

Working-Class Social and Economic Attitudes

An Analysis

The Center for Working-Class Politics

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Authors

Jared Abbott, Dustin Guastella, Carson Kindred, and Sean Mason

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

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Contact

Authors: jared@workingclasspolitics.org

Press: publicity@workingclasspolitics.org

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Introduction

The Democrats' working-class problem is not going away. In fact, it's only getting worse — expanding beyond Donald Trump's base of working-class whites to now include working-class Latinos and even a significant share of black men.¹

Debates rage on about how the Left can win back these workers. Influential pollster and Democratic consultant David Shor and the prominent liberal think tank Third Way have argued that the non-college-educated working class is simply more culturally and economically conservative than its college-educated counterpart.² They advocate that the party ought to pivot to the center to appeal to them. With this in mind, prominent liberal journalists like Jonathan Chait have argued that progressive economic populism offers no real electoral benefit for Democrats.³

Yet others, like Timothy Noah and Joan C. Williams as well as John B. Judis and Ruy Teixeira, have argued that while the working class may hold more conservative views on a variety of *sociocultural* issues, they do not hold more conservative *economic* views.⁴ These advocates argue that economic populism — the kind advanced by congressmen Chris Deluzio and Gabe Vasquez and even Senator Bernie Sanders — is key to winning back working-class support.

To adjudicate these claims, a clear accounting of working-class attitudes is needed — not only for the present but over time. How have working-class attitudes changed? And critically, how do they compare to middle and upper-class attitudes? In this report we draw on over 125 public opinion questions over six decades of the American National Election Study (ANES), General Social Survey (GSS), and Cooperative Election Study (CES) to answer these questions. While we do draw out important strategic implications from our findings, our primary objective is descriptive.

The bulk of this report is a presentation of historical trends and the contemporary landscape of class attitudes across six different issue clusters: immigration, civil rights, environmental policy, sociocultural issues, and two dimensions of economic policy. We supplement these descriptive analyses with an analysis of the attitudes of the Trump 2020 electorate to estimate what proportion of that group may be open to progressive economic appeals.

The report offers two key findings, both of which provide some hope for building a working-class majority in 2026 and beyond.

First, as shown in figure 1, working-class Americans have become substantially more progressive on immigration, civil rights, and social issues relative to their views in the past. And while it is true that, as shown in figure 2, working-class Americans have become moderately more conservative relative to middle- and upper-class Americans since the Obama administration, this is largely due to the latter group's increasing progressivism rather than a rising tide of reaction among workers. Another way of putting this is that, while working-class attitudes have drifted slowly toward more socially and culturally liberal positions, those of the middle and upper classes have moved much more rapidly in the same direction.

Second, we show that working-class Americans have historically held, and continue to express, more egalitarian views on economic issues than their middle- and

1 *What Happened in 2024: An Analysis of the 2024 Presidential Election* (Washington, DC: Catalist, 2025)

2 David Shor (@davidshor), "The fundamental coalitional fact of our time is that wealthy voters are more supportive of economic redistribution than the working class right now," quote tweet of Chris Hayes, December 8, 2024, x.com/davidshor/status/1865856648121634880.

3 *Campaign for Working America: A PPI/YouGov Survey of Working-Class Voters* (Washington, DC: Progressive Policy Institute, 2024); Jonathan Chait, "Maybe It Was Never About the Factory Jobs," *Atlantic*, January 13, 2025.

4 Timothy Noah, "The Worst Take of All: Democrats Should Write Off the Working Class," *New Republic*, January 30, 2025; Joan C. Williams, "'We shouldn't blow this one': why Democrats have a chance to retake the working class," interview by J. Oliver Conroy, *Guardian*, May 20, 2025; John B. Judis and Ruy Teixeira, *Where Have All the Democrats Gone?: The Soul of the Party in the Age of Extremes* (New York: Henry Holt and Co, 2023).

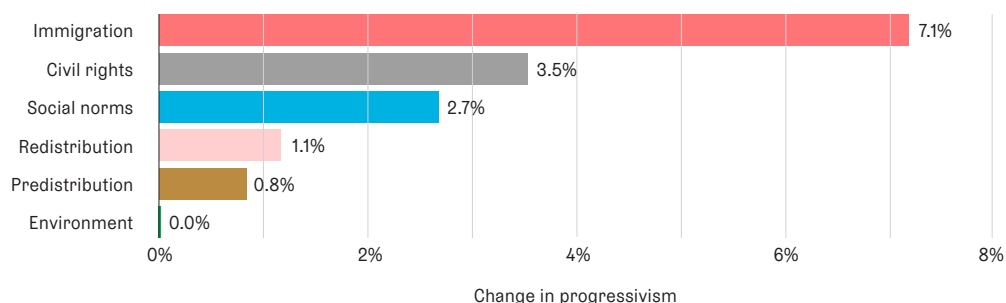
upper-class counterparts — particularly on matters such as job security, wages, and protecting Medicare and Social Security. Today working-class Americans generally support a broad range of progressive economic policies, including those related to jobs, wages, health care, education, and taxes.

However, as our results show, not all progressive economic issues resonate equally with working-class voters. In particular, working-class voters show less support than middle-to-upper-class voters for welfare spending, new large-scale government programs, and tax hikes on the wealthy. By contrast, they show especially strong support for policies that increase workers' economic power — such as raising the minimum wage and protecting American jobs from foreign competition — as well as for preserving and expanding universal government programs like Social Security and Medicare.

At the same time, we find that middle- and upper-class Americans have become more egalitarian on economic issues over the past decades (as can be gleaned from figures 1 and 2) and today even express more egalitarian views than the working class on select economic issues — often those focused on government regulation, taxing the rich, and proposals to increase government spending. Thus, while figure 3 shows that working-class Americans in the period between 2008 and 2022 held modestly more egalitarian attitudes on economic issues, the specific kind of egalitarian policies they preferred often differed from those favored by the middle and upper classes.

Changes in working-class preferences, 1990–2007 to 2008–2022

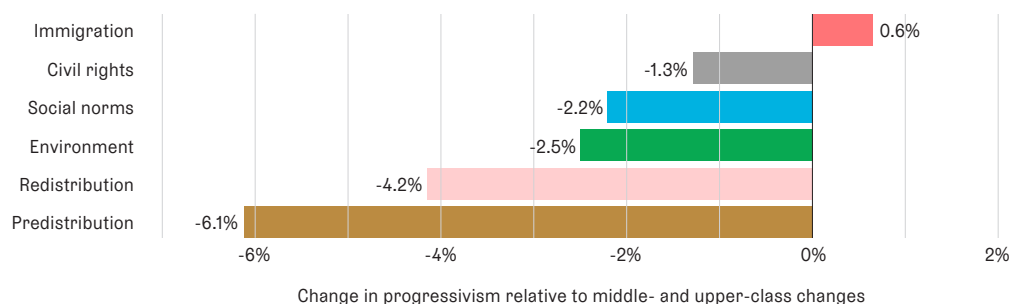
FIGURE 1



Changes in the aggregate preferences of working-class (bottom two-thirds income distribution and no four-year college degree) respondents on 128 survey questions across the ANES, GSS, and CES. Questions are aggregated into six policy-issue areas. Economic issues are categorized as either “predistributive” policies that strengthen workers’ position within the economy before taxes and transfers, or “redistributive” policies that shift resources through taxation and public spending. Positive values indicate increasing progressivism.

Changes in working-class preferences relative to middle- and upper-class preferences, 1990–2007 to 2008–2022

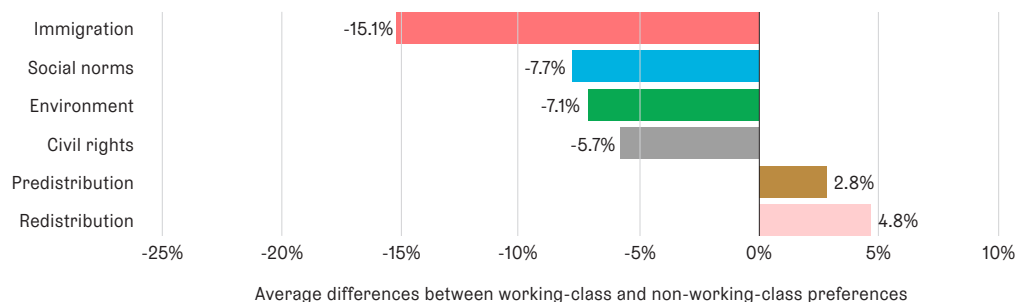
FIGURE 2



Changes in the aggregate preferences of working-class (bottom two-thirds income distribution and no four-year college degree) relative to changes in the aggregate preferences of middle-to-upper-class respondents on 128 survey questions across the ANES, GSS, and CES. Questions are aggregated into six policy-issue areas. Economic issues are categorized as either “predistributive” policies that strengthen workers’ position within the economy before taxes and transfers, or “redistributive” policies that shift resources through taxation and public spending. Negative values indicate decreasing relative progressivism.

Working-class preferences relative to middle- and upper-class preferences, 2008–2022

FIGURE 3



Aggregation of differences in the share of working-class (bottom two-thirds income distribution and no four-year college degree) respondents relative to middle-to-upper-class respondents on 128 survey questions aggregated into six policy-issue areas. Negative values indicate areas where the working class is less progressive than the middle and upper classes, whereas positive values indicate areas where the working class is more progressive.

In fact, an ideologically similar working-class coalition helped to propel both Barack Obama and Donald Trump to victory. Based on historical trends, the same working-class coalition that elected Obama is now likely even more progressive than it was eighteen years ago. Nonetheless, progressives shouldn't overestimate the degree of working-class liberal drift. Because middle- and upper-class Americans have grown significantly more liberal, especially on social and cultural issues, a gap has opened between Democratic politicians' policy stances and where many working-class voters stand on a range of social and cultural issues. The increasing prominence of middle- and upper-class voters within the Democratic coalition has only exacerbated this effect.⁵ While this gap has made it challenging for progressive candidates to reach working-class voters, our analysis indicates that there is no good reason to assume that many working-class voters' social and cultural attitudes place them beyond progressives' reach.

Finally, we find that a small but significant segment of the Trump electorate holds moderate social views *and* egalitarian economic beliefs, indicating a potential openness to economic populism. In particular, we find that 11% of working-class Trump supporters in 2020 expressed at least moderate views on key social and cultural issues while simultaneously holding progressive attitudes on economic issues. This suggests that a critical share of the Republican electorate is both largely aligned with egalitarian economic priorities and not so conservative on social and cultural issues that it falls outside the range of realistic progressive appeals.

Of course, this does not mean that all or even most of these particular Trump voters would flock to the Democratic fold if only Democratic candidates doubled down on a progressive economic program. The strong pull of partisanship and the challenge of highly salient controversial social and cultural issues — combined with the Democrats' already damaged reputation among working-class voters — will make it difficult for the party's economic message to break through the noise. But it does indicate the potential for a focus on progressive economic policies to win over an electorally meaningful proportion of working-class voters — even the Trump voters.

5 Sam Zacher, "Polarization of the Rich: The New Democratic Allegiance of Affluent Americans and the Politics of Redistribution," *Perspectives on Politics* 22, no. 2 (June 2024).

What We Did

We analyzed 128 questions from the ANES, GSS, and CES.⁶ ANES data is from the ANES Time Series Cumulative Data File, which summarizes ANES data from 1948 to 2020. GSS data is from the GSS 1972–2022 Cross-Sectional Cumulative Data. CES data is from each individual year’s survey data from 2006 to 2022.⁷

We analyzed survey responses dating back to 1960, categorizing each individual response by three key factors: the respondent’s class (working-class or non-working-class), the year the response was recorded, and the category of the survey question (environment, immigration, civil rights, redistribution, predistribution, or social norms). We categorized sociocultural attitudes on a scale from least to most progressive, and economic attitudes on a scale from least to most egalitarian. To calculate response rates by class, year, and question, we averaged responses within each class and year grouping. For instance, as shown in figure 4, response rates for specific periods — such as 1960–1989, 1990–2007, and 2008–2022 — were calculated by averaging all relevant responses within each time range for working-class vs. non-working-class respondents.

The goal of this averaging was to determine the share of respondents who selected the more progressive option for each question. Before averaging, we standardized every question into a binary format: Did the respondent select the progressive or egalitarian response (or one of them, if there were several)? This made it possible to combine data from a wide range of question formats, including yes-no questions, multiple-choice questions, and questions using support scales ranging from 1 to N (where N varied). Examples of how we standardized these formats are provided in table 1.

Examples of question standardization for generating average progressive response rates

TABLE 1

Survey question	Survey	Possible responses	Progressive selections
Would you say that blacks have too much influence in American politics, just about the right amount of influence in American politics, or too little influence in American politics?	ANES	1. Too much influence 2. Just about the right amount 3. Too little influence	3
Background checks for all gun sales, including at gun shows and over the Internet.	CES	1. Support 2. Oppose	1
Some people think that the government in Washington should do everything possible to improve the standard of living of all poor Americans.	GSS	1. Government should help 2. 3. Agree with both 4. 5. People should help themselves	1,2

We define working class as those without a college degree and who fall within the bottom two-thirds of the income distribution. In this we follow Nicholas Carnes and Noam Lupu, who argue that combining education and income offers a clearer picture of working-class status than relying on either measure alone.⁸ For example, consider

⁶ https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1DGmj_xWXDUCstiQn-OifCzmj2ESbWxfdB00OsN2TviU/edit?gid=0#gid=0

⁷ For data, see dataverse.harvard.edu/dataset.xhtml?persistentId=doi:10.7927/H4TJ-6M9Q (CES), gss.norc.umd.edu/gss/get-the-data/stata.html (GSS), and electionstudies.org/data-center/anes-time-series-cumulative-data-file/ (ANES).

⁸ Nicholas Carnes and Noam Lupu, “The White Working Class and the 2016 Election,” *Perspectives on Politics* 19, no. 1 (March 2021).

a grocery store cashier and an intern at a tech start-up: both might earn below the median income at certain times, yet only the cashier is typically embedded in the working-class experience. Similarly, while many individuals without a college degree work in manual labor or service jobs, others — such as freelance graphic designers and entrepreneurs — might achieve higher incomes that don't align with a traditional working-class profile.⁹

Finally, while we would have liked to include an occupation-based measure of class, respondents' occupational data isn't consistently available across all surveys.

9 For interested readers, in the appendix we also present all results using a simple college-noncollege measure, as well as a white working-class respondent subset.

Results: Sociocultural Issues

There is little doubt that working-class Americans are less progressive on social and cultural issues than those in the middle and upper classes.¹⁰ As is shown in figures 4 and 5, the working class holds more conservative views on abortion, LGBTQ issues, and certain civil rights policies relative to their middle- and upper-class counterparts. At the same time, the working class has become more progressive relative to its earlier views on many of these issues over the last twenty years. While working-class voters have certainly taken a turn toward the right at the ballot box since 2016, this shift simply cannot be explained by a general rise in conservative social and cultural attitudes.¹¹

Below we present a detailed breakdown of working-class voters' attitudes on different sociocultural issues. We divide these into five main categories: LGBTQ issues, law enforcement, abortion, immigration, and civil rights.

LGBTQ

On LGBTQ issues, the working class has historically been less progressive than the middle and upper classes and remains so today. Nonetheless, on some questions — like support for legislation that protects gay and lesbian individuals — the working class has become more progressive over time, with over 70% of the working class having a progressive position on this issue in the 2008–2022 period. Similarly, we see a large increase in working-class Americans' support for allowing gays and lesbians to adopt between the 1990–2007 and 2008–2022 periods, during which support rose from less than 40% to over 60%.

While figure 4 helps us to understand trends over time in policies around social norms, only a small number of the questions analyzed were included consistently in the various ANES, CES, and GSS surveys. As a result, the range of policies included in figure 4 reflects only a fraction of key social norm policies. To address this issue, we performed a similar analysis on a broader set of questions that were included in the 2022 waves of the surveys. This addresses the possibility that the analysis in figure 4 presents an unrepresentative picture of class attitudes around such policies while also giving us deeper insight into the current state of working-class attitudes in this area. Our analysis in all subsequent issue areas (immigration, civil rights, environmental, predistribution, and redistribution) takes a similar approach.

Moving to the contemporary picture in figure 5, we see that while middle- and upper-class Americans remain substantially more progressive on most issues concerning sexual minorities, focusing on relative class preferences obscures the fact that working-class people today are quite progressive on many questions. For example, over 75% of the working class holds a progressive view on the question of whether gay couples should be allowed to adopt. Additionally, 56% of the working class believes that there is too much discrimination against trans people in the United States, and 83% support protecting homosexuals from job discrimination. This indicates that, even though their views are not as progressive as middle- and upper-class Americans, the working class has decidedly *not* embraced more conservative attitudes in recent years.

¹⁰ We categorize specific issues as more or less progressive based on popularly held perceptions about whether a given position is associated with progressives or conservatives. Thus, for instance, while a traditional liberal may object that defunding the police is not a liberal position, there is little doubt that this position is more closely associated with progressives than conservatives among the American public.

¹¹ Some recent polling, however, suggests the American public as a whole has moved to the right on certain issues since 2022, such as restrictions for trans people. "Americans have grown more supportive of restrictions for trans people in recent years," Pew Research Center, February 26, 2025.

Working-class progressive response rates to social norms

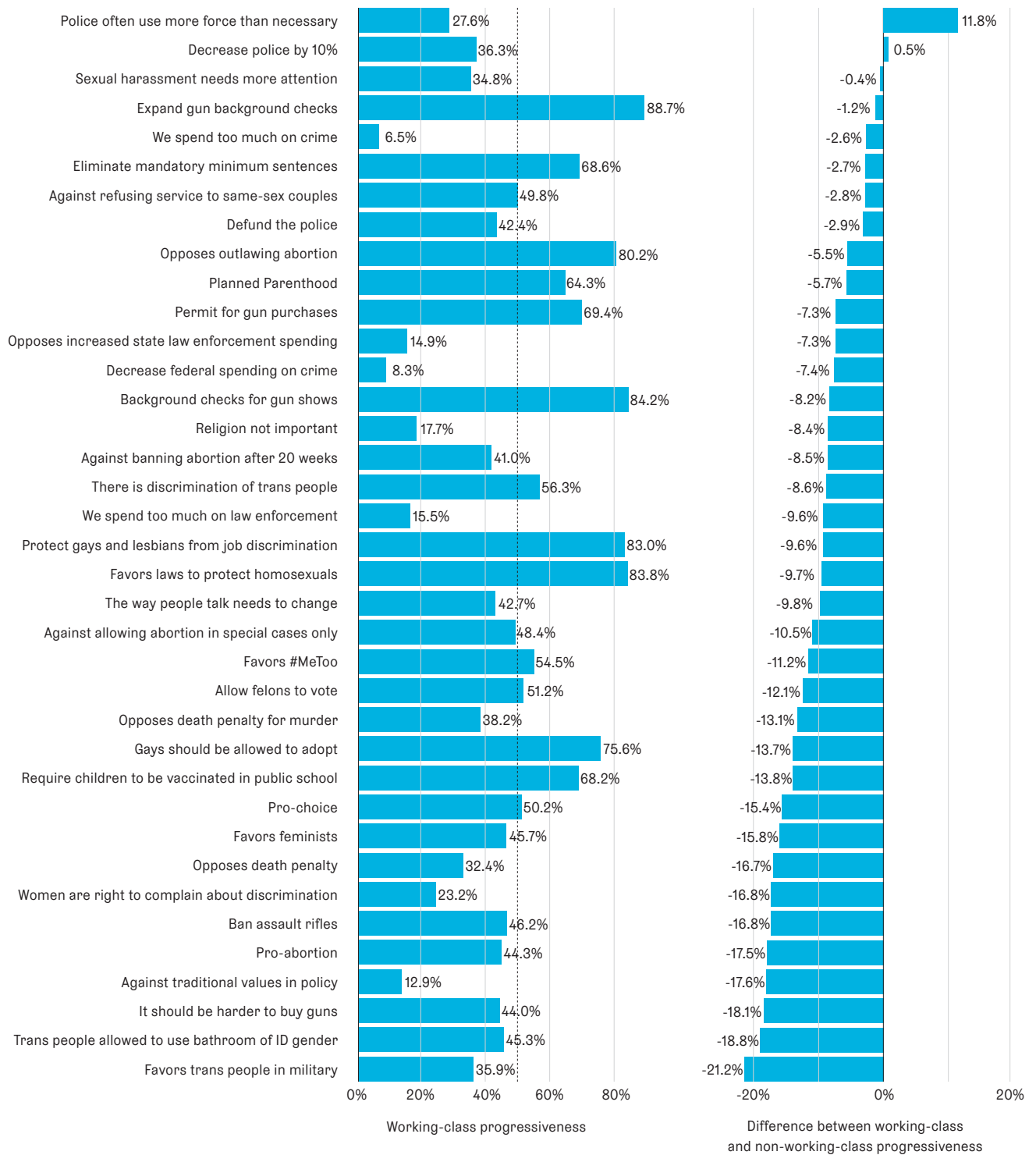
FIGURE 4



The top panel presents absolute working-class preferences for social norms, and the bottom panel presents average differences in response rates between working-class and non-working-class respondents for the same social norms, where positive values represent more progressive working-class preferences and negative values less progressive ones.

Working-class progressive response rates to social norms, 2020–22

FIGURE 5



The left panel presents absolute working-class preferences for questions related to social norms in ANES, CES, and GSS survey waves between 2020 and 2022. The right panel presents average differences in response rates between working-class and non-working-class respondents for the same attitudes around social norms.

Guns, Crime, and Law Enforcement

On the issue of gun control, the working class has historically expressed more conservative attitudes relative to middle- and upper-class Americans, though on some specific questions — such as supporting permits for gun purchases — the working class has always held progressive views (over 70% supported this position as early as the 1960–1989 period). For questions regarding spending on law enforcement, the working class has historically rejected liberal positions, but in this they have differed very slightly (between 1% and 5%) from other Americans, indicating that this issue is not polarized on class lines. In the years since 2007, we even see a slight decline in the relative conservatism of working-class Americans on these issues. These trends indicate that the gap in views on this issue between the working class and other Americans has stayed relatively consistent, and that the working class has not become more conservative in the face of increased calls for gun control.

In 2020–22, the average gap between working-class and middle- and upper-class people on most questions regarding gun control was around 12%. When it comes to attitudes toward the police, the working class largely shares the same views as other Americans — and are sometimes more progressive. For instance, 27.6% of working-class Americans reported that police often use more force than necessary, a figure 11.8% higher than among middle- and upper-class respondents. However, the raw numbers indicate that working-class people, along with their middle- and upper-class counterparts, largely oppose strong progressive positions on policing and crime.

Abortion

The working class has likewise expressed more conservative views than middle- and upper-class Americans on abortion. For instance, while working-class Americans have become marginally more “pro-abortion” over time, only around 40% held this view in the 2008–2022 period, and the gap between working-class vs. middle-to-upper-class positions on this question was over 15 percentage points. Yet working-class views on abortion have been consistently moderate, with over 80% of working-class Americans expressing opposition to outlawing abortion, with only minor variation, since the 1980s.

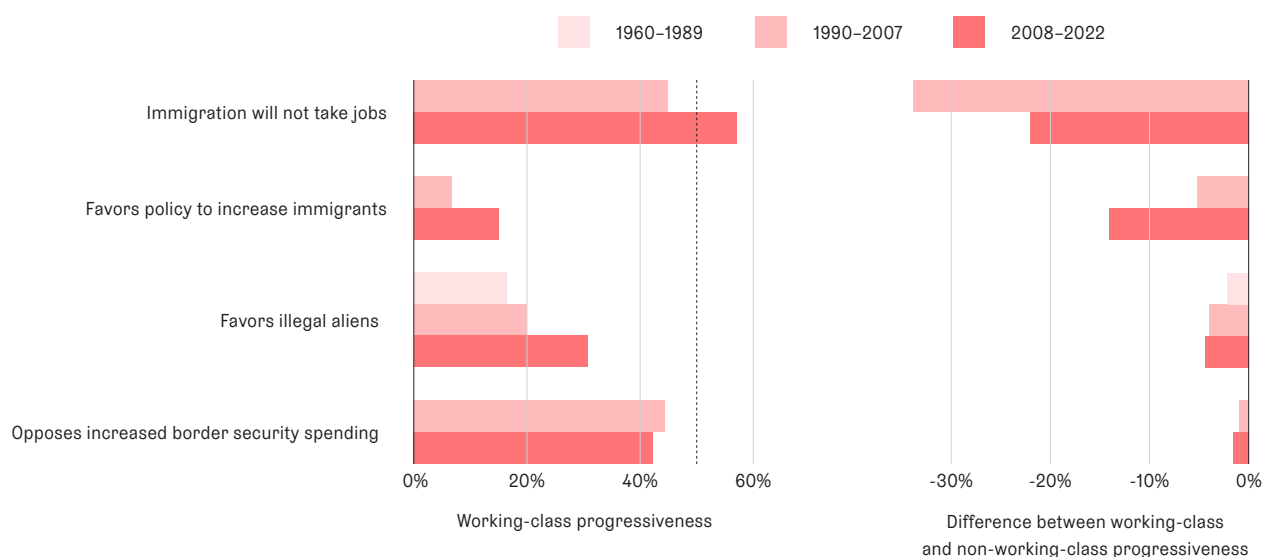
Moving to the contemporary picture, between 2020–2022, we see that — despite their relative conservatism on abortion — working-class Americans generally hold at least moderate views on the issue. For instance, 80.2% of the working class was against outlawing abortion, and 50.2% described themselves as “pro-choice.” That said, only 41% of the working class expressed opposition to banning abortion after twenty weeks, a gap of 8.5 points relative to middle- and upper-class respondents — indicating that while the working class is far from conservative on the issue, it largely opposes the most progressive abortion positions.

Immigration

On the issue of immigration, the picture is mixed. On the one hand, we see in figure 6 that the working class has historically been more wary of immigration compared to middle- and upper-class Americans, largely opposing proposals to increase immigration rates. Interestingly, however, the working class has become less conservative relative to the middle- and upper-class around fears that immigration will take jobs (dropping from a difference of 30% during the 1990–2007 period to 20% during the 2008–2022 period), with nearly 60% of working-class respondents reporting that they did not believe immigration will take jobs in the 2008–2022 period. On general favorability toward undocumented immigrants and opposition to increased border spending, we see minimal class differences across the periods analyzed. In short, while the working class has become more conservative relative to the middle and upper classes on support for increased immigration, we do not see a clear trend of increasing working-class conservatism on the issue.

Changes in working-class attitudes toward immigration

FIGURE 6



The left panel presents absolute working-class preferences for questions on immigration in 1960-1989, 1990-2007, and 2008-2022. The right panel presents average differences in response rates between working-class and non-working-class respondents.

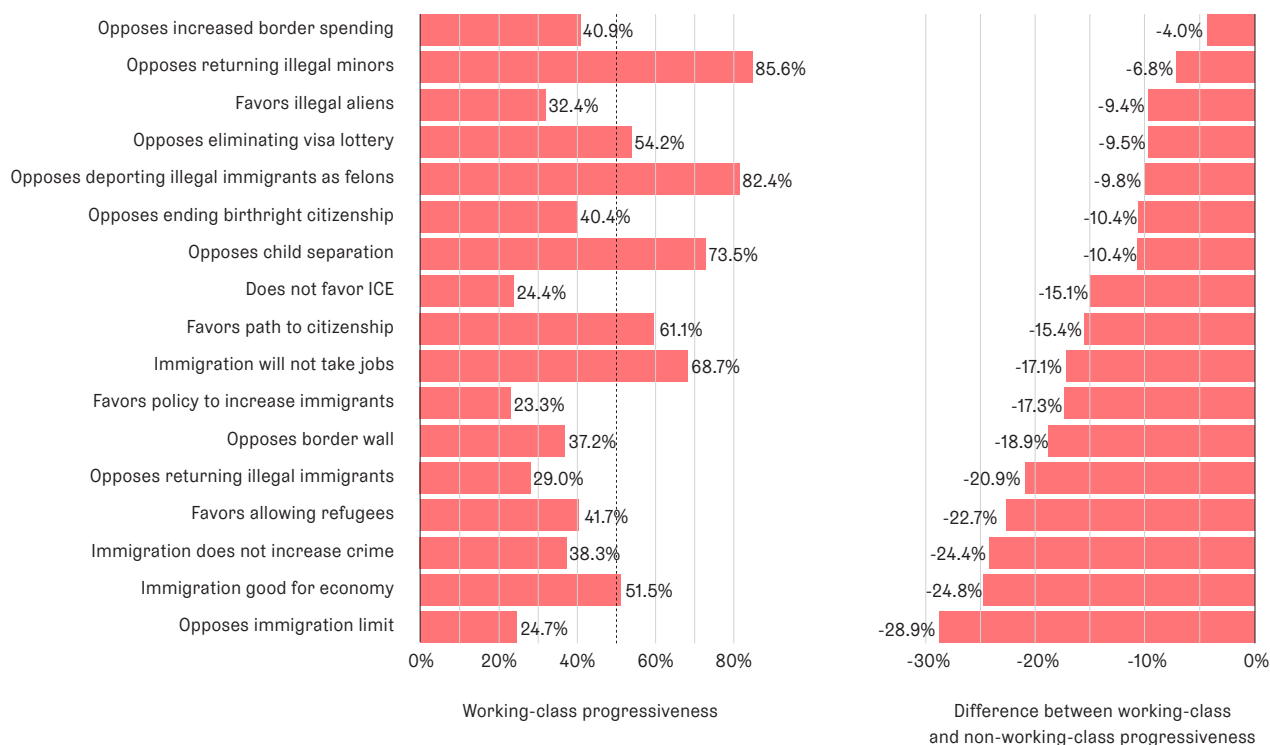
In contrast, the contemporary picture around immigration attitudes is much clearer. As shown in figure 7, during the 2020-22 period, working-class Americans reported more conservative views than middle- and upper-class Americans across all questions we examined, though the differences range dramatically — from nearly 30% with respect to favoring immigration limits to just 4% in the case of opposition to increased border security spending. That said, working-class Americans hold broadly progressive views across a range of immigration-related questions, especially those related to particularly harsh treatment of undocumented immigrants (like separating children of detained immigrants from their families), offering a pathway to citizenship for immigrants who follow established legal channels, and recognizing the economic value that immigrants provide to the United States.¹²

Finally, despite the clear class differences we observe around contemporary attitudes toward immigration policies, it is important to note that both working- and middle-to-upper-class Americans also reported generally conservative attitudes across a range of progressive immigration positions, from support for increased immigration and opposition to ICE to general favorability toward undocumented immigrants and opposition to increased border security spending. This indicates that Americans' opposition to many progressive immigration policies is not strictly a question of class.

12 Importantly, there is recent survey evidence from April 2025 that the proportion of working-class Americans who support a pathway to citizenship has not declined even after the 2024 election, during which Republicans focused heavily on immigration. See Les Leopold, "Voters Strongly Support Legal Status for Undocumented Immigrants," *Substack*, May 14, 2025.

Working-class attitudes toward immigration, 2020–22

FIGURE 7



The left panel presents absolute working-class preferences for questions related to immigration in ANES, CES, and GSS survey waves between 2020 and 2022. The right panel presents average differences in response rates between working-class and non-working-class respondents for the same attitudes around immigration.

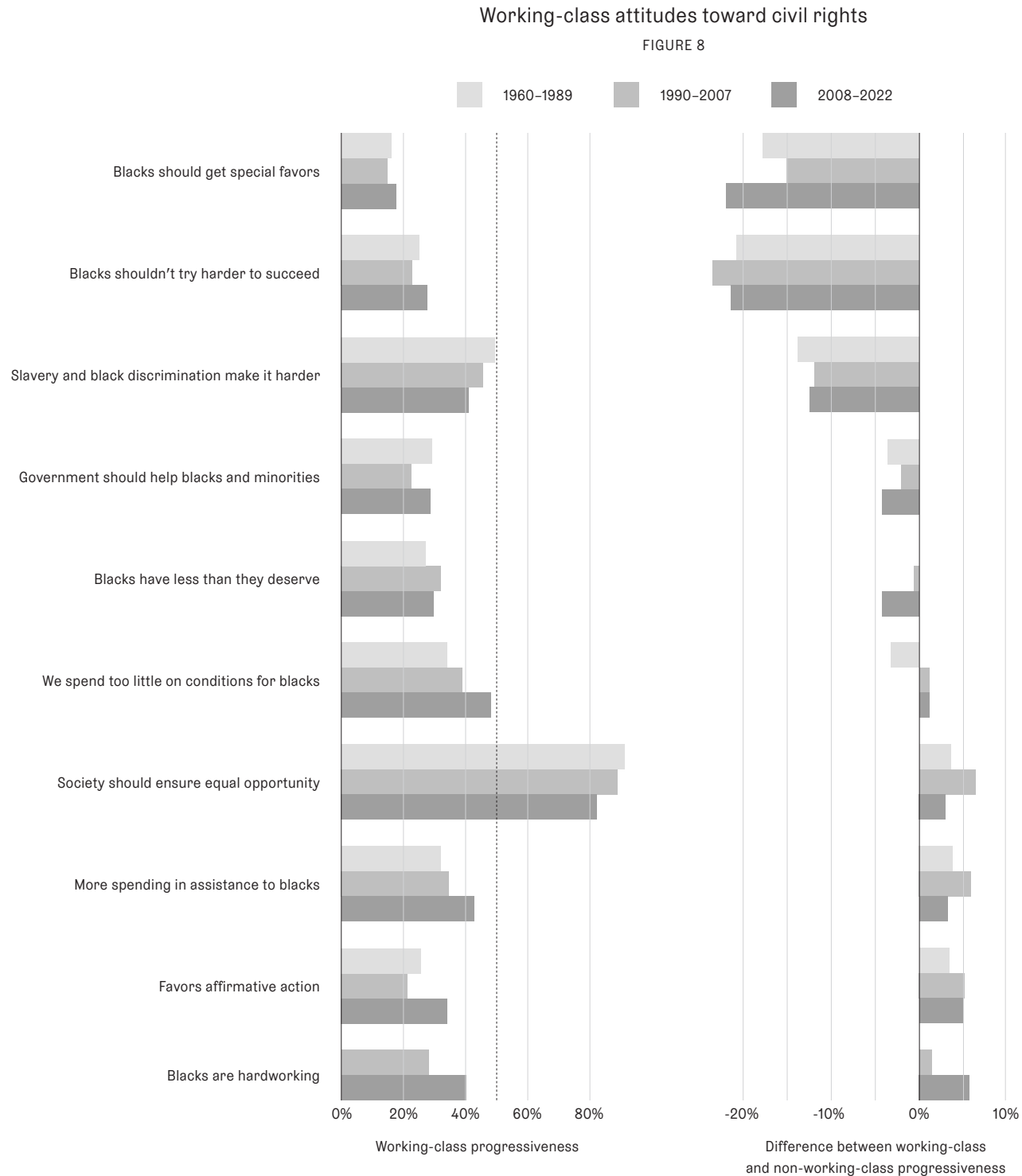
Civil Rights

Following the pattern of other social and cultural attitudes, the working class has generally held and continues to hold less progressive views than middle- and upper-class Americans. In some cases, these differences are large, especially with respect to questions related to preferential treatment for black Americans or the role of slavery and discrimination in explaining contemporary racial inequalities. In addition, working-class voters' absolute levels of support for many progressive civil rights positions — from providing government support to help blacks and minorities to support for affirmative action — have been and remain quite low, at less than 30%. The one civil rights issue for which working-class Americans have expressed an overwhelmingly positive attitude — even more positive than middle- and upper-class Americans — is the belief that society should ensure equal opportunity. All that said, however, there is little evidence that working-class Americans' views on civil rights have become more conservative over time.¹³ In fact, on a number of issues they have become marginally more progressive in recent decades.

Looking at the broad range of attitudes on civil rights questions between 2020 and 2022 presented in figure 9, we see that the working class is more conservative virtually across the board compared to middle- and upper-class respondents, though the range of class differences is large. For instance, the working class is 28 percentage points more conservative with respect to support for preferential treatment for black Americans; 25 points more conservative in the belief that black Americans shouldn't have to try harder to succeed; 3 points more conservative in the support for affirmative action; and less than 1 point more conservative on the question of preferential hiring of

13 This remains true even when we look only at working-class white respondents, though absolute levels of support for most of these policies are lower among working-class whites than the working class as a whole. See Appendix B.

blacks — though all voters largely oppose these policies. Yet despite these differences, working-class Americans held generally progressive attitudes on important civil rights questions from the belief that minorities don't hurt white employment (61.4%), that we spend too little to assist black Americans (52.5%), and that there is much discrimination against black Americans in the United States (51.4%).¹⁴

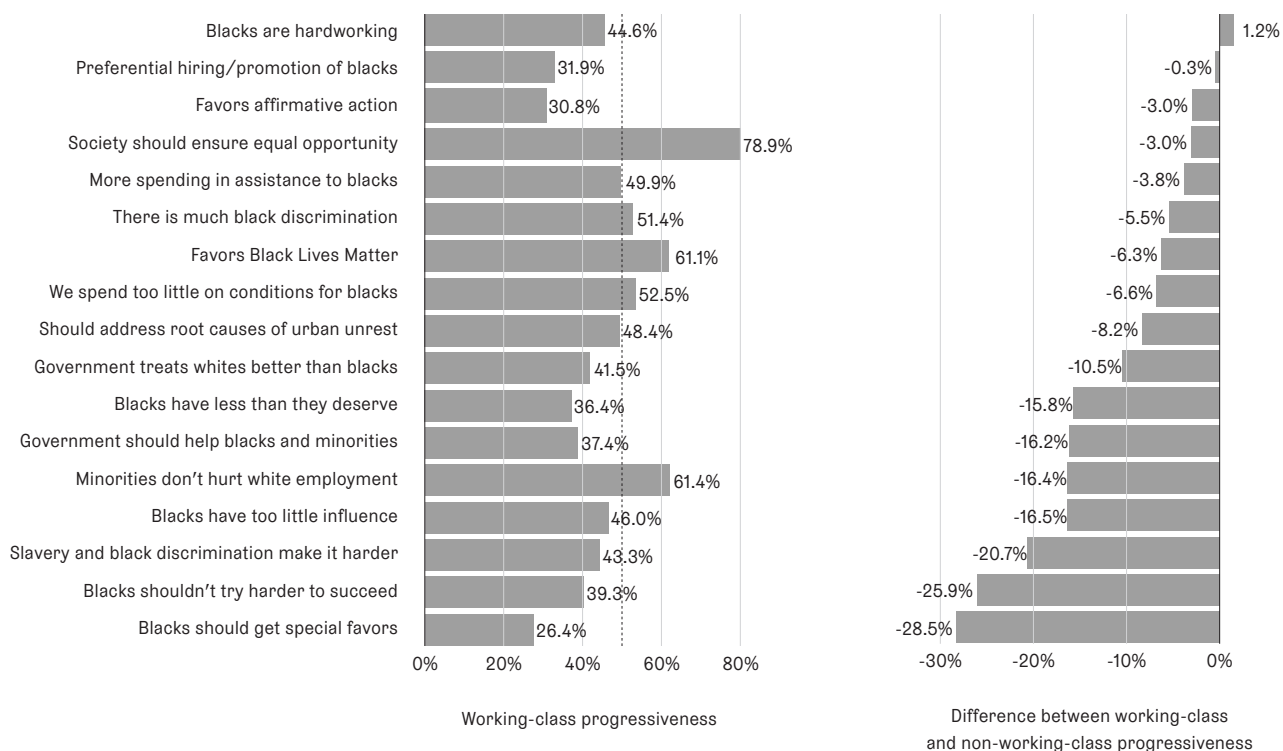


The left panel presents absolute working-class preferences for questions about civil rights in 1960–1989, 1990–2007, and 2008–2022. The right panel presents average differences in response rates between working-class and non-working-class respondents for the same civil rights questions.

14 In some cases, those figures are slightly lower when we look at just working-class white respondents, but the general picture remains unchanged.

Working-class attitudes toward civil rights, 2020–22

FIGURE 9



The left panel presents absolute working-class preferences for questions related to civil rights in ANES, CES, and GSS survey waves between 2020 and 2022. The right panel presents average differences in response rates between working-class and non-working-class respondents for the same questions.

Environment

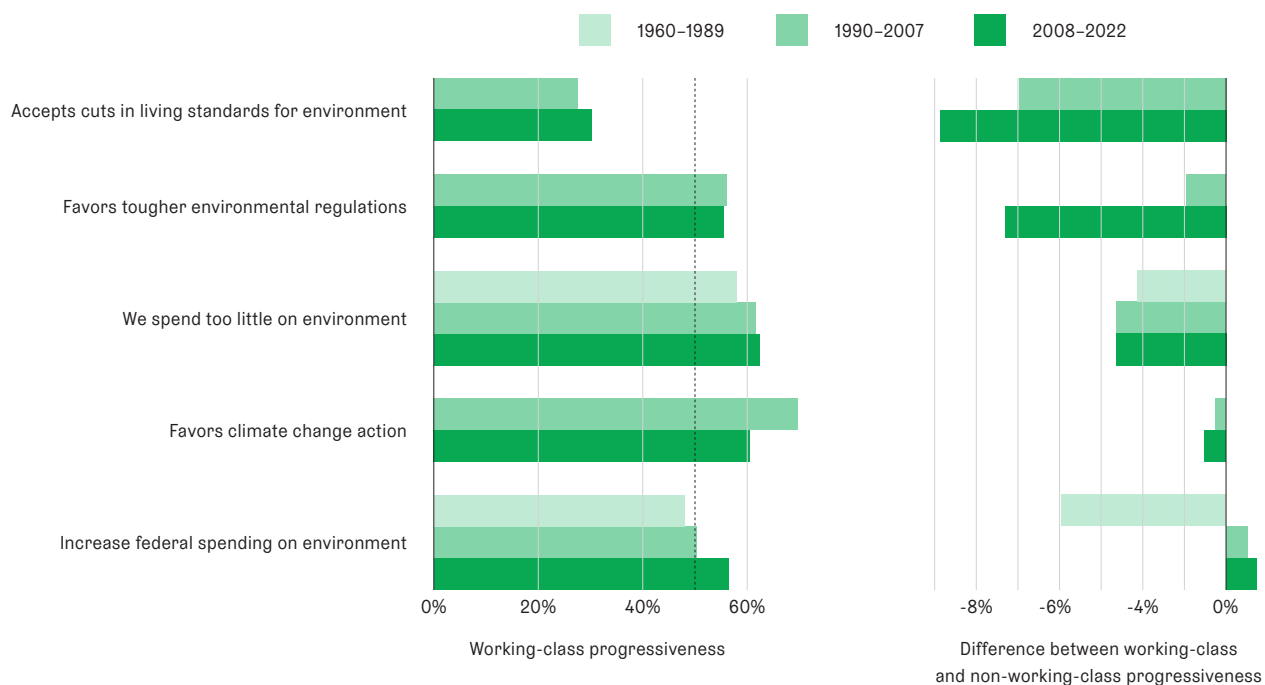
Working-class Americans' views on environmental issues have also skewed less progressive historically than those of middle- and upper-class Americans, as reported in figure 10. On the other hand, with the exception of the question "Accepts cuts in standard of living for the environment" (which is also unpopular among middle- and upper-class Americans), working-class Americans have held and continue to hold majority-favorable positions on all the environmental questions we examined. This is true even in cases where there has been significant movement toward less progressive attitudes over time, such as working-class support for "favoring action on climate change," which dropped from around 70% between 1990 and 2007, to just over 60% between 2008 and 2022. As a result, the increasing progressivism we see among middle- and upper-class Americans compared to working-class Americans on environmental issues has been driven largely by a leftward shift among the middle class rather than a rightward trend among the working class.

A similar story emerges when we look at contemporary class preferences for environmental issues between 2020 and 2022, though here, as depicted in figure 11, working-class Americans are uniformly more conservative than middle-class Americans. From support for regulating greenhouse emissions (-19.4 points) to the belief that climate change impacts severe weather in the United States (-6 points), middle- and upper-class Americans held consistently more progressive views than working-class voters on environmental issues.

At the same time, it is important to note that working-class Americans overall are far from reactionary on environmental issues. Indeed, majorities of working-class Americans between 2020 and 2022 had progressive attitudes on eight of the ten environmental questions we examined, including large majorities in the cases of belief that climate change impacts severe weather (73.1%) and that we spend too little on the environment (70.1%).

Changes in working-class attitudes on the environment

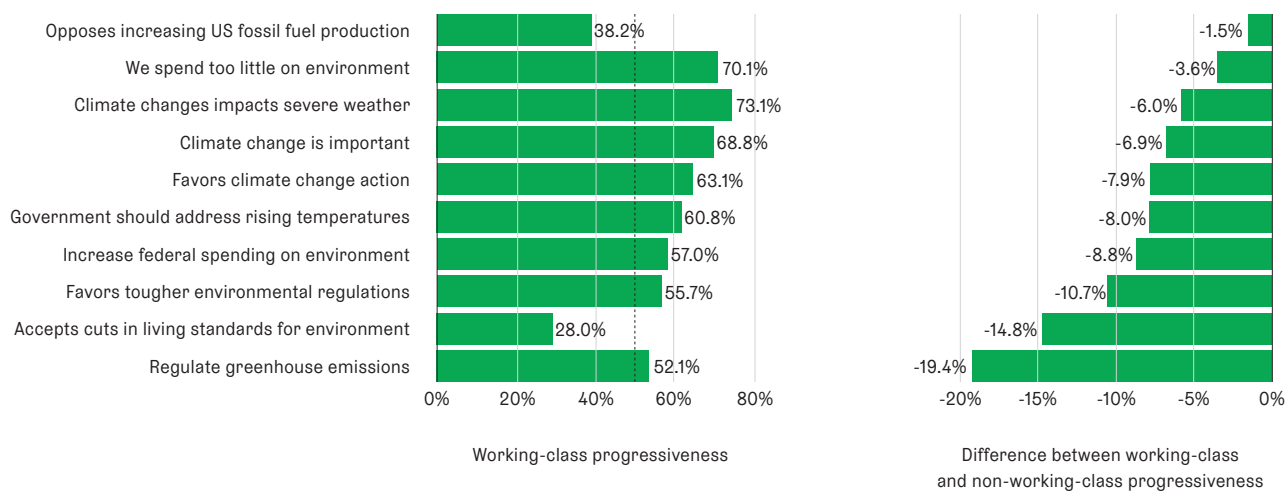
FIGURE 10



The left panel presents absolute working-class preferences on questions about environmental policies in 1960–1989, 1990–2007, and 2008–2022. The right panel presents average differences in response rates between working class and non-working-class respondents for the questions.

Working-class attitudes on the environment, 2020–22

FIGURE 11



The left panel presents absolute working-class preferences on questions related to the environment in ANES, CES, and GSS survey waves between 2020 and 2022. The right panel presents average differences in response rates between working-class and non-working-class respondents on the same questions.

Conclusion: Sociocultural Issues

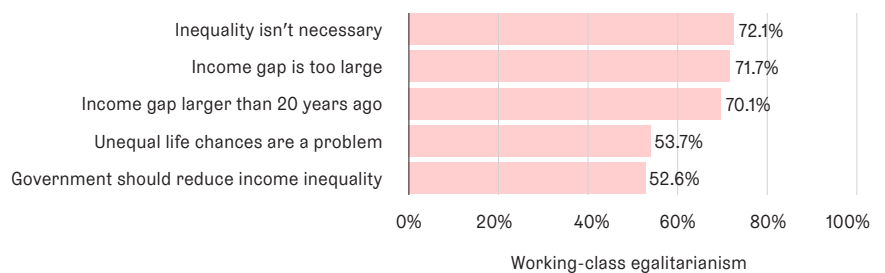
In sum, working-class people are more conservative than their middle- and upper-class counterparts across most social and cultural issues. Yet across all categories, the working class has not exhibited any substantial movement toward conservatism. To the contrary, their views have either remained relatively the same as they were in the late twentieth century or become more progressive over this period. At the same time, the middle and upper classes have turned more sharply toward progressive positions, which largely explains the increasing attitude gaps we observe between the classes.

Results: Economic Issues

We now turn to working-class Americans' attitudes toward economic issues. As a starting point, we find that concern about inequality is both widespread and deeply felt. As the graph below shows, strong majorities of working-class Americans believe that income inequality is too high, has increased over time, and is not necessary in our society. These responses reflect a broadly egalitarian outlook and a shared sense that the current economic system is unfair. In the sections that follow, we examine how this concern translates into support for two broad categories of economic policy: those that aim to shape the structure and rules of the economy before taxes and transfers, and those that seek to redistribute resources after the fact.

Working-class attitudes on inequality

FIGURE 12



Working-class respondents' attitudes toward inequality across select questions from the ANES, GSS, and CES between the years 2008 and 2022.

Predistribution

To test class attitudes toward economic policies, following Kuziemko et al., we divided economic policies into two major categories: predistribution and redistribution. Predistributive policies are those that seek to shape the structure and rules of economic activity in ways that benefit workers before taxes and transfers.¹⁵ Key predistributive economic policies include minimum wage hikes, union protections, policies to protect workers from international competition, and government-backed jobs programs. Redistributive policies, on the other hand, are those that seek to tax and transfer money downward after the fact, such as income taxes, welfare programs, and spending on social programs such as Medicare and Social Security. Given the argument of Kuziemko et al. that workers are more likely than the middle and upper classes to prefer predistributive policies over redistributive ones — for reasons such as their belief that increasing pretax income can improve workers' sense of social standing and the distrust that many working-class Americans have of redistributive systems they consider to be inefficient and corrupt — we expected to find greater support for predistributive policies among the working class and greater support for redistributive policies among the middle and upper classes. Our findings partly confirm the former but not the latter of these hypotheses.

Figure 13 demonstrates that working-class Americans have historically held more egalitarian views than those of middle- and upper-class Americans on most predistributive policies. The only exception is support for transportation spending, particularly with respect to support for mass transit spending — though this may simply reflect the

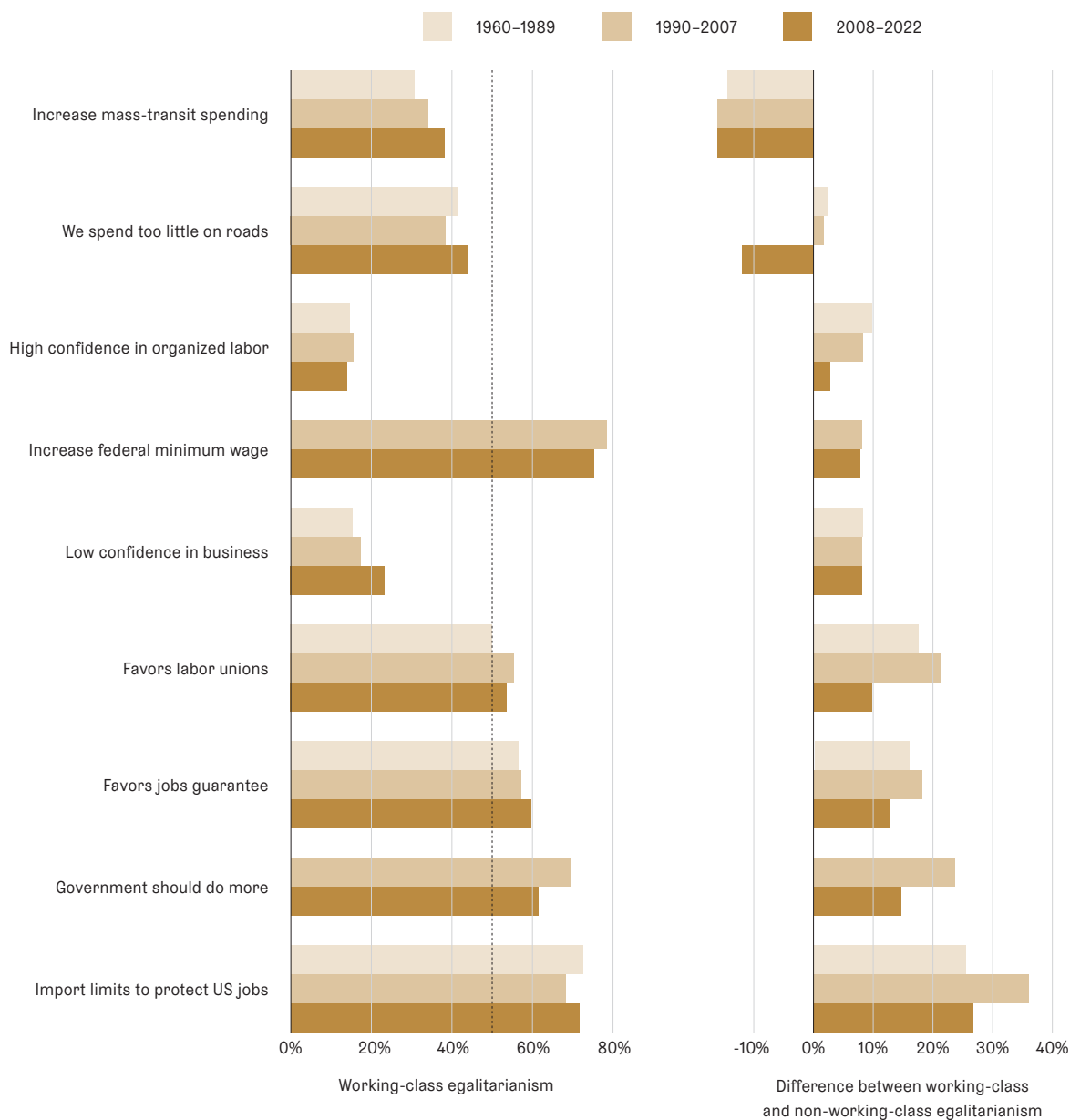
15 Ilyana Kuziemko, Nicolas Longuet-Marx, and Suresh Naidu, "Compensate the Losers? Economic Policy and Partisan Realignment in the US," National Bureau of Economic Research working paper series, no. 31794, Cambridge, MA, October 2023.

lack of mass transit in many areas of the country with a high concentration of working-class residents. Interestingly, however, middle- and upper-class Americans' views on a range of predistributive issues have become more egalitarian relative to the working class over time. This is especially true regarding attitudes toward labor unions, in addition to support for a jobs guarantee and concern over inadequate spending on roads.

As shown in the left panel of figure 13, the closing of the gap between the working class and the middle-to-upper class with respect to predistributive issues is not driven by a decline in working-class support for egalitarian policies. Instead, it reflects the increasing economic progressivism of middle- and upper-class Americans over time.

Changes in working-class attitudes on redistribution

FIGURE 13



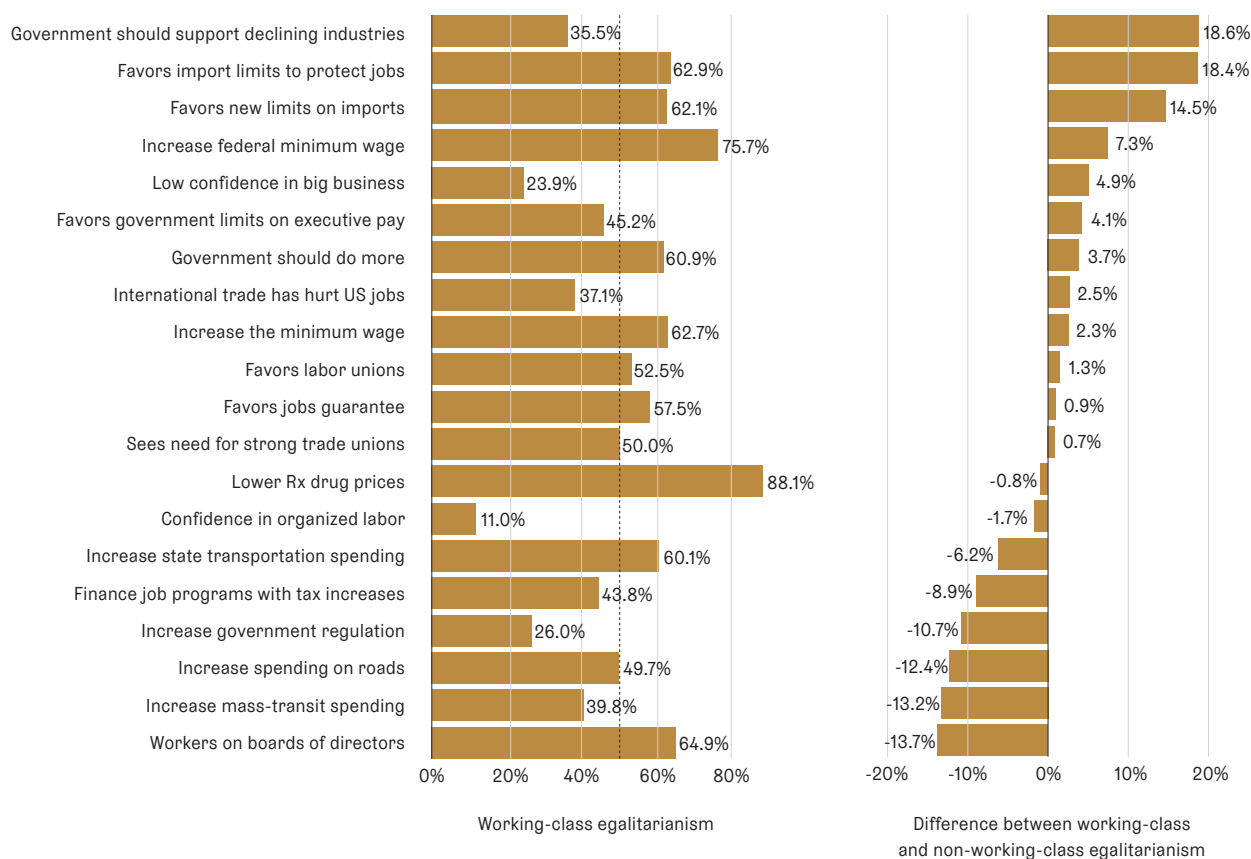
The left panel presents absolute working-class preferences on questions about redistribution policies in 1960–1989, 1990–2007, and 2008–2022. The right panel presents average differences in response rates between working-class and non-working-class respondents on the same questions.

As for contemporary attitudes, figure 14 shows that working-class Americans between 2020 and 2022 remained generally more supportive of egalitarian redistributive economic policies than their middle- and upper-class counterparts, and strongly egalitarian overall on a range of key economic policy questions. Policies addressing wages and job security consistently garner higher support among working-class compared to middle-class respondents. For example, working-class respondents were 18.4 percentage points more likely to support import limits to protect US jobs than middle- and upper-class respondents, a policy that also has high absolute working-class support (62.9%). Similarly, working-class respondents were 14.5 points more likely to favor new limits on imports — a policy that received 52.1% support among the working class — and were 7.3 points more favorable toward increasing the federal minimum wage, which was strongly favored by working-class respondents overall (75.7%). Interestingly, support for labor unions and a federal jobs guarantee was roughly equal — and relatively strong — among working-class and middle- and upper-class respondents, again signaling the increasing progressivism of middle-class Americans on these issues.

On the other hand, working-class respondents expressed less enthusiasm than middle-class Americans for some policies focused on increased government regulation and government spending. For instance, working-class respondents were less favorable than middle- and upper-class respondents to policies that focused on mass transportation infrastructure (13.2 points less supportive than middle- and upper-class respondents), increasing government regulation (10.7 points less supportive), and

Working-class attitudes on predistribution, 2020–22

FIGURE 14



The left panel presents absolute working-class preferences on questions of economic policy in ANES, CES, and GSS survey waves between 2020 and 2022. The right panel presents average differences in response rates between working-class and non-working-class respondents on the same questions.

increasing taxes to fund a new government jobs program (8.9 points less supportive). Working-class Americans were also substantially less favorable than middle- and upper-class Americans toward corporate governance reforms, such as requiring workers on boards of directors (13.7 points less supportive). However, while the cases of mass transit spending and increasing government regulation are also instances where absolute working-class support is low (39.8% support for mass transit and just 26% support for increasing government regulation), this wasn't true for the question of having more workers on corporate boards. Here the class divide we observe was more a reflection of strong middle-class support for the policy than working-class opposition to it, since 64.9% of working-class respondents between 2020 and 2022 favored having workers on corporate boards.

Finally, the issue of support for a government jobs program is particularly instructive in the nuances of these questions for working-class Americans. On the one hand, working-class Americans are strongly in favor of a jobs program that guarantees all Americans a job who want to work (57.5% supportive) and are slightly more favorable toward this program than middle- and upper-class voters. Yet working-class support dips to just 43.8% (and falls well below middle- and upper-class support) when respondents are told that the program will be government-financed through a tax increase.

In sum, working-class Americans have held more egalitarian views than middle- and upper-class Americans on predistributive issues, particularly those addressing job security and wages. Over time, however, middle- and upper-class Americans have grown more progressive on these issues, narrowing the gap. Between 2020 and 2022, working-class Americans remained focused on tangible economic relief while showing skepticism toward increased government regulation and higher levels of government spending. The challenge for progressives is finding predistributive policies that are both popular and impactful enough. The easiest — and potentially most impactful — of these might be raising the minimum wage, which, depending on the specific question, received from 62.7% to 75.7% support among working-class voters, while also garnering strong support among middle-to-upper-class respondents. Similarly, lower prescription drug prices received overwhelming support (over 87%) across classes.

Redistribution

While we expected working-class respondents to express more egalitarian views on predistributive policies, we expected them to hold less egalitarian positions on redistributive policies than middle- and upper-class Americans. To the contrary, however, we found that working-class Americans have historically held more egalitarian attitudes on most redistributive policies as compared to their middle- and upper-class counterparts.

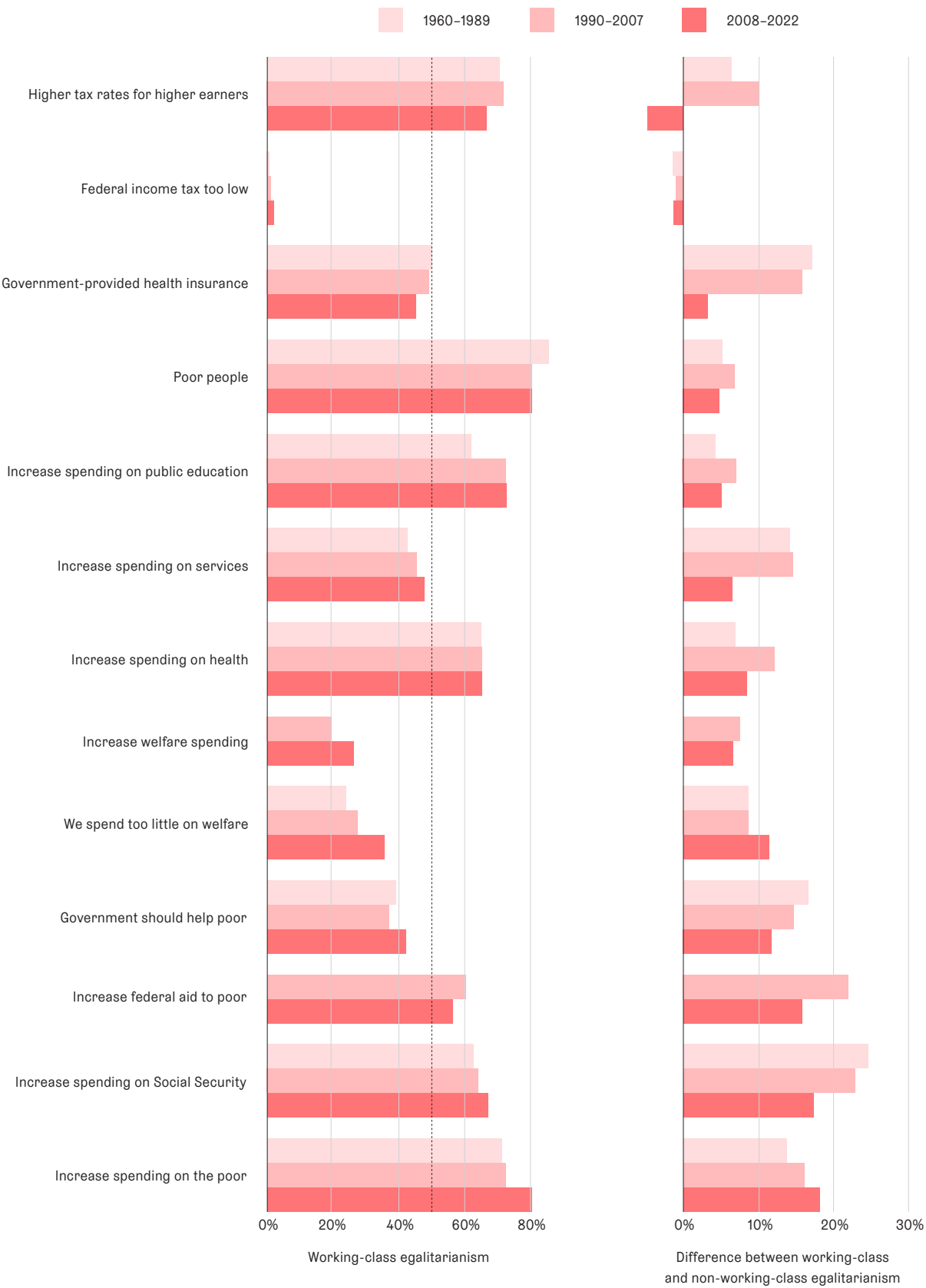
For instance, as reflected in the right panel of figure 15, working-class respondents have been — and in the 2008–2022 period remained — more likely to support policies that address social inequalities through traditional tax and transfer methods, such as providing assistance to the poor and increasing government spending on education and health care. In turn, the left panel shows that, with a few exceptions — particularly around welfare spending and the creation of ambitious new government programs like government-provided health insurance — working-class Americans have consistently expressed majority support for most redistributive policies.¹⁶ The left panel also shows that absolute working-class support for redistribution has remained relatively consistent over the decades.

As in the case of the predistributive policies above, there are also a number of redistributive policies for which middle- and upper-class Americans have become more progressive relative to working-class Americans over time. These include support for government-provided health insurance, higher taxes on the wealthy, and increased spending on government services more generally. Again, however, the closing of the egalitarian attitude gap is due to the increasingly progressive attitudes of middle- and upper-class voters rather than a conservative shift among working-class voters.

¹⁶ Importantly, as the corresponding figure in Appendix B shows, these patterns are substantially the same regardless of whether we look at the working class as a whole or just working-class whites.

Changes in working-class attitudes on redistribution

FIGURE 15



The left panel presents absolute working-class preferences on questions about redistribution in 1960–1989, 1990–2007, and 2008–2022. The right panel presents average differences in response rates between working-class and non-working-class respondents for the same questions.

Contemporary preferences (2020–22) reveal a more complex picture of working-class attitudes toward redistribution. While working-class Americans continue to hold broadly egalitarian views, middle- and upper-class Americans now express more progressive attitudes relative to the working class than they did in earlier periods. On average, middle-to-upper-class Americans are substantially more supportive of taxing the wealthy (by 6.5 to 6.9 points) and implementing large-scale government spending programs such as government-provided health insurance (by 5.6 points).

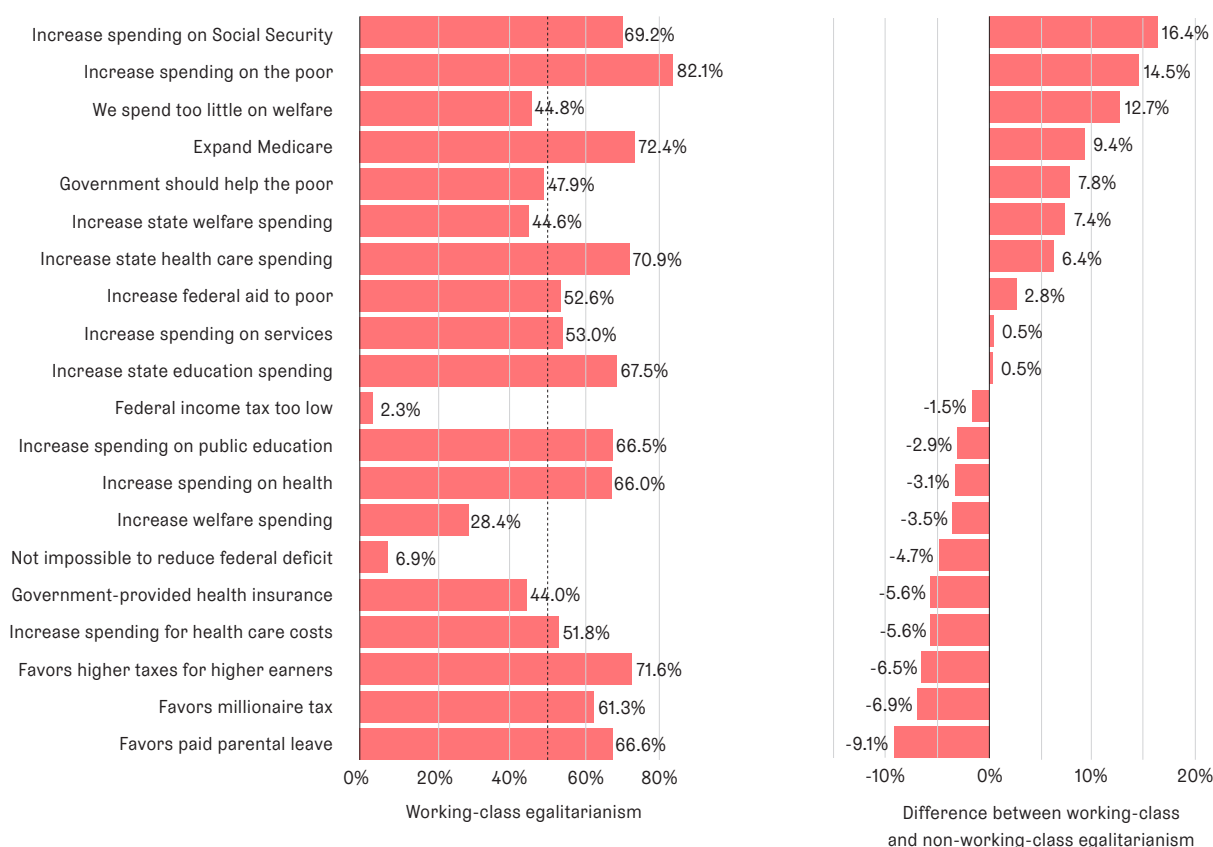
That said, the increasing relative progressivism of middle-to-upper-class Americans around redistribution does not imply that working-class Americans have become conservative on these issues. In fact, they remain strongly supportive of redistribution through established universal programs. Working-class respondents were more likely than their middle- and upper-class counterparts to favor increased spending on Social Security (by 19.8 points) and Medicare (by 7.5 points) and showed high absolute support for expanding Medicare (72.4%), increasing state health care spending (70.9%), taxing high earners (71.6%), and boosting Social Security funding (69.2%).

Importantly, as in the case of preferences for predistribution, working-class attitudes around redistribution varied significantly depending on how policies were framed. While working-class Americans were more supportive of welfare and health care spending when it was presented as state-level policy, they were less supportive when it was associated with federal action. For example, only 44% supported government-provided health insurance, and just 28.4% favored increasing welfare spending — though support for increased education spending was roughly similar (67.3% vs. 66.5%) regardless of whether it was framed as federal vs. state-level funding. These lower levels of support for using federal intervention to address social problems likely reflect broader concerns about government inefficiency, tax burdens, and the federal deficit.

Finally, attitudes toward welfare spending are highly sensitive to wording. While 82.1% of working-class respondents said we spend too little on the poor, far fewer believed that the government should help the poor (between 47.9% and 52.6%) or supported increased welfare spending (between 28.4% and 44.8%). These patterns highlight a central tension in working-class opinion: a strong desire to address inequality tempered by deep skepticism toward expansive federal government solutions.

Working-class attitudes on redistribution, 2020–22

FIGURE 16



The left panel presents absolute working-class preferences for questions related to redistribution in ANES, CES, and GSS survey waves between 2020 and 2022. The right panel presents average differences in response rates between working-class and non-working-class respondents for the same questions.

Conclusion: Economic Issues

In sum, working-class Americans are broadly egalitarian in their economic attitudes, particularly on issues related to wages, job security, and support for existing universal social programs. Across both predistributive and redistributive domains, they consistently support policies aimed at addressing inequality — such as raising the minimum wage, taxing high earners, and increasing spending on Social Security, Medicare, and health care.

Yet the class dynamics around economic policy have shifted in important ways over the past several decades. While the working class has not grown more conservative, middle- and upper-class Americans have become more progressive across a wide range of economic issues. As a result, the large attitude gaps that once consistently separated working-class respondents from their more affluent peers have narrowed or in some cases reversed.

Still, working-class Americans show stronger support than their middle- and upper-class counterparts for many redistributive policies tied to popular programs and direct material relief. They also remain more favorable toward predistributive measures like import protection and job guarantees, though they express greater skepticism when such policies are explicitly tied to increased government spending or taxation. Taken together, these results reveal a working class that remains committed to economic fairness but is selective in its support — prioritizing concrete, worker-centered interventions that do not involve large increases in spending on new federal programs.

Left Populism Can Win (Some) Working-Class Trump Voters

The results in the previous section suggest that Democrats have an opportunity to reach more working-class voters through progressive economic appeals. At the same time, while working-class Americans are more conservative than middle- and upper-class Americans on cultural and social issues, they are no more so than in the past when Democrats garnered large majorities of working-class voters. And working-class voters have only become more progressive on many of these issues, not less. On economics, predistributive policies (like raising the minimum wage, policies to protect and expand access to good jobs, and increasing worker influence in corporate decision-making) along with some redistributive policies (such as protecting Social Security and Medicare, increasing spending on health care and education, and tax hikes on the rich) are all viewed favorably by working-class Americans. But as we have argued *several times over*, Kamala Harris's 2024 presidential campaign did not sufficiently embrace such appeals, and even moved away from them as the campaign unfolded.¹⁷

The advantages of a worker-focused economic populism are clear. Ahead of the 2026 midterms and 2028 presidential election, the Democratic Party would be wise to promote candidates that can credibly campaign on such a program. But even if a candidate has the right messaging and credibility on economic issues, can they really sway enough voters to abandon the MAGA camp? To investigate this question, we first analyzed respondents from the ANES who voted for Trump in 2020 and fit our definition of the working class (bottom two-thirds of income with no college degree) to see what percentage of them hold economically progressive attitudes.¹⁸

We found that a substantial proportion of working-class respondents who voted for Trump in 2020 held favorable views of progressive economic policies like a higher minimum wage (38%), increased Social Security spending (59%), increased public school spending (50%), a tax on millionaires (39%), and more. And these were not simply policy-specific anomalies. Indeed, many Trump voters held progressive views across a range of economic issues. For instance, table 2 shows that over 20% of working-class Trump voters were in favor of an economic policy package that included increasing federal funding for public schools, increasing federal funding for Social Security, and increasing the minimum wage. A similar percentage of working-class Trump voters favored a four-item economic policy package that includes those three items plus increasing income tax on those earning a million dollars a year. While these economically progressive Trump voters hardly amount to a MAGA majority, they represent a meaningful slice of the electorate (around 5%) that could easily tip elections in key working-class-heavy swing states.

17 Milan Loewer and Jared Abbott, "Analysis: Kamala Harris Turned Away From Economic Populism," *Jacobin*, November 27, 2024; Isaac Rabbani and Domenico Siravo, "No, Economic Populism Did Not Lose This Election," *Jacobin*, December 24, 2024; Jared Abbott, Fred DeVeaux, Dustin Guastella, Milan Loewer, and Isaac Rabbani, *Populism Wins Pennsylvania* (Brooklyn, NY: CWCP, Jacobin, YouGov, 2024).

18 The sample of working-class Trump voters in the 2020 ANES was 1,072, about 56% of the 1,931 respondents who voted for Trump in 2020 (working-class plus non-working-class).

Economic policy combinations favorable to 2020 Trump voters

TABLE 2

Economic policy combination	Working-class 2020 Trump voters in favor of all policies	Working-class 2020 Trump voters analyzed	Percentage of working-class 2020 Trump voters in favor	Percentage of entire electorate (working-class and non-working-class respondents who voted for either Trump or Biden in 2020)
Public school spending Social Security spending Minimum wage increase	194	953	20.4	4.9
Public school spending Social Security spending Millionaire tax Minimum wage increase	187	950	19.7	4.8

The economic policy combinations most favorable to working-class 2020 Trump voters. The “Working-class 2020 Trump voters analyzed” column shows the number of respondents who weighed in on all three and all four policies, respectively. Since not all respondents weighed in on every policy question, the value in this column changes by row.

These are encouraging statistics, but given the strong pull of partisanship and high salience of divisive social and cultural issues in US politics, there are obviously many Trump voters who would likely never vote for a Democratic candidate over a Republican, even if the Democrat’s platform were more economically appealing. For an individual voter, the appeal of a Democrat with an egalitarian economic platform often depends on that voter’s attitudes toward social and cultural issues, at least to some degree. Our remaining analysis takes this into account by assuming that all respondents that have low social progressivism scores are unwinnable under any circumstances, and therefore excludes them from our analysis. Doing so results in a subpopulation of Republican voters who should be more receptive to Democrats’ progressive economic messaging.

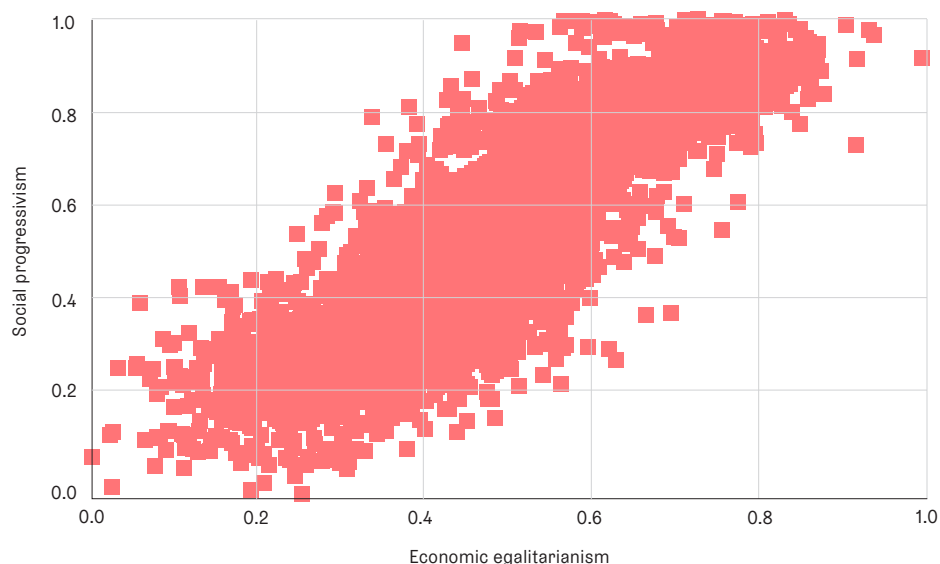
To quantify social progressivism, we scored each respondent on a scale of most to least socially progressive based on their responses to a range of survey questions about social policies. Similarly, we scored each respondent on a scale from least to most economically egalitarian based on their responses to economic policy questions.

Social progressivism scores were distilled from responses to fifty-four social policy questions. Economic egalitarianism scores were distilled from responses to twenty economic policy questions. For each respondent, a single social progressivism score between 0 and 1 was estimated from their responses to the social policy questions. Similarly, we generated a single economic egalitarianism score between 0 and 1 from respondents’ positions on the twenty economic policy questions. For both metrics, a score of 1 is most progressive or egalitarian and a score of 0 is least so. Summarizing each respondent this way allows us to visualize populations along social and economic policy axes, which we do for all working-class respondents across partisanship in figure 17. Consistent with previous analyses that have found a strong and increasing correlation between American voters’ social-cultural and economic preferences, we find a very strong relationship between economic and social scores in Figure 17.¹⁹

19 William Marble, “What Explains Educational Realignment Among White Americans?,” unpublished manuscript, June 2024.

Working-class economic egalitarianism and social progressivism, 2020

FIGURE 17

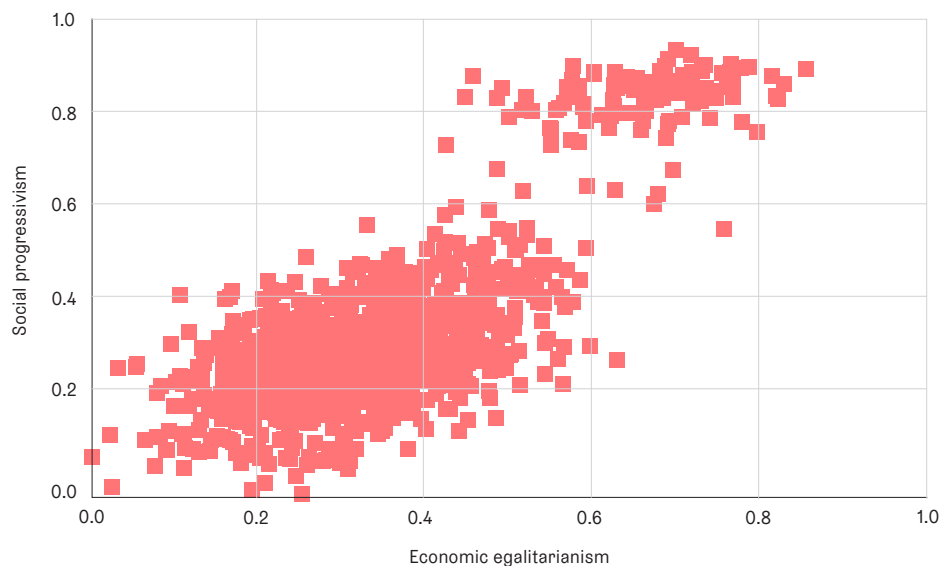


All working-class ANES 2020 respondents, plotted according to social progressivism and economic egalitarianism scores. For either axis, a value near 1 is most progressive or egalitarian and a value near 0 is least so.

We repeat the same visualization in figure 18, this time only showing 2020 Trump voters. Predictably, this population is concentrated more in the lower left quadrant, indicating that it is, on average, quite conservative on both axes. Indeed, just 11% of respondents are in the top-right quadrant of figure 18, indicating high social progressivism and economic egalitarianism. Still, 11% can be electorally meaningful. For one thing, 11% of 2020 working-class Trump voters comprises about 6% of all 2020 Trump voters and about 2.7% of all people who voted for either Trump or Joe Biden in 2020. Recall that Kamala Harris lost the nationwide popular vote by 1.5% in the 2024 presidential election.

Working-class economic egalitarianism and social progressivism of Trump 2020 voters

FIGURE 18



The subset of working-class ANES respondents who voted for Trump for president in 2020.

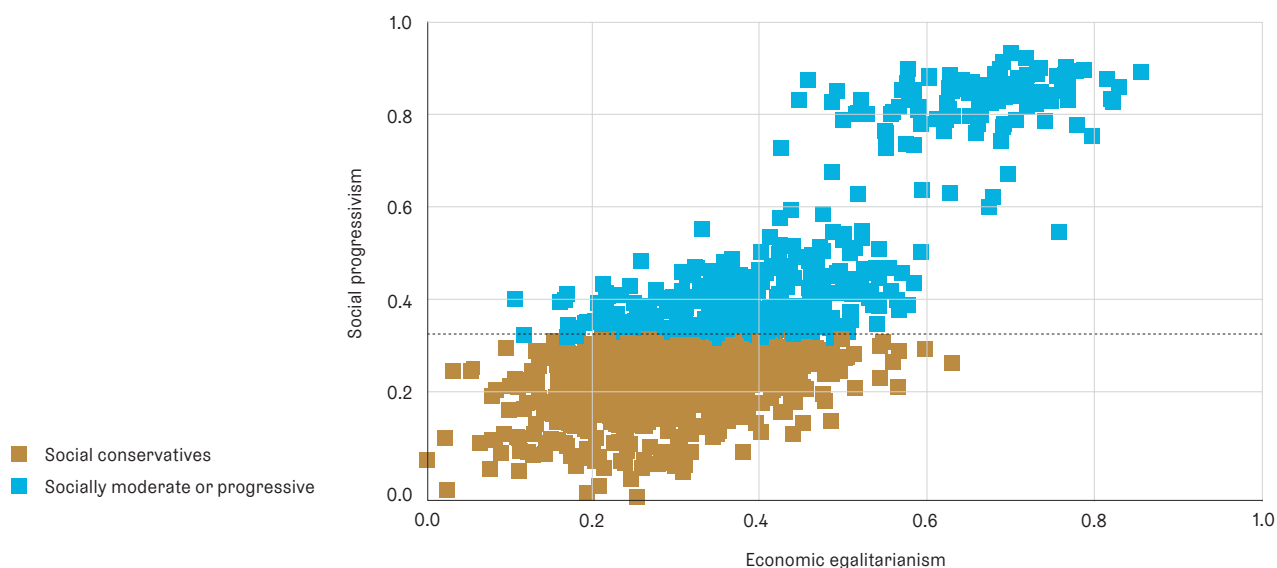
To get a clearer sense of what percentage of Trump 2020 voters held socially moderate or progressive views, we set a social progressivism score of 0.33 and analyzed the subpopulation above it to see how appealing certain economic policies were to them.²⁰ The populations above and below this threshold are shown in figure 19. The subpopulation above the threshold (socially moderate and socially progressive working-class Trump voters) comprises 40% of all working-class Trump voters.

We use this 0.33 social progressivism score to exclude the most socially conservative respondents from additional analysis. The goal is to ensure that our estimates of how many voters may be swayed by appealing economic policies are as realistic and credible as possible. To help understand what a social progressivism threshold of 0.33 means, we analyzed the twenty respondents closest to this threshold but above it. These are the most socially conservative members of the population that we will analyze going forward.

An analysis where the most conservative respondents that we classify as “social moderates” stand on a range of social issues arguably paints a more socially moderate picture than a socially conservative one. Only a few of the twenty favored an outright ban on abortion (3), and only a small handful favored abortion only in cases of rape, incest, or when the woman’s life is in danger (6). Nearly all favored requiring background checks for gun purchases (16), though fewer than half favored a ban on assault rifles (8). On immigration, most opposed separating children from their detained immigrant parents (12), but most also reported that they had at least some fear that immigrants would take their jobs (15). On LGBTQ issues, most were in favor of laws to protect homosexuals against job discrimination (16), but several were opposed to laws requiring businesses to provide services to same-sex couples (8). A majority believed that there was at least a moderate amount of discrimination against blacks in the United States (15), while zero believed there is none. A majority also believed climate change impacts severe weather in the United States (13), while zero believed climate change had no impact. Overall, considering these are the most socially conservative members of the population that will be analyzed going forward, it seems likely that these voters’ preferences on social issues could be moderate enough for many of them to not rule out voting for a Democratic candidate under the right circumstances.

Working-class Trump 2020 voters by social progressivism

FIGURE 19



All working-class ANES respondents who voted for Trump in 2020, divided between social conservatives and social moderates and progressives. Overall, about 40% of the respondents plotted are in the latter group. Further analysis will focus on this population, which is less likely to be dissuaded by the more progressive social messaging of a Democratic candidate.

²⁰ Conceptually, respondents with scores between 0 and 1 out of 3 can be considered social conservatives, those with scores between 1 and 2 can be considered social moderates, and those with scores between 2 and 3 can be considered social progressives.

What are the right circumstances, though? Even after excluding social conservatives below our 0.33 threshold, we were still able to identify a significant population that responded favorably to progressive economic policy questions. For example, the proportion of the entire electorate that was working-class, socially moderate (or socially progressive), voted for Trump, and supported increasing the minimum wage and increased spending on Social Security and public schools was 2.5%. Though small, this population is unquestionably large enough to make the difference in working-class-heavy swing states.

For example, projecting the relative size of this group to the size of the US electorate results in a population more than twice the size of Trump’s 1.5% popular vote margin over Harris in the 2024 presidential election. It more than covers Trump’s popular vote advantages in Georgia (2.2%), Michigan (1.4%), Pennsylvania (1.7%), and Wisconsin (0.9%) as well.

Table 3 repeats the analysis of table 2, but only for this subpopulation of socially moderate and socially progressive working-class Trump voters. This analysis makes an even stronger case for the potential for an economically progressive platform to win over significant portions of working-class Trump voters. A Democratic politician running on some combination of progressive policies around public school spending, Social Security, minimum wage, a millionaire tax, and government health insurance should maximize their appeal to socially moderate and socially progressive working-class Trump voters. And these are substantial proportions too. For example, the revelation that 8.4% of working-class Trump voters are essentially “Bernie Bros” — in that they support a millionaire tax, higher minimum wage, and single-payer health care — indicates significant potential for the right kind of Democratic candidates with the right kind of messaging to help the party rebound from its 2024 failure.

Economic policy combinations favorable to working-class 2020 Trump voters who are at least moderately socially progressive

TABLE 3

Economic policy combination	Percentage of all working-class 2020 Trump voters	Percentage of entire electorate (working-class and non-working-class respondents who voted for Trump or Biden in 2020)
Public school spending Social Security spending Minimum wage increase	10.4	2.5
Social Security spending Millionaire tax Minimum wage increase	9.3	2.3
Public school spending Social Security spending Millionaire tax	9.2	2.2
Public school spending Millionaire tax Minimum wage increase	8.9	2.2
Social Security spending Minimum wage increase Government health insurance	8.4	2.0
Millionaire tax Minimum wage increase Government health insurance	8.4	2.0
Public school spending Social Security spending Government health insurance	8.3	2.0
Public school spending Minimum wage increase Government health insurance	8.0	1.9

Combinations of progressive economic policies that are most favorable to working-class 2020 Trump voters who are at least moderately progressive on social issues.

To explore which underlying demographic factors might be associated with support for the economic policies shown in table 3, we compare three groups of respondents: (1) all working-class ANES respondents, (2) those who voted for Trump in 2020, and (3) Trump-voting respondents who also ranked in the top third on the social progressivism scale. These results are presented in table 4.

Demographic statistics of working-class Trump 2020 voters

TABLE 4

Demographic	Working-class Trump voters, non-social conservatives	All working-class Trump voters	All working-class ANES respondents
Age	52.0	55.8	51.9
People can be trusted	50.3	52.4	49.3
Consumes right-wing media	13.9	20.8	11.2
Family member in union	8.5	9.3	10.9
Vaccine requirement in schools	74.6	76.5	78.4
Financially secure	55	57.3	64.5
Follows politics	50.4	59	56.4
Hunting or fishing in last year	33.3	35.7	26.1
Income	\$35,000-39,999	\$35,000-39,999	\$30,000-34,999
Christian	57	60.5	50.5
Knows an immigrant	48	51.5	50.6
Longevity	40.1	44	38.1
Male	41.8	45.9	44.2
Owns gun	37.6	46.2	33
Politically pragmatic	38.6	41.2	36.3
Politically optimistic	55.1	58	32.9
Prioritizes the US	49.1	62.9	45.7
Trusts the system	47.4	48.1	52.4
White	80.2	86	67.3

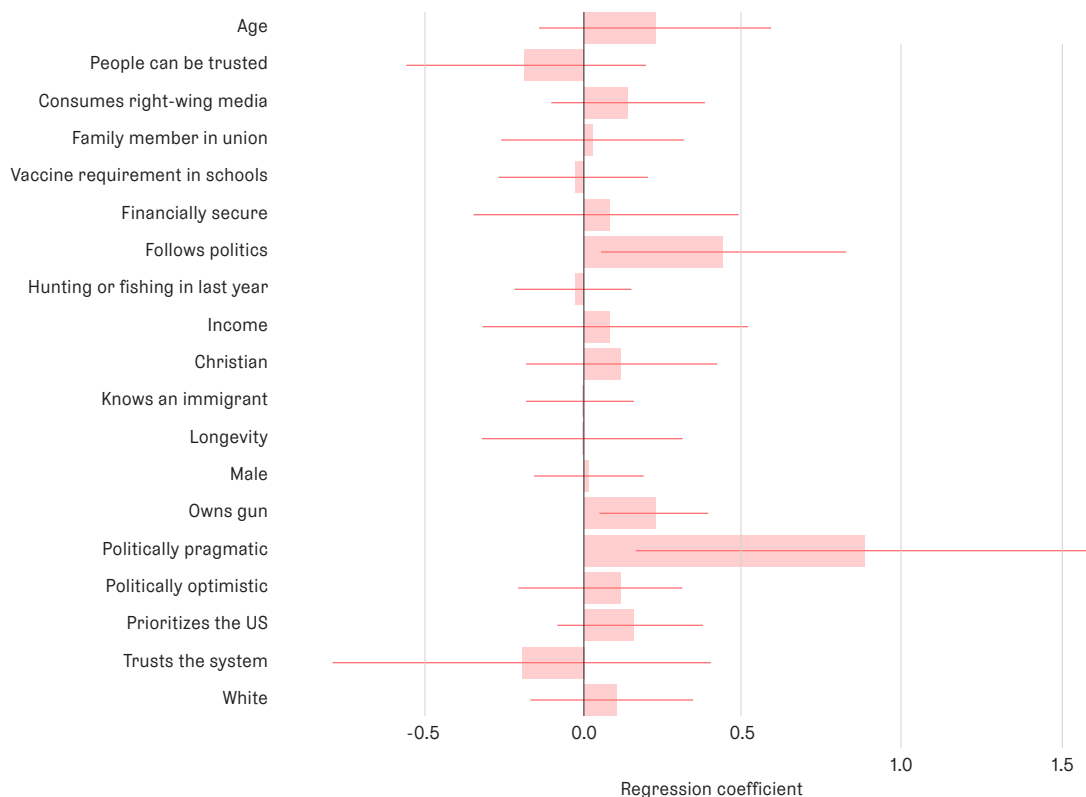
Summary demographic statistics for all three analyzed populations. All demographic variables are rates with the exception of age (mean) and income (median). The first column is the population of working-class Trump voters who are above the 0.33 social progressivism threshold; the second column is all working-class Trump voters regardless of their level of social progressivism; and the third column is all working-class ANES respondents.

We find that the largest demographic differences between the non-socially conservative working-class Trump voter population and the overall working-class Trump voter population are for gun ownership (8.6%) and nationalist sentiment (“Prioritizes US,” 13.8%). By contrast, demographic variables related to age, race, income, and religion show modest differences. Figure 20 shows the results of a regression analysis examining which demographic factors are associated with social conservatism among 2020 working-class Trump voters. Specifically, we regress a set of demographic variables on an indicator for whether a respondent falls below our top-third threshold on the social progressivism scale.

A few factors stand out as statistically significant predictors of lower social progressivism: working-class Trump voters who are more politically engaged, own guns, or prioritize political pragmatism are more likely to be socially conservative. In contrast, variables such as age, income, gender, and race were not statistically significant. This suggests that identity-based outreach alone is unlikely to be effective in mobilizing the socially moderate and progressive subset of working-class Trump voters, as these traits do not meaningfully predict their political attitudes.

Demographic factors associated with social conservatism among working-class 2020 Trump voters

FIGURE 20



Results of a regression analysis to determine which demographic variables influence whether a working-class Trump 2020 voter is below our social progressivism threshold.

This result suggests that the most promising Republican targets of progressive economic appeals should be individuals who are not deeply imbued in right-wing media and those who are not likely to attend gun clubs.²¹ The political pragmatism likely suggests that the most socially conservative Republicans are committed to achieving their core political objectives regardless of the sacrifices they may have to make, such as supporting candidates, like Trump, who do not share common conservative cultural values.

The number of factors that show no meaningful relationship with social conservatism is striking. In addition to identity-based characteristics — such as being male, white, or Christian — many variables commonly associated with social conservatism also fail to reach statistical significance. For instance, support for school vaccine mandates, feelings of financial security, and trust in government institutions all show no significant association with whether someone falls above or below our social progressivism threshold. This suggests that conventional stereotypes of social conservatives may be overly simplistic. It also raises questions about the Democratic Party's strategy of writing off large swaths of the electorate as unwinnable — an approach that may reflect a reductive understanding of the very voters it seeks to avoid.

Regardless of what drives social conservatism, it is clear that progressive economic policies around public school spending, Social Security, minimum wage, a millionaire tax, and government health insurance resonate with a significant minority of 2020 working-class Trump voters. There are, in fact, enough of these voters to make an electoral difference — just as long as the aforementioned economic policies are the focal point of the Democratic campaign in question and the candidate is trusted to fight for those policies once in office.

21 See Lainey Newman and Theda Skocpol, *Rust Belt Union Blues: Why Working-Class Voters Are Turning Away from the Democratic Party* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2023).

The potential for this strategy to positively transform the Democratic Party is both substantial and very badly needed. The Democratic Party failed miserably in November, when Harris became the first Democratic presidential candidate to lose the popular vote since 2004. Now, six months later, the party arguably still has no plan for taking back power. This situation should force Democratic strategists to reevaluate even the most fundamental aspects of their approach. A chief concern needs to be expanding the Democratic Party's political base. Here we've shown the kind of progressive economic messaging that is necessary to achieve that goal.

We have shown that 10% of working-class 2020 Trump voters hold views consistent with support for economic progressivism. If anything, this estimate is conservative, since it excludes working-class Trump voters classified as socially conservative, regardless of whether they favored progressive economic policies. Still, 10% is significant in any competitive election. With the working class comprising about 56% of 2020 Trump voters, this translates to at least 2.5% of voters nationwide that might be swayed to the Democrats' side. This figure exceeds the margin by which Harris lost both the national popular vote as well as several key swing states.

And of course, our analysis did not address the likely even larger group of low and infrequent independent and Democratic voters — overwhelmingly working-class, supportive of key progressive economic policies, and less socially progressive than typical Democrats — who would also find an economic populist policy agenda appealing.

The time is now for the Democratic Party to abandon business as usual. Our results give a clear path forward: running candidates with economically progressive agendas can more than make up for Harris's shortfall. To take back power from Trump, candidates like these must become the standard-bearers of the Democratic Party going forward as it strives to win back Congress and the White House in 2026 and 2028.

Conclusion

We have presented a comprehensive analysis of the attitudes and preferences of working-class Americans, all against the backdrop of the Democratic Party's decisive defeat in the 2024 presidential election. The relevance is clear: over the past several decades, the Democratic Party has increasingly pivoted away from the working class, leaning into a misguided assumption that they would still retain a large enough voter base to be electorally successful. Kamala Harris's defeat proves the weakness of that assumption. The only realistic hope the Democrats have for building a political base capable of winning national elections and taking consistent control of the US Senate is to win back a significant portion of the working class. Our analysis offers insights into how this might be achieved. Our findings suggest that the Democratic Party would be wise to capitalize on the working class's strong preference for policies that are economically egalitarian — particularly predistributive policies that involve strengthening worker rights and leverage as well as existing universal social insurance and health care programs — while deemphasizing potentially divisive social policies. Several of the economic policies we analyzed here, such as those concerning increased job security, wages, and worker power, would make a strong foundation for a successful campaign.

The right candidates for this plan are out there. And given our findings, the Democratic Party would be wise to embrace such candidates, while eschewing those politicians on its current roster that have comparably little to offer the working class. The stakes couldn't be much higher. The second Trump term has combined authoritarian populist rhetoric with a slash-and-smash approach to the federal government that threatens to undermine democracy as we know it and can only result in a greater concentration of wealth at the top and a hollowed-out state incapable of solving our biggest national problems.

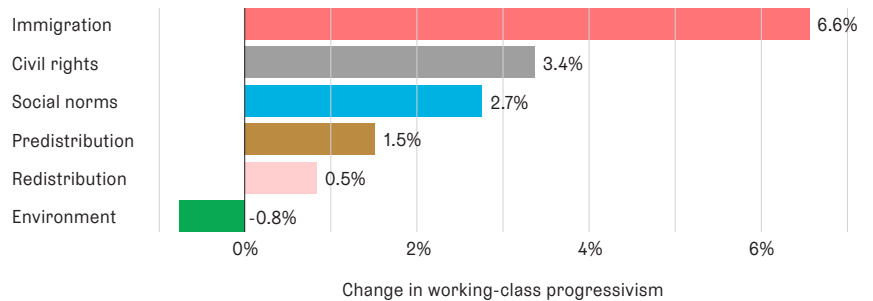
Yet at the same time, working-class voters' skepticism toward government and government spending poses a serious challenge to progressives who advocate bold, transformative economic policies. While such programs might be necessary to turn around decades of neoliberal policies that have left so many working-class communities behind, careful persuasion is still needed to win back working-class trust. This is both an indispensable task and an extraordinarily difficult challenge given the current state of working-class attitudes. Nonetheless, if we have any hope of undercutting Trump's savvy exploitation of populist resentment, it's our only option.

Appendix A: Results With College Education Split

We present the same results as in the prior sections (excluding the “Left Populism Can Win (Some) Working-Class Trump Voters” section), but with the working class defined as respondents with no four-year college degree.

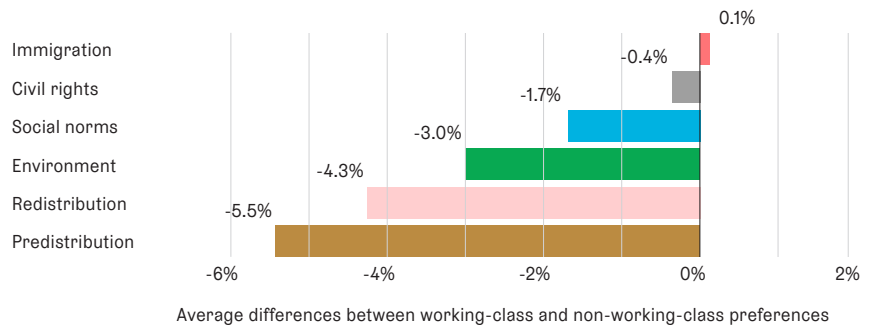
Changes in working-class (noncollege) preferences,
1990–2007 to 2008–2022

FIGURE A1



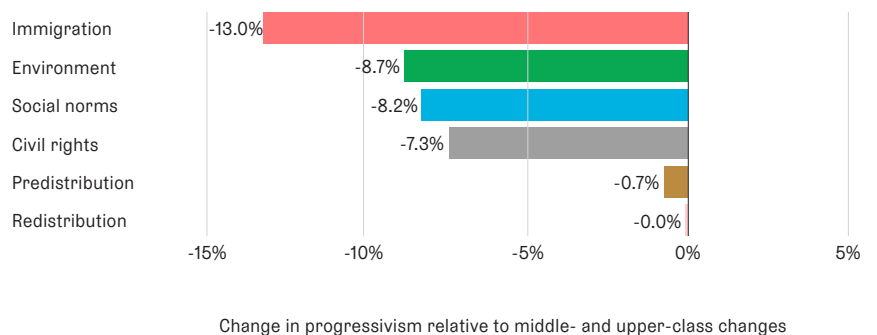
Changes in working-class (noncollege) preferences relative to middle-
and upper-class preferences, 1990–2007 to 2008–2022

FIGURE A2



Changes in working-class (noncollege) preferences relative to middle-
and upper-class preferences, 2008–2022

FIGURE A3



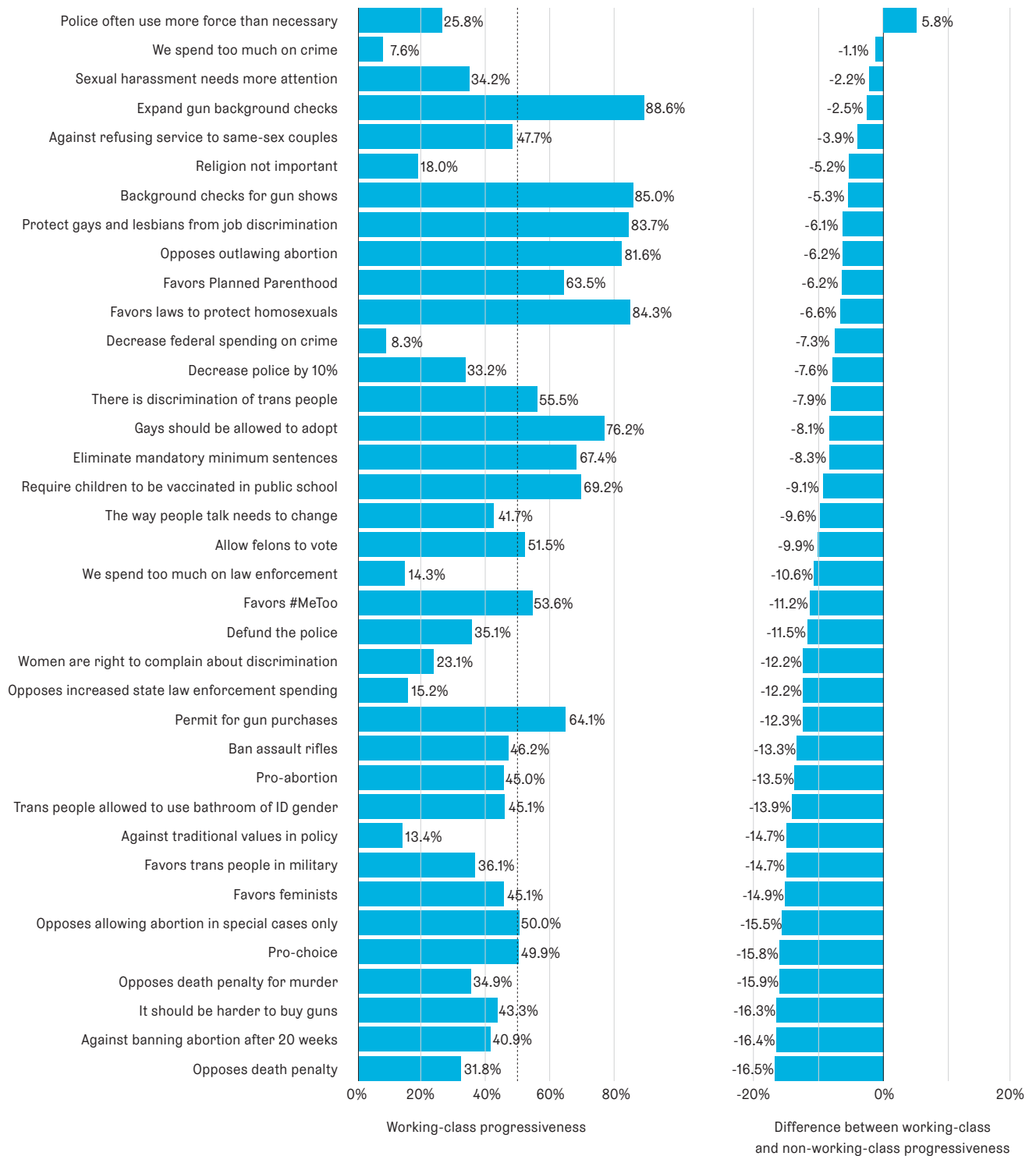
Working-class (noncollege) progressive response rates to social norms

FIGURE A4



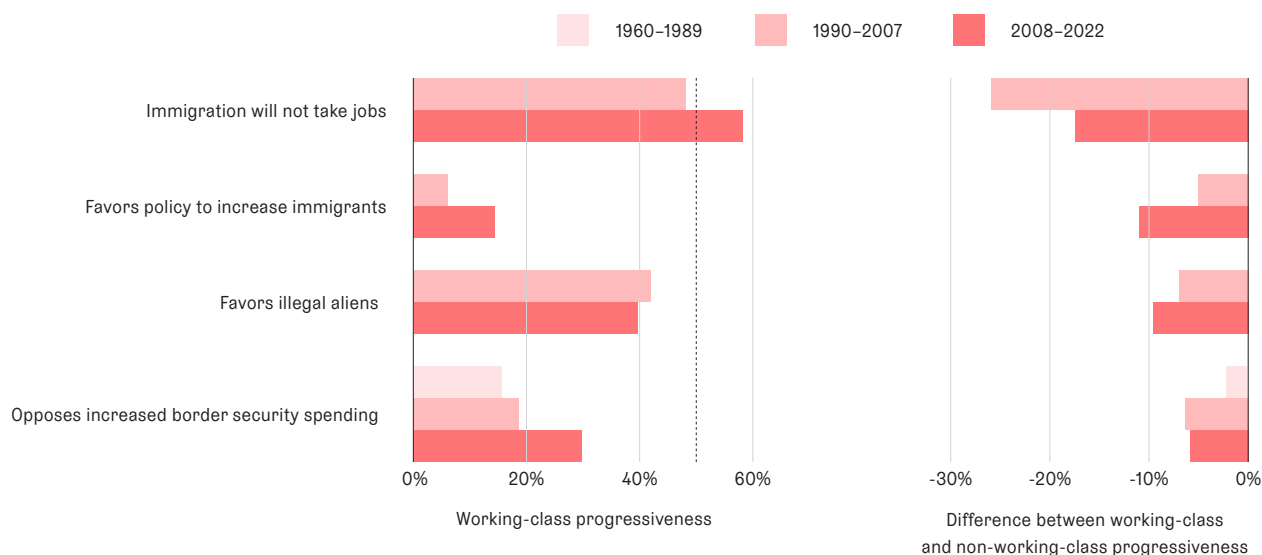
Working-class (noncollege) progressive response rates to social norms, 2020–22

FIGURE A5



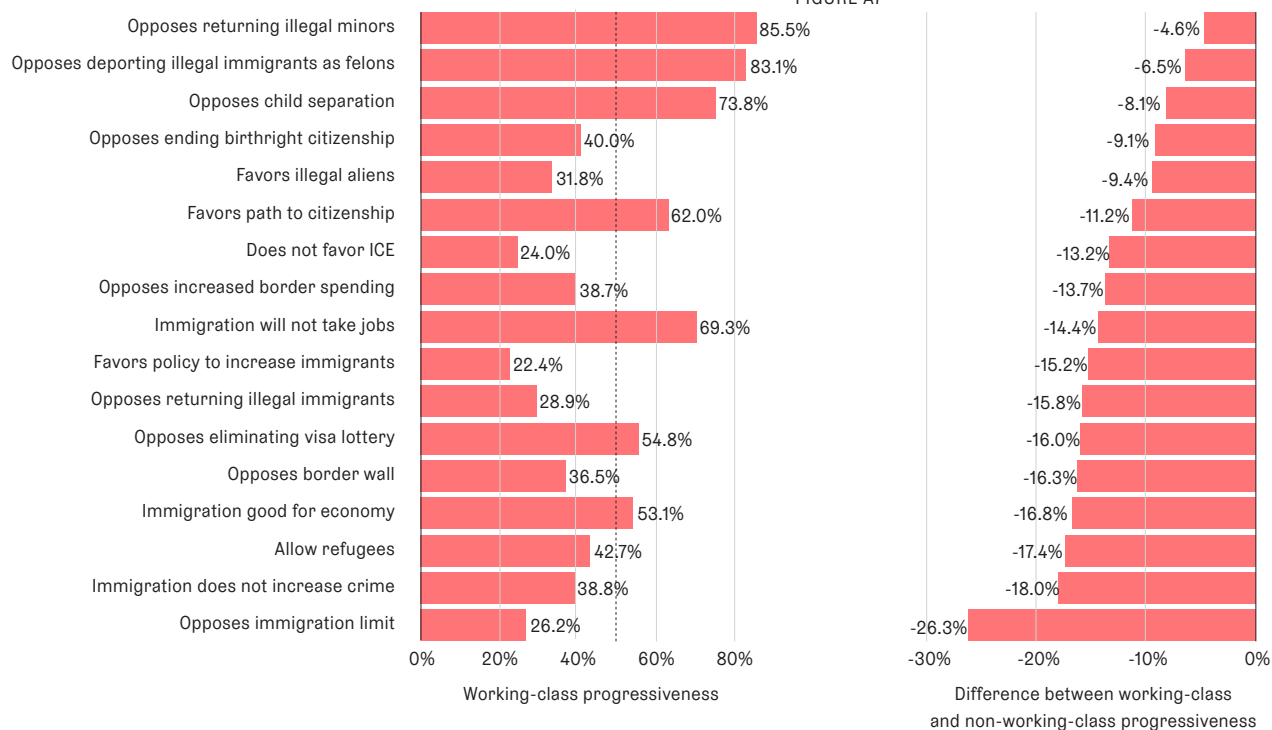
Changes in working-class (noncollege) attitudes toward immigration

FIGURE A6



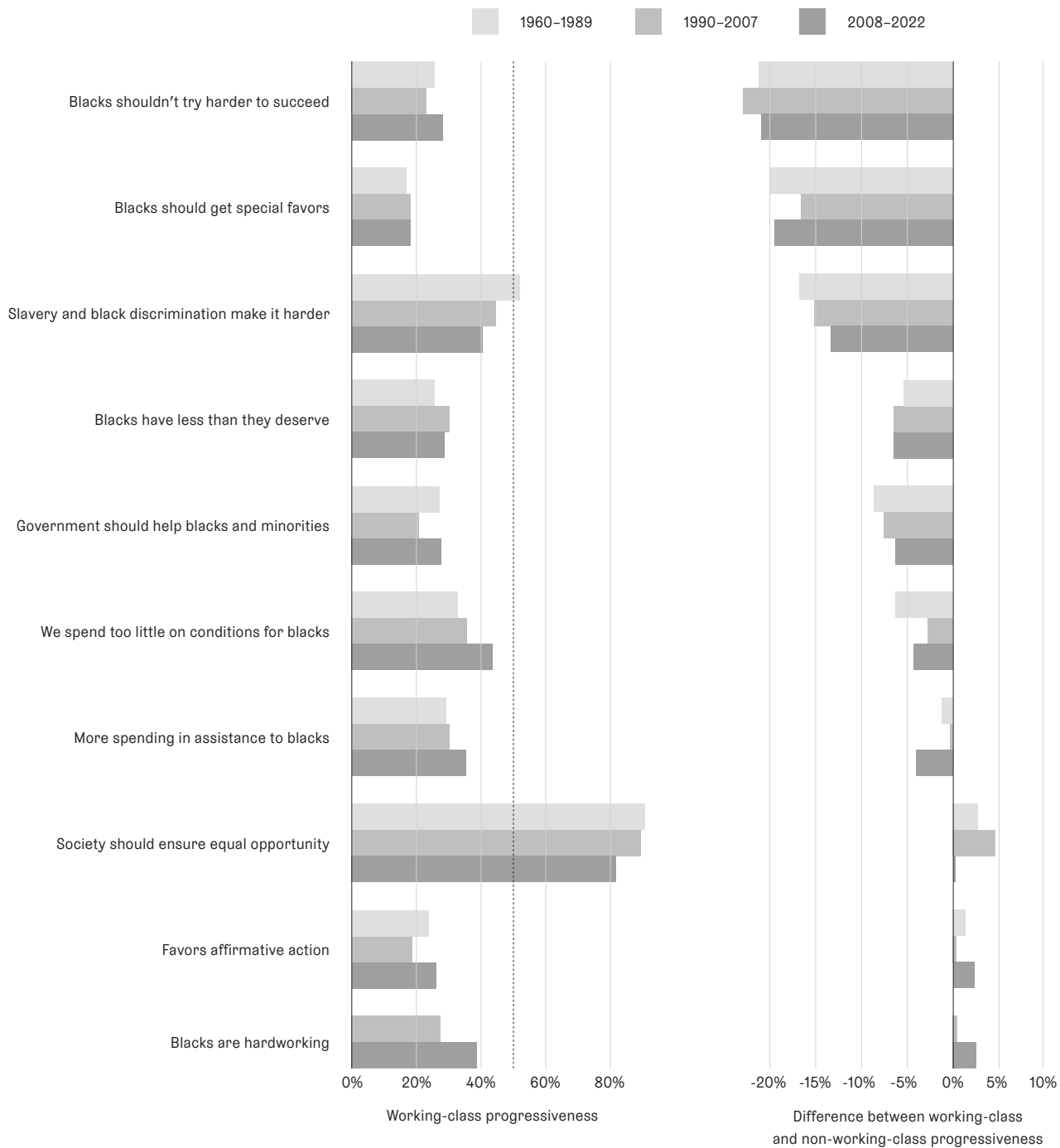
Working-class (noncollege) attitudes toward immigration, 2020-22

FIGURE A7



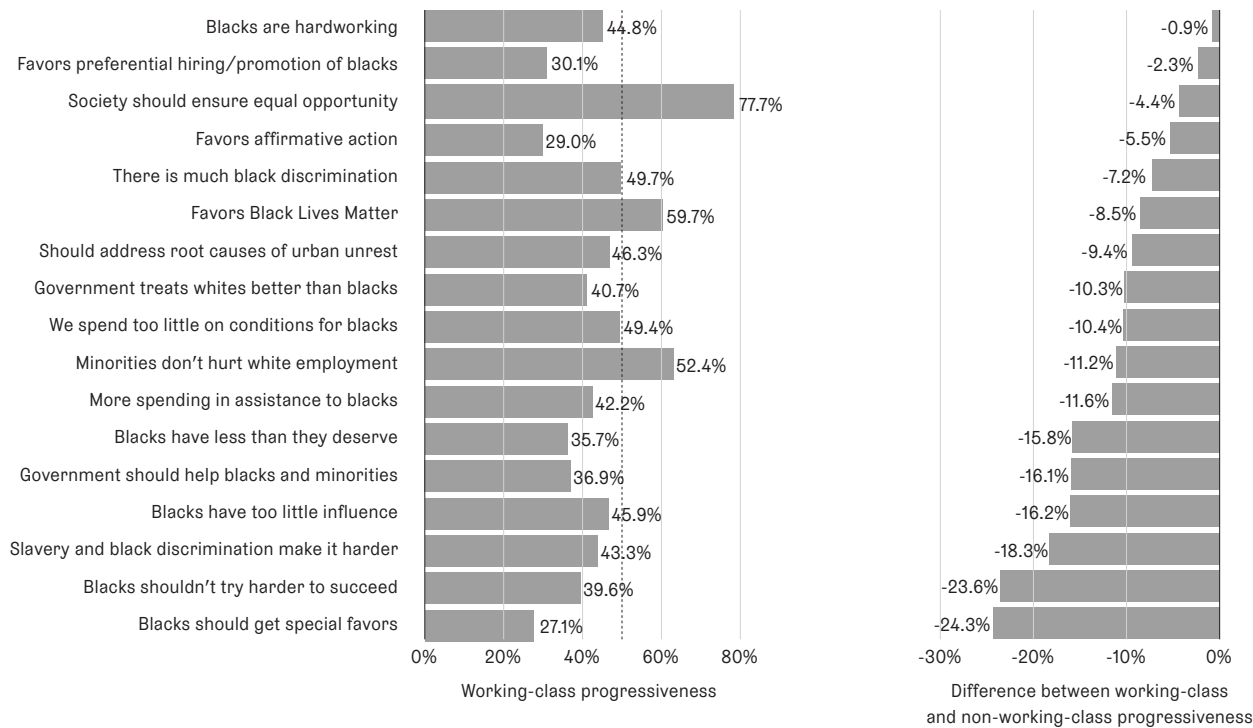
Working-class (noncollege) attitudes toward civil rights

FIGURE A8



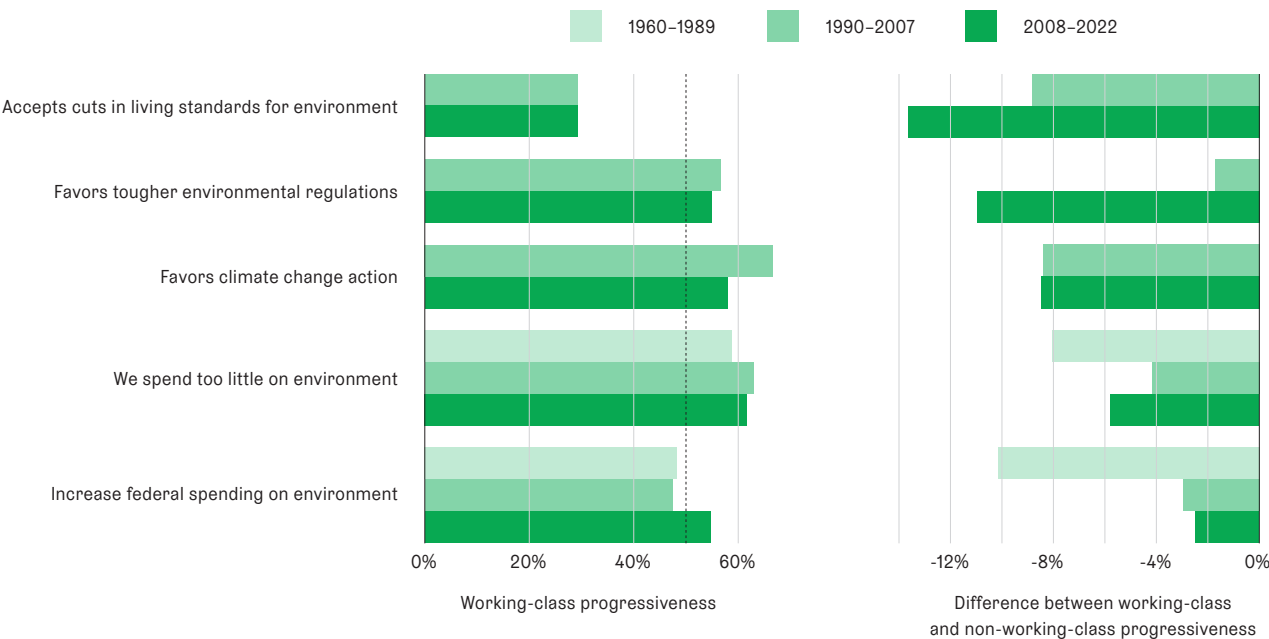
Working-class (noncollege) attitudes toward civil rights, 2020–22

FIGURE A9



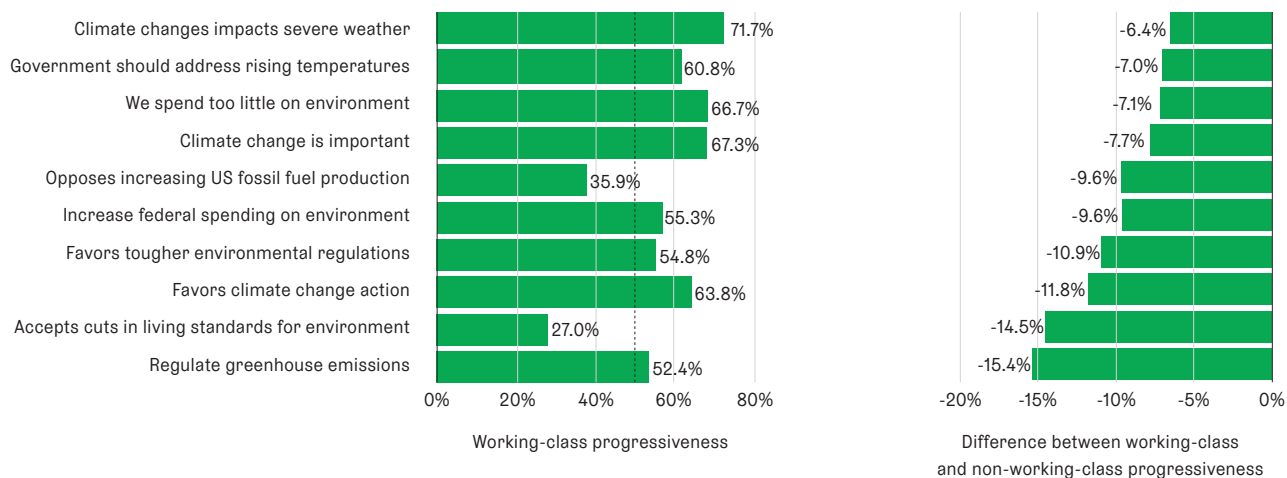
Changes in working-class attitudes on the environment

FIGURE A10



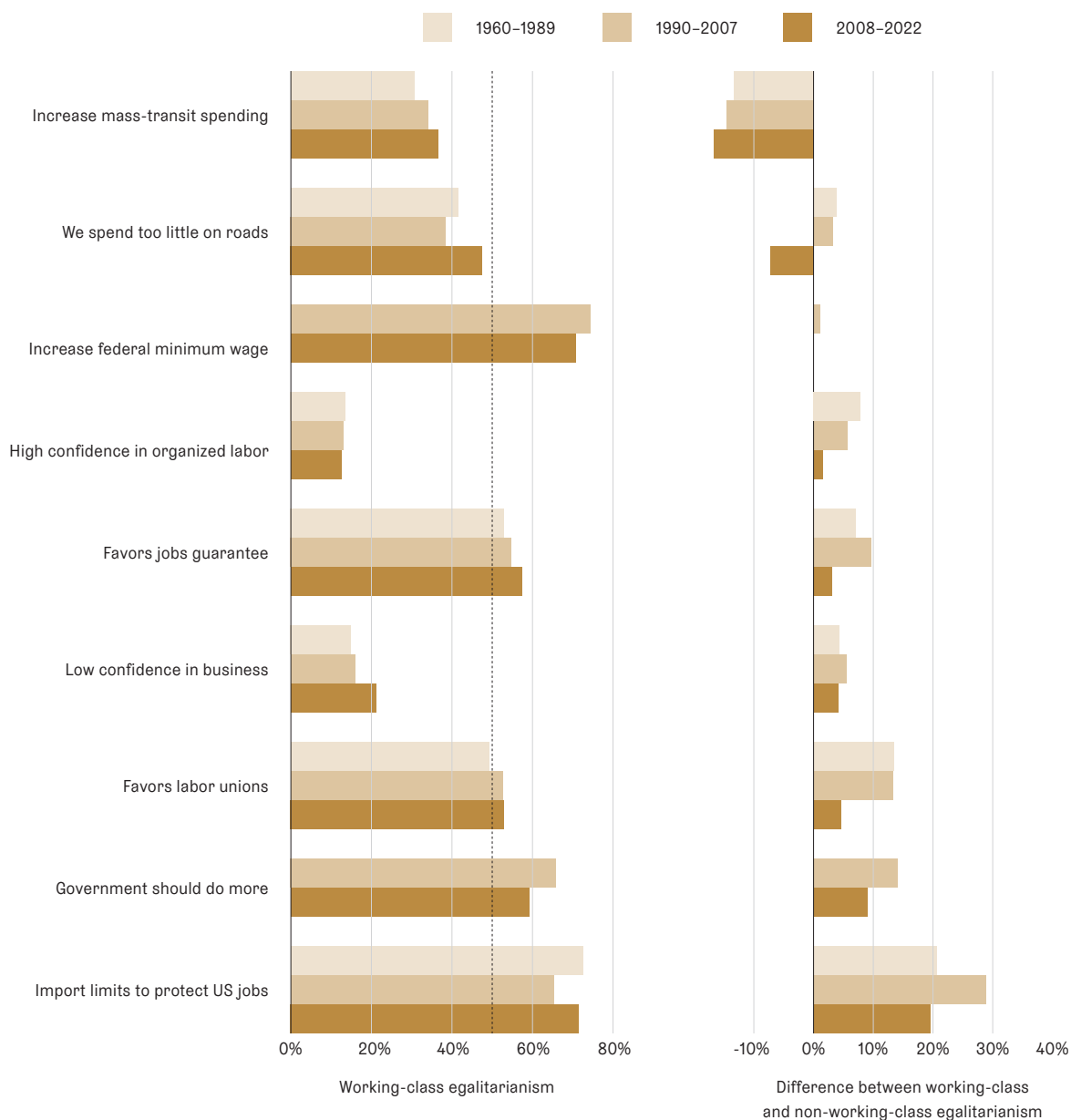
Working-class (noncollege) attitudes on environment, 2020–22

FIGURE A11



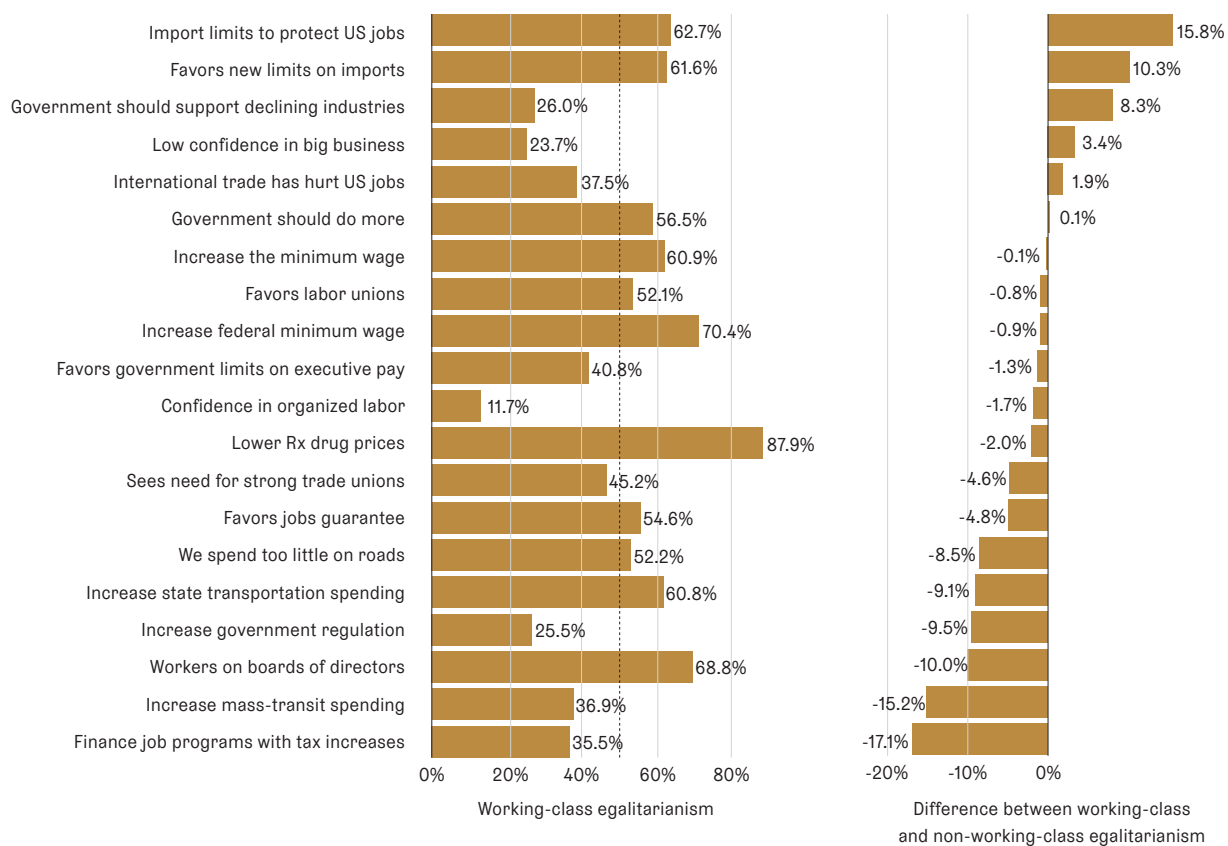
Changes in working-class (noncollege) attitudes on predistribution

FIGURE A12



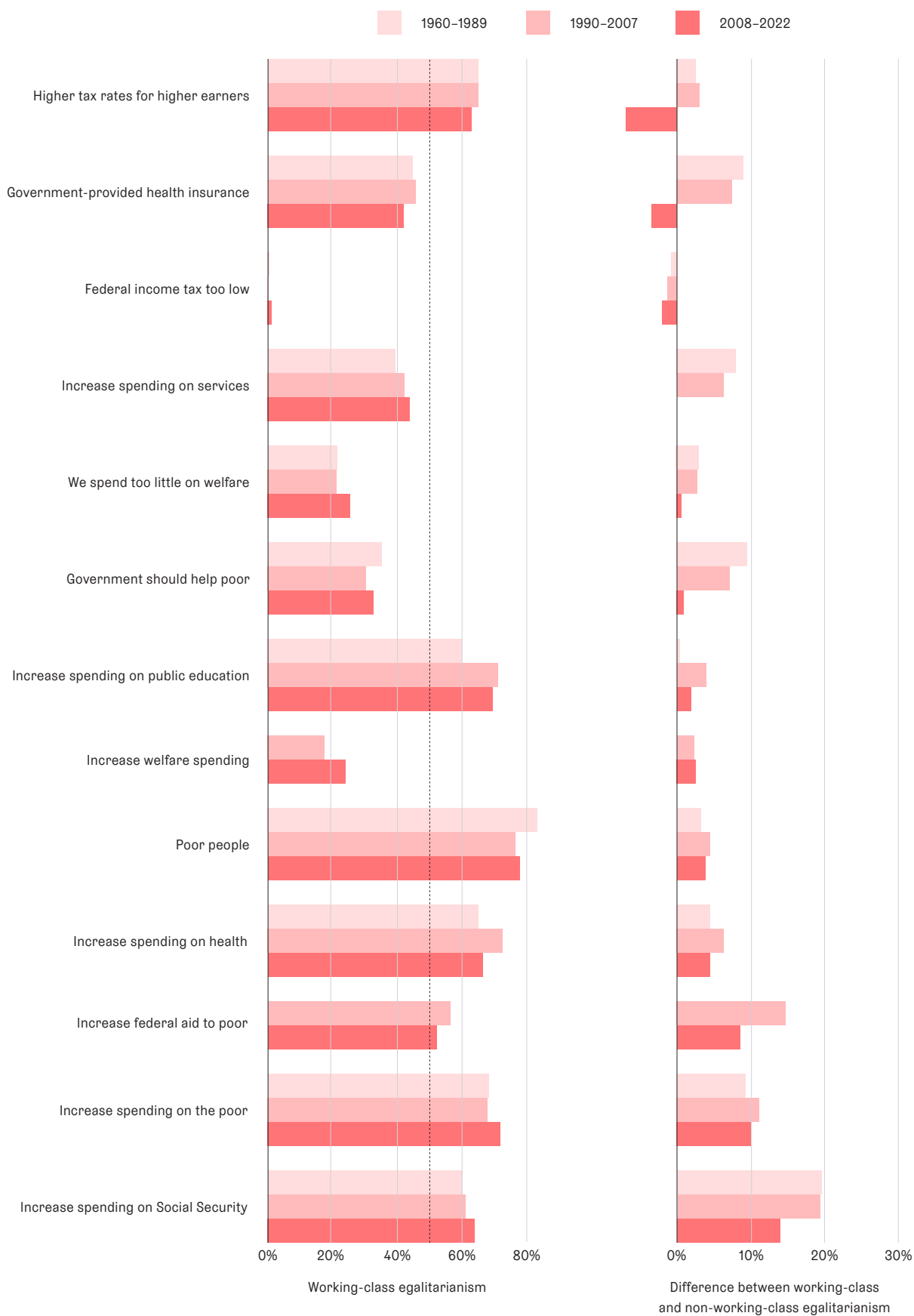
Working-class (noncollege) attitudes on predistribution, 2020–22

FIGURE A13



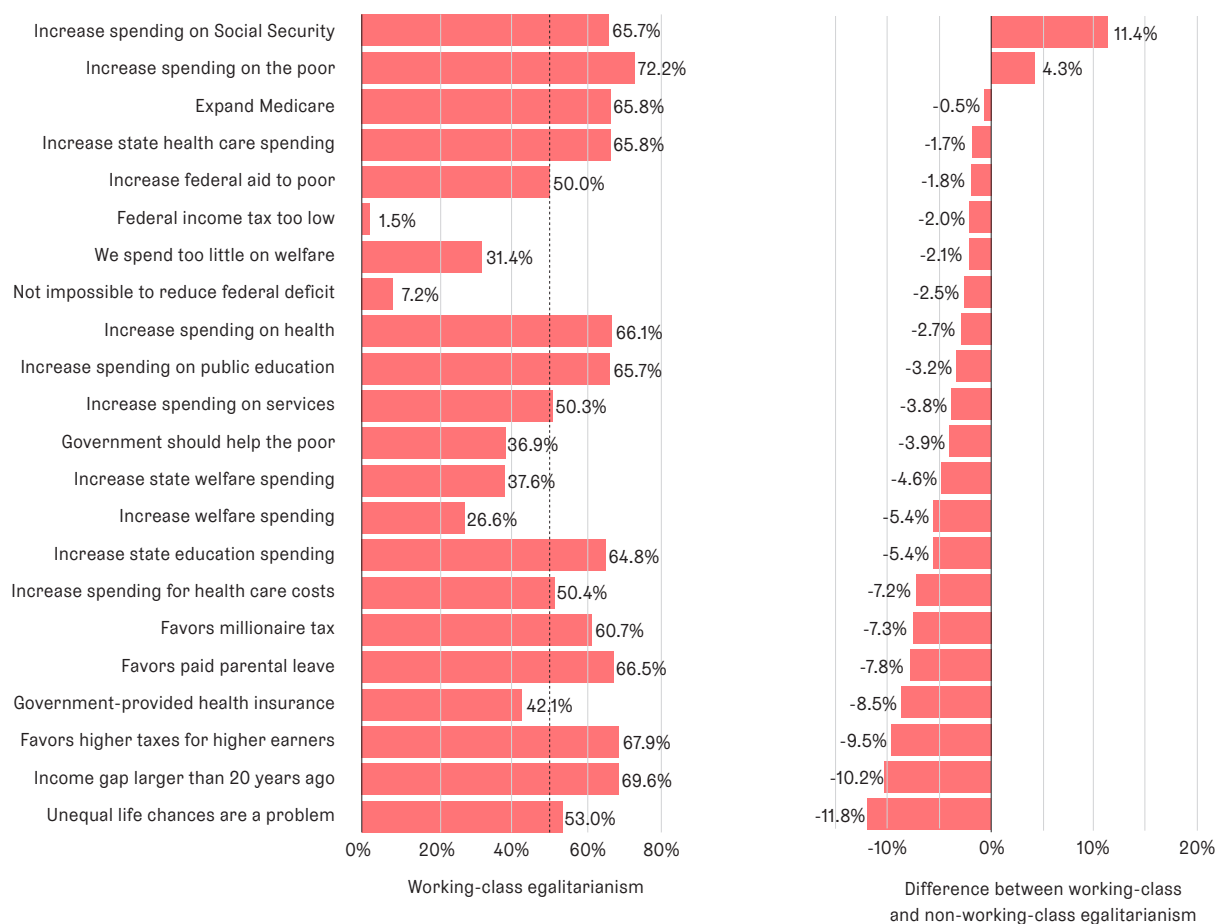
Changes in working-class (noncollege) attitudes on redistribution

FIGURE A14



Working-class (noncollege) attitudes on redistribution, 2020–22

FIGURE A15

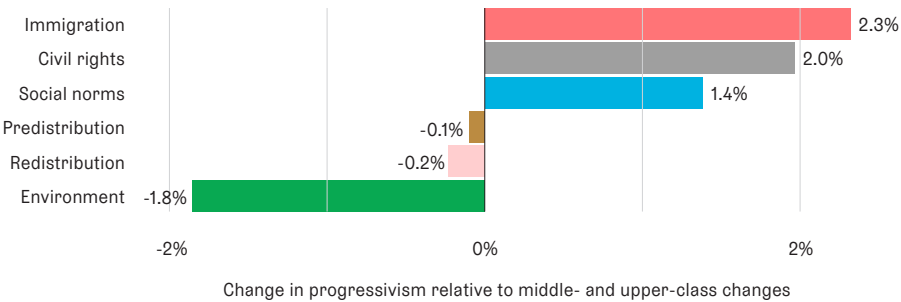


Appendix B: Preferences for White Respondents Only (College and Income Split)

We show results for white respondents only, with the working class defined as no four-year college degree and in the bottom two-thirds of income.

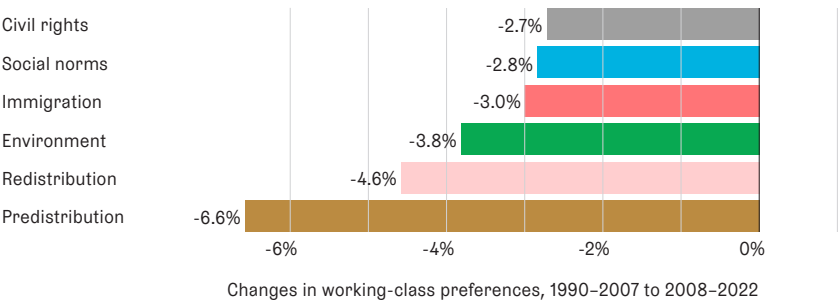
Changes in working-class preferences, 1990–2007 to 2008–2022 (white respondents only)

FIGURE B1



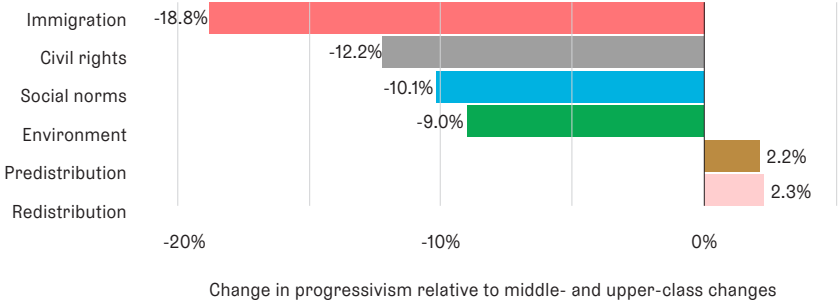
Changes in working-class preferences relative to middle- and upper-class preferences, 1990–2007 to 2008–2022 (white respondents only)

FIGURE B2



Working-class preferences relative to middle- and upper-class preferences, 2008–2022 (white respondents only)

FIGURE B3



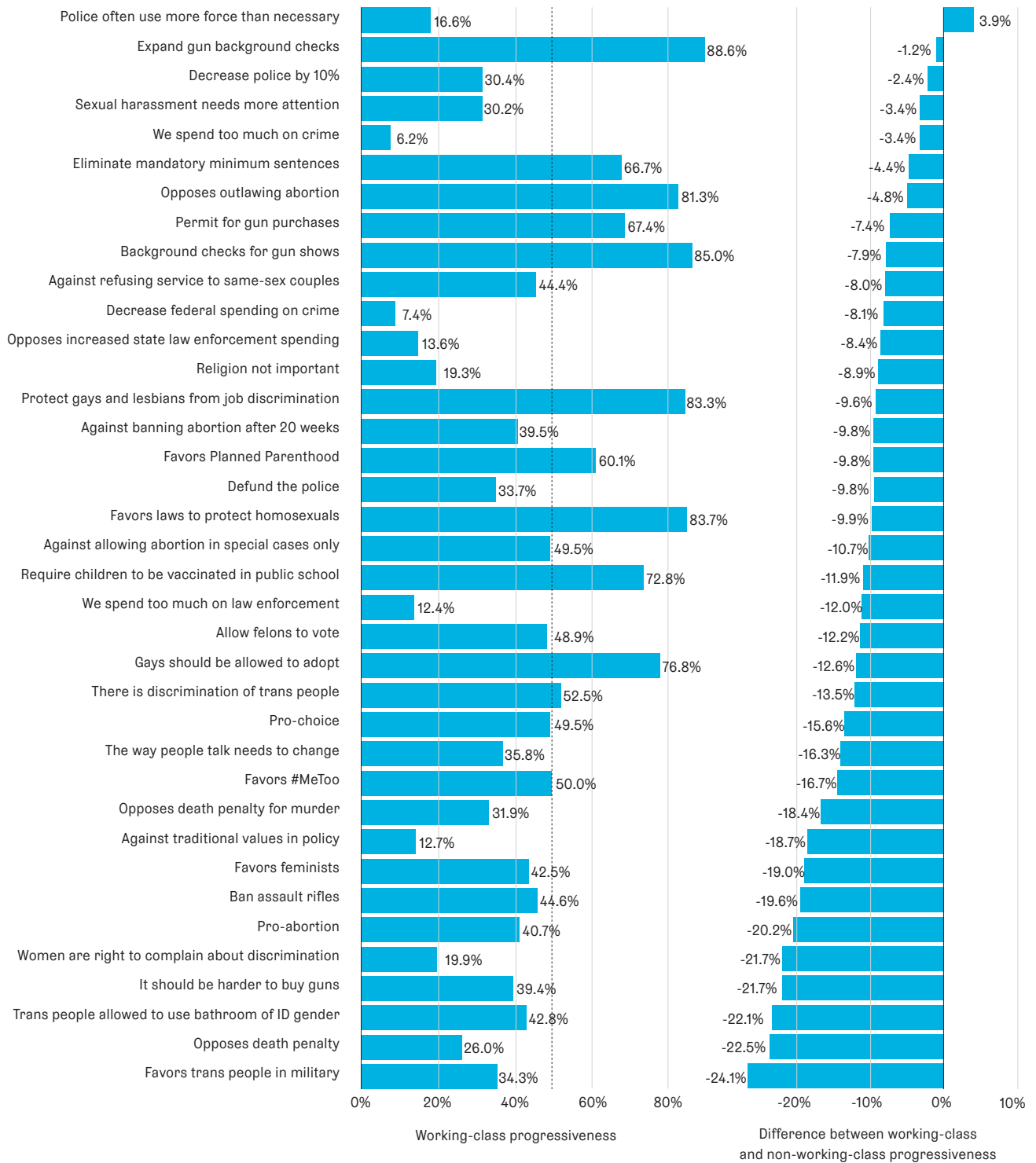
Working-class progressive response rates to social norms
(white respondents only)

FIGURE B4



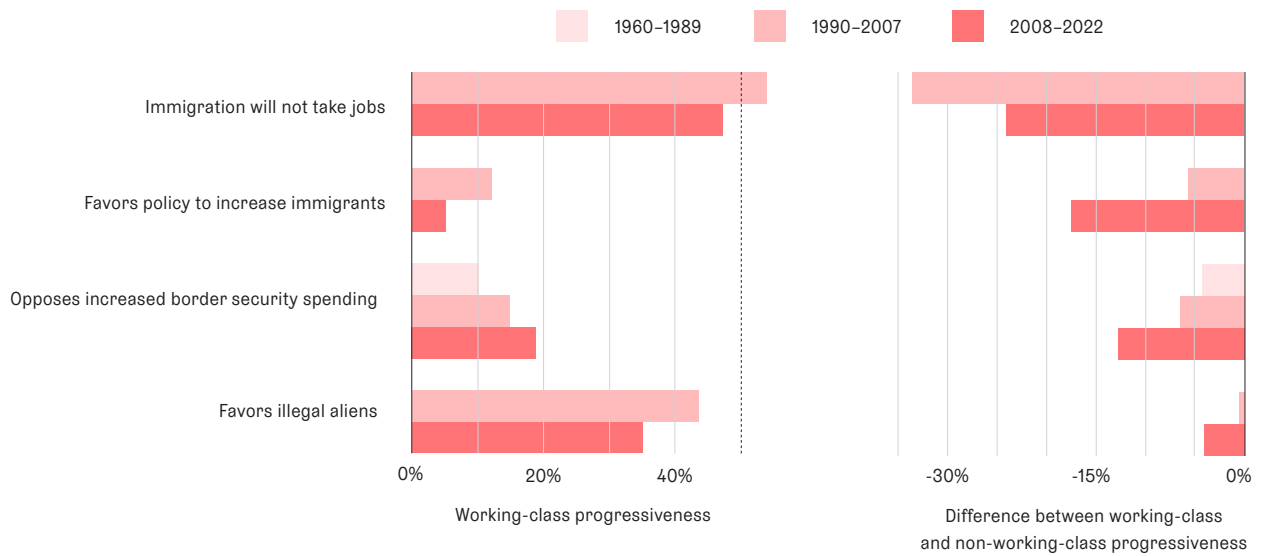
Working-class progressive response rates to social norms, 2020–22 (white respondents only)

FIGURE B5



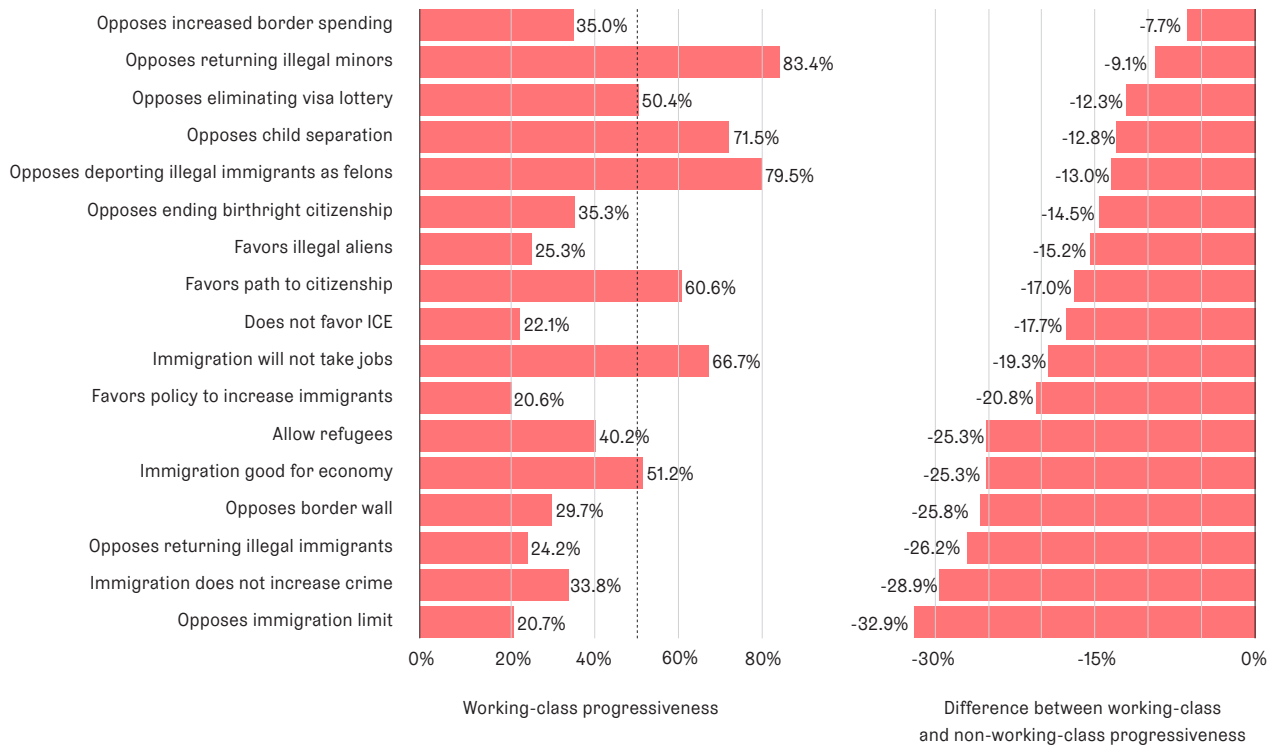
Changes in working-class attitudes toward immigration (white respondents only)

FIGURE B6



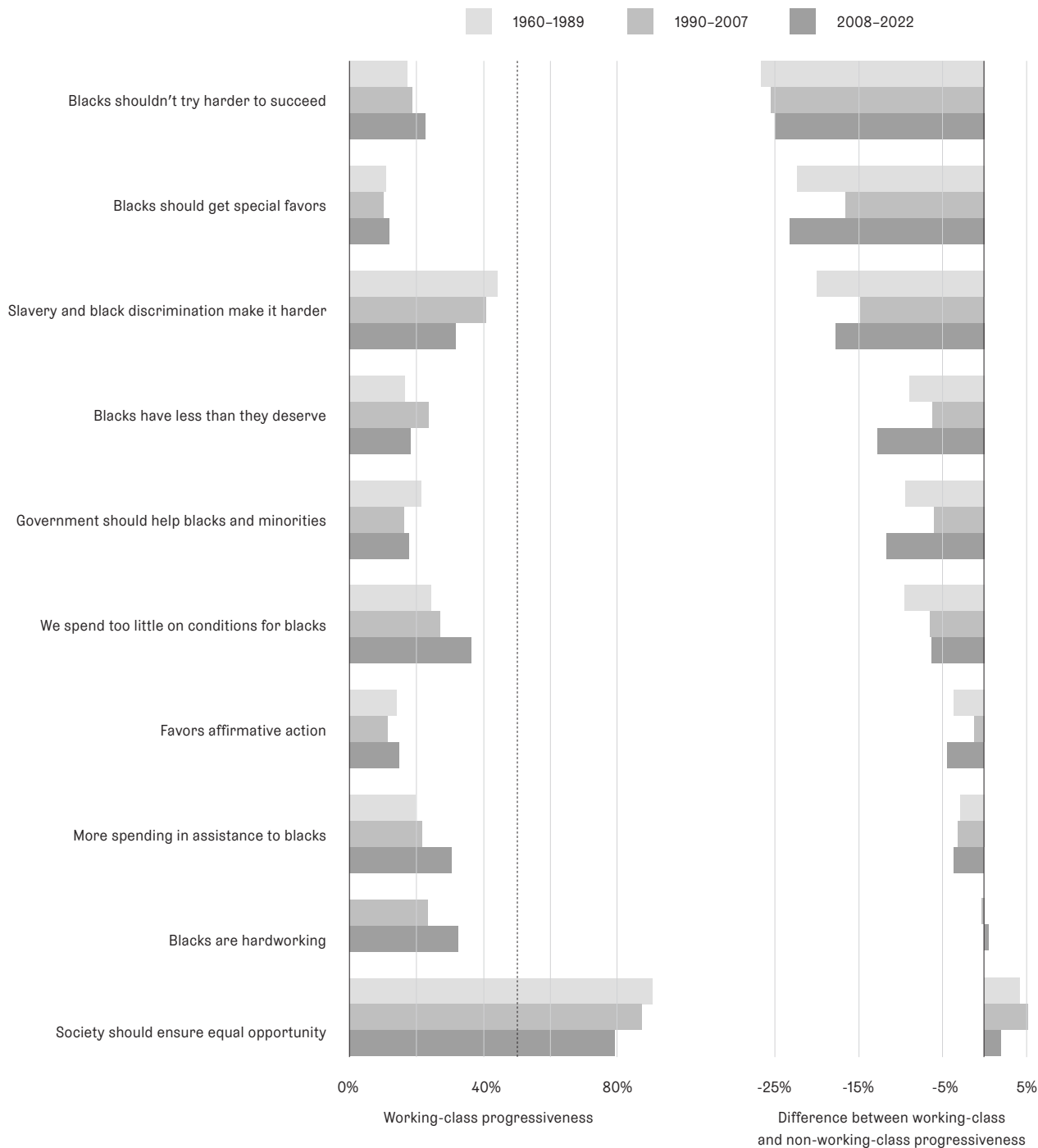
Working-class attitudes toward immigration, 2020-22 (white respondents only)

FIGURE B7



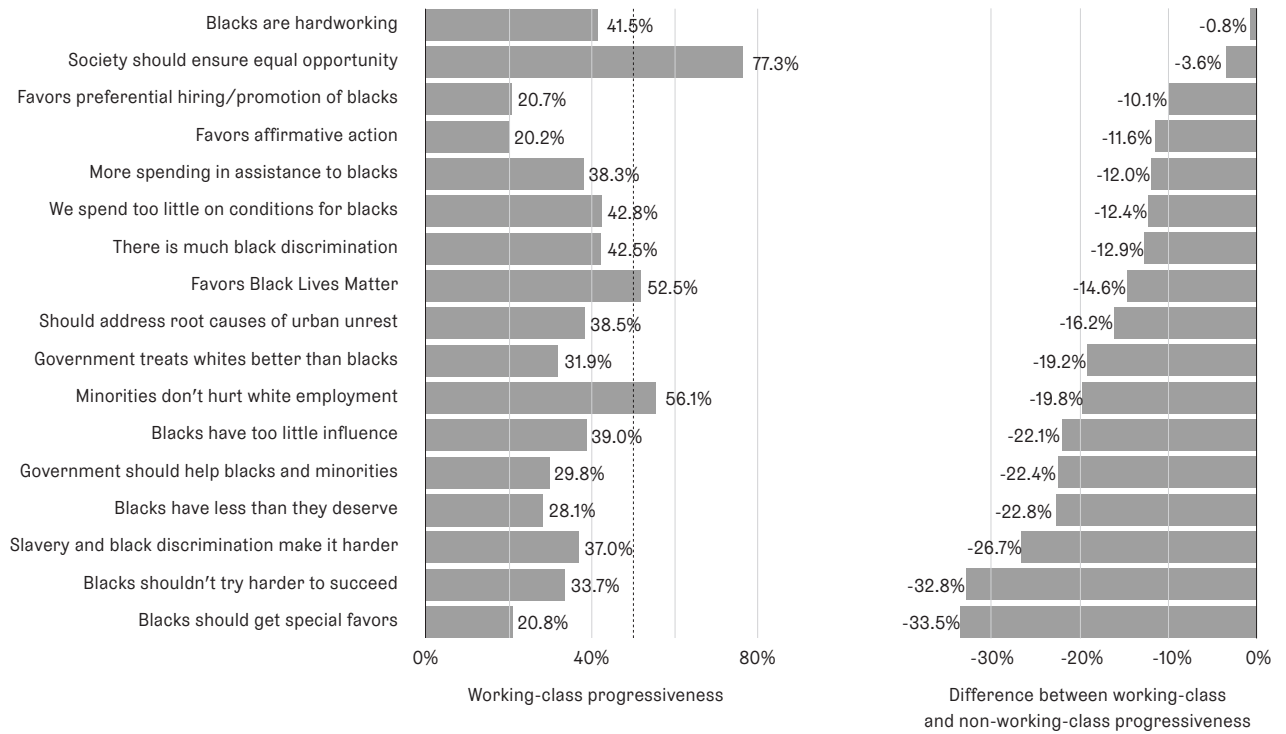
Working-class attitudes toward civil rights (white respondents only)

FIGURE B8



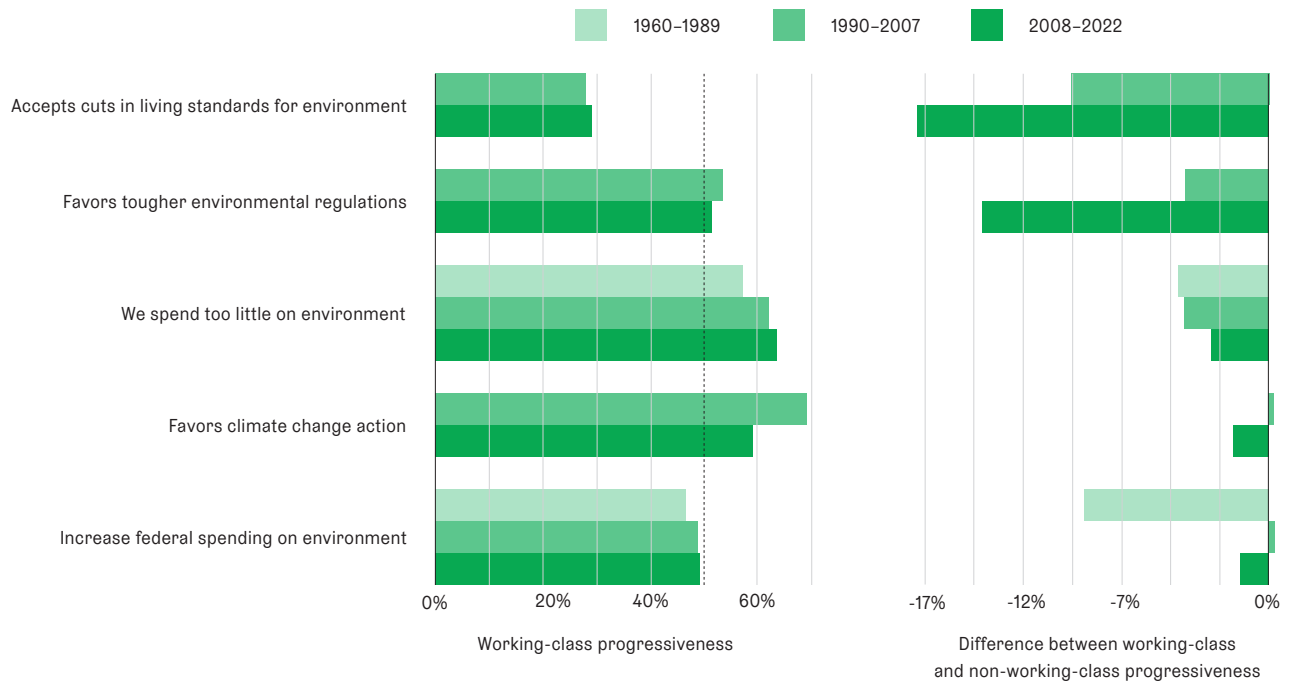
Working-class attitudes toward civil rights, 2020–22 (white respondents only)

FIGURE B9



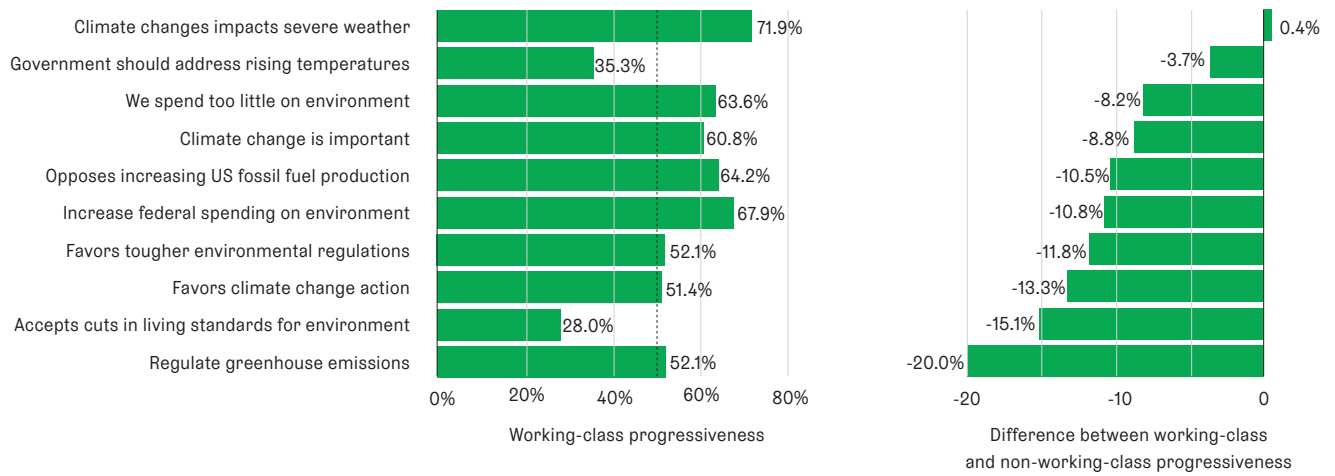
Changes in working-class attitudes on the environment (white respondents only)

FIGURE B10



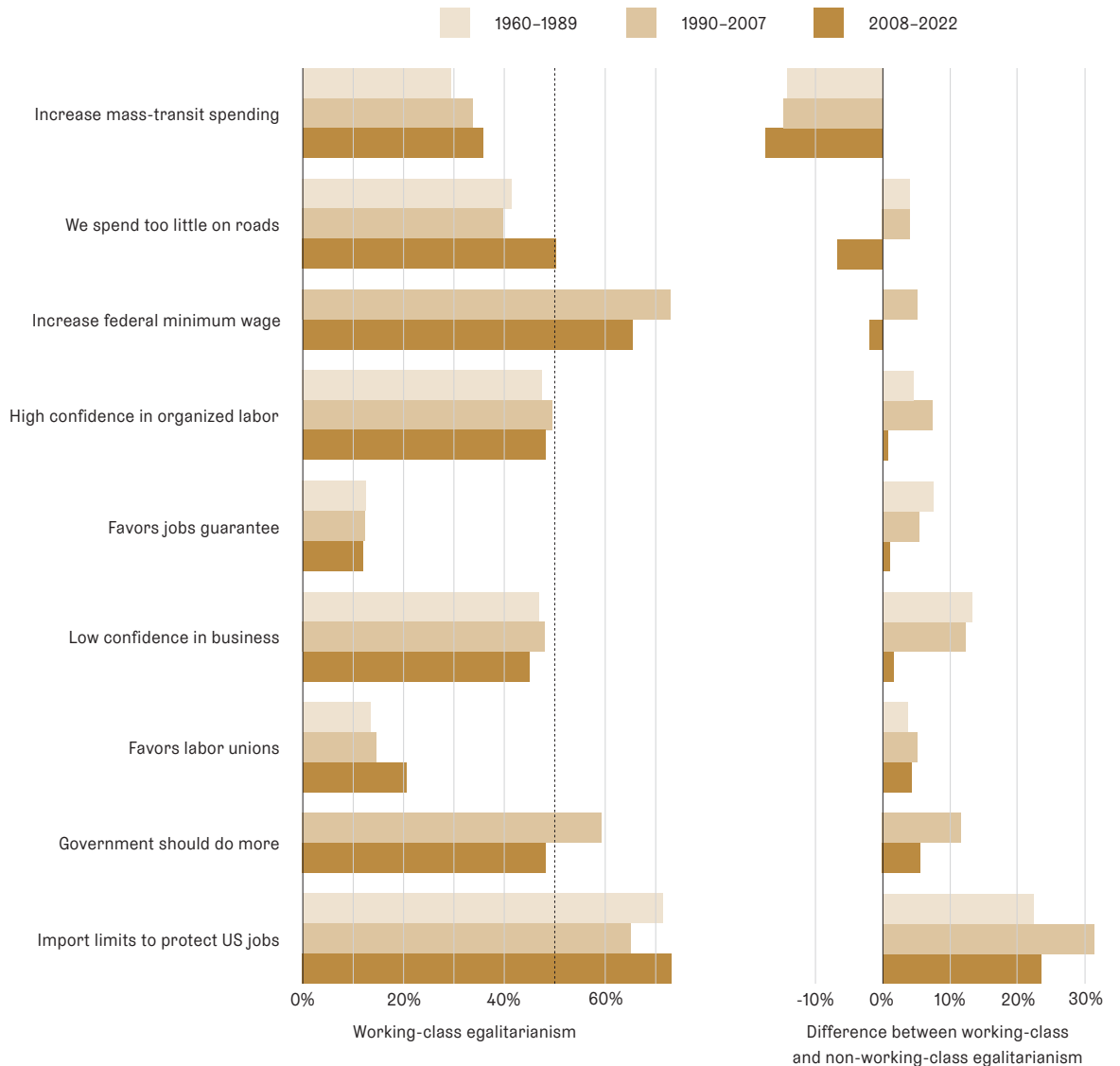
Changes in working-class attitudes on the environment (white respondents only)

FIGURE B10



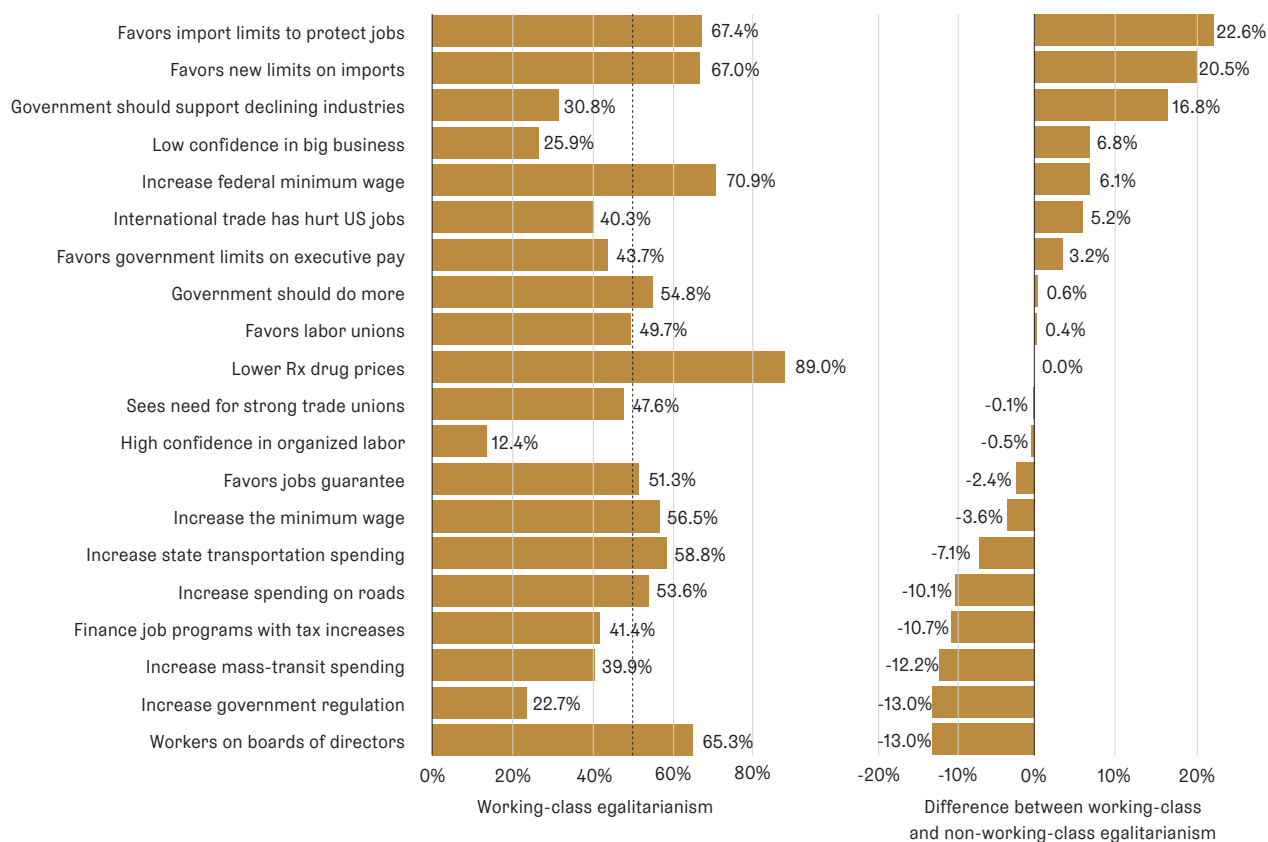
Changes in working-class attitudes on predistribution (white respondents only)

FIGURE B12



Working-class attitudes on redistribution, 2020–22 (white respondents only)

FIGURE B13



Changes in working-class attitudes on redistribution (white respondents only)

FIGURE B14



Working-class attitudes on redistribution, 2020–22 (white respondents only)

FIGURE B15

