooperative Election Study's 2018 Common Content sample, with selection within strata by weighted sampling with replacements.

The matched cases of each state were combined and weighted to the sampling frame using propensity scores. The matched cases and the frame were then combined, and a logistic regression was estimated for inclusion in the frame. The propensity score function included age, gender, race/ethnicity, years of education, and region. The propensity scores were grouped into deciles in the frame and post-stratified according to these deciles. The weights were then post-stratified on a four-way stratification of gender, age (four categories), race (four categories), and education (four categories) to produce the final weight.

Sponsors

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.

Jacobin Foundation produces *Jacobin* magazine, *Catalyst: A Journal of Theory and Strategy*, and the UK-based *Tribune*. Combined, its publications reach 4 million people monthly online and 100,000 readers in print.

Contact

Authors: jared@workingclasspolitics.org
Press: publicity@workingclasspolitics.org