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## Who's the Party of the People? Economic Populism and the U.S. Public's Beliefs About Political Parties

Stephen P. Nicholson · Gary M. Segura

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**Abstract** Some observers of American politics have argued that Republicans have redrawn the social class basis of the parties by displacing the Democrats as the party of the common person. While others have addressed the argument by implication, we address the phenomenon itself. That is, we examine whether the populist rhetoric used by conservatives has reshaped the American public's perceptions about the social class basis of American political parties. To this end, we used NES data and created novel survey questions for examining the class-based images of the parties. We examine whether the public holds populist images of the Republican Party and whether the working class and evangelical Christians are especially likely to hold this belief. Contrary to this argument, most Americans view the Democrats as the party of the people. Furthermore, working class and evangelical Christians are no less likely to hold this belief.

**Keywords** Populism · Party image · Social class · American elections

Howard Dean should take his tax-hiking, government-expanding, latte-drinking, sushi-eating, Volvo-driving, *New York Times*-reading, Hollywood-loving, left-wing freak show back to Vermont, where it belongs.

– Club for Growth ad against Democratic presidential candidate Howard Dean

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Which political party in the United States represents the working class? At least since the New Deal, the answer to this question had been relatively straight forward—the Democrats. Yet, as illustrated in the quote about Howard Dean, the answer may not be so clear anymore. Political trends in recent years provide fodder for the argument that economic based class distinctions are waning. After all, how much could class matter if richer blue states are voting Democratic and poorer red states are voting Republican (Gelman 2008)? How much could the old class distinctions matter given all the talk about values voters? If the meaning of social class hasn't changed to reflect values, how does one explain the exodus of white evangelical voters from the Democratic Party? Whereas class had traditionally been defined by income, the new class politics, we are told by political observers and pundits, is about social values and personal tastes (Bageant 2008; Brooks 2001; Frank 2004; Nunberg 2006).

How could such a change come about? These authors and others have observed the efforts of conservatives to displace public concern over economic issues with culture war issues such as abortion, gay rights, and gun control. In addition, these authors point to carefully rehearsed political stagecraft and the increasing association of the GOP with rural areas and Southerners served to reinforce the new images of the parties. Witness the spectacle of George W. Bush clearing brush on his Crawford, Texas, ranch, a property he purchased in 1999, the year he declared his candidacy for the Presidency, and at which he spent 487 days of his term (Hernandez 2008). In 2005, the Washington Post reported on this activity:

On most of the 365 days he has enjoyed at his secluded ranch here, President Bush's idea of paradise is to hop in his white Ford pickup truck in jeans and work boots, drive to a stand of cedars, and whack the trees to the ground" (Rein 2005, p. A3).

Upon his retirement, President Bush did not move back to the Crawford ranch but, instead, purchased a home in an exclusive Dallas neighborhood. Bush's Democratic opponent in the 2004 election, John Kerry, also made appeals to working class voters. In an attempt to woo blue-collar voters, Kerry went goose hunting wearing a newly purchased camouflage jacket, drank beer while watching sports, and spoke in a folksier style (Wilgoren 2004). At least with regards to the media narrative of the campaign, however, it appeared that Kerry's efforts were ineffective while Bush's succeeded.

The marriage of the Republican Party to "common man" visuals and conservative culture war issues has arguably changed the meaning of class in America, a result described by some as the "great backlash" (Frank 2004). No longer the province of economics, "What makes one a member of the proletariat is not work per se, but unpretentiousness, humility, and the rest of the qualities that our punditry claims to spy in the red states that voted for George W. Bush (Frank 2004, pp. 113–114)." According to backlash authors, this transformation recasts the Democrats as snobbish over-educated urban sophisticates with un-American values and tastes, and associates the GOP with what Sarah Palin—the Party's 2008 Vice-Presidential candidate—would come to refer to as "real" Americans. In sum, backlash authors have lamented that the GOP has become the new party of the

working class.<sup>1</sup> If correct, the displacement of an economics-based definition of class with a definition rooted in values, tastes and social issues represents a profound transformation of American politics.

Given the centrality of questions involving the social class basis of parties, scholars have investigated the electoral implications of the great backlash and found it does not withstand empirical scrutiny (Ansolabehere et al. 2006; Bartels 2006, 2008; Gelman 2008; Gelman et al. 2007; Stonecash 2005). This research, which we will examine in greater detail, convincingly concludes that in terms of partisanship, vote choice, and issue salience, there is little evidence that changing party images have significantly impacted American politics.

In this effort, we move beyond these questions regarding the electoral implications of the great backlash argument. Rather than test its claims by implication, we address the phenomenon itself, and do so on its own terms. That is, we examine whether the populist rhetoric used to define this inversion of party images is really subscribed to by the American public. If these efforts have succeeded in remaking party images—that is, the American public has actually come to believe the Republican Party is now the party of the working class—we should find three things. First, a substantial share of voters will identify the GOP as the party of the common person. Second, the working class will be especially likely to hold this opinion. Third, when identifying which party does, in fact, advocate for the common person, religious beliefs and practices will play a substantial role. We believe that neither of the first two claims is the case, and we are skeptical as to whether even the religious argument is correct.

Using NES survey data and questions from a 2006 survey designed expressly for the purposes of testing the great backlash hypothesis, we find no evidence to support it. Rather, most Americans view the Democrats as the party of the people and the working class and evangelical Christians are no less likely to hold this belief. Although we agree that conservative elites have attempted to reinvent the Republican Party as the party of working class and the Democratic Party as the party of an out of touch elite, our results suggest that the American people, and in particular the working class, may not have been exposed to this rhetoric or believed it when they heard it.

Our study has important implications for understanding the nature of party images and the limits of elite attempts to frame them. In testing the effects of conservative efforts to remake party brands, our study advances research on the foundations of party images (Baumer and Gold 1995; Bowler et al. 2006; Brewer and Stonecash 2007; Brewer 2009; Campbell et al. 1960; Geer 1991; Green et al. 2002; Jackman 1986). Our research also has implications for the study of framing, especially its limits (e.g., Barker 2005; Druckman 2001; Nelson et al. 1997). Although our analysis does not explicitly test framing effects, research on framing

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<sup>1</sup> At least one concern here is whether folks see “working class” as the appropriate term for common, average, or everyday Americans. It is, indeed, possible that part of what has occurred in social discourse has been the decay of “working class” as a representative term, particularly in the wake of deindustrialization of the American economy. Nevertheless, the term strikes us still broadly in use and still reflective of those without significant political and economic power.

offers further insight into why efforts to frame party images have largely been rejected by the public.

### Revisiting the Great Backlash

In the aftermath of the 2004 presidential election, political pundits of the left offered an explanation for the Democratic Party's loss that posited that the traditional class-based distinctions had been inverted (Frank 2004; Nunberg 2006). In particular, Thomas Frank's (2004) *What's the Matter with Kansas?* emerged as a compelling narrative for the Democratic Party's loss. Frank (2004) argues that the meaning of social class has changed in America. Traditional understandings of social class as a matter of income and bread-and-butter economic policies have given way to a new understanding sustained by cultural issues such as abortion, gay marriage, school prayer, and gun control. According to Frank (2004, p. 20) the great backlash recasts "the Democrats as the party of a wealthy, pampered, arrogant elite that lives far away from real Americans" and "Republicanism as the faith of the hard-working common people of the heartland, an expression of their unpretentious, all-American ways, just like country music and NASCAR." Other observers on the American left offered comparable accounts:

They [Republicans] had to unify their appeal to those groups by rewriting the old language of populism in ways that diverted the traditional conflicts between "the people" and "the powerful" into "cultural" resentments over differences in lifestyle and social values. And in the course of things, they managed to redefine the distinction between conservatives and liberals, so as to depict liberals as the enemies of the values of "ordinary Americans" (Nunberg 2006, p. 51).

Having accepted this new view of the parties, Frank (2004) and other despondent observers of this phenomenon conclude that the working class has helped usher in an era of GOP dominance of American national politics.

Several studies have examined Frank's (2004) arguments and found them not supported by empirical evidence (Ansolabehere et al. 2006; Bartels 2006, 2008; Gelman 2008; Gelman et al. 2007; McCarty et al. 2008; Stonecash 2000, 2005). Ansolabehere et al. (2006) and Bartels (2006) both examine the issue displacement argument. Although these studies show that moral issues have grown in importance as predictors of the vote, especially abortion, both provide evidence that economic issues have twice as large an effect as moral issues. Furthermore, neither study finds support for the contention that moral issues have a larger effect on the voting behavior of working class voters; the working class largely behaves as other social classes. In sum, there is little evidence to suggest that moral issues dominate economic issues in the electorate or among the working class.

Scholars have also found no support for Frank's contention that the partisan loyalties and votes of white working class voters have become more Republican over time. Although white working class voters have become significantly less Democratic, Bartels (2006, 2008) found that the trend is largely confined to the

South—not the heartland of America. Furthermore, contrary to the backlash argument, scholars have shown that income differences have become a stronger predictor of voting behavior and that low-income voters have become more supportive of Democrats (Ansolabehere et al. 2006; Bartels 2006; Gelman 2008; Gelman et al. 2007; McCarty et al. 2008; Stonecash 2000, 2005). In sum, the evidence suggests that white working class voters are not more concerned with social issues than economic issues nor are they are more likely to support Republican candidates.

Although the scholarly research on this question has addressed essential questions, it has left unanswered Frank's (2004) compelling argument about public images of the parties, the focus of our effort. No doubt, public discourse about social class and the political parties resembles much of what Frank (2004) claims. Conservative pundits such as Ann Coulter, Sean Hannity, and Rush Limbaugh frequently invoke images of out-of-touch, latte-drinking liberal Democratic elites and ordinary, hard-working, NASCAR Republican conservatives. Undoubtedly, some people do hold these views and they make up the colorful stories told by Frank and others about how working class individuals have become loyal Republicans.

Yet, we find good reason to doubt the claims of backlash authors. First, most people do not attend to political discourse (Prior 2007) much less listen to conservative talk radio (Bennett 2002). Bennett (2002), for example, reports that most Americans do not listen to talk radio and only about 10% claim to be regular listeners. Of those that listen regularly, not surprisingly, many are receptive to conservative messages. Although conservative talking heads may not be exclusively preaching to the choir, conservative talk radio listeners are more likely to identify as conservative and Republican (Barker 2002; Bennett 2002). Since the "right-wing noise machine" fails to reach most Americans, we do not anticipate finding that the images of the parties have shifted in the manner that backlash authors contend.

Second, even if most people were exposed to backlash rhetoric, it does not necessarily mean that they believe it. Frames, regardless of their focus, do not automatically affect opinion (e.g., Barker 2005; Druckman 2001; Nelson et al. 1997). Rather, the psychological processes at work behind a framing effect are likely to be conscious and deliberative (e.g., Barker 2005; Druckman 2001; Nelson et al. 1997). Since opinion change through framing happens consciously and deliberately, people reject them for a variety of reasons (Druckman 2001, pp. 240–245). Druckman (2001) identifies political predispositions and source effects as two factors that limit the ability of frames to alter opinion. Efforts to reframe party images should be no different. Consider political predispositions: party images are not easily changed (Green et al. 2002) and when they do change, it is often the product of an issue evolution (Carmines and Stimson 1989; also see Bowler et al. 2006). Or consider source effects: proponents of the "GOP is the party of the working class" frame are almost exclusively conservative, a noncredible source for many people.

Yet, according to Frank and others, a major reversal in the images of the parties has occurred. Since a reversal in public perceptions of the class basis of the political

parties would represent evidence of a “Great Inversion,” we investigate this claim. In contrast to Frank (2004), we expect that most Americans, including the working class, will associate the Democrats, not the Republicans, as the party of the working class. Thus, our primary hypothesis is that the public perceives the Democrats as the party of the working class rather than Republicans and we do not expect any differences in this belief across class or religious categories.<sup>2</sup>

In addition, we examine Smith’s (2007) criticism of Frank’s (2004) bait and switch argument. Although we agree with the basics of Smith’s (2007) claim that the GOP has been upfront and clever in marketing their economic policies, in large measure, we expect that economic opinions on specific policy issues still conform, to a substantial degree, to long-held expectations about how economic interests map to policy preferences. We believe that few in the electorate, and even fewer in the working class, have been convinced that many of the specific aspects of GOP economic policy preferences are really in their interest.

## Data and Analysis

To evaluate our claims, we use survey data from the National Election Studies (NES) cumulative data file and the 2006 Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES).<sup>3</sup> On the CCES, we created a module for the post-election stage of the survey (Nicholson and Segura 2006) to directly examine Frank’s (2004) argument about contemporary party images. Specifically, we asked respondents their views on the political parties from the perspective of the interests and cultural placement of the working class, at least according to Frank (2004). Although our data provide a look at public beliefs about party images only two years after the 2004 election (and Frank’s book), a relatively short period for party images to have switched back, they nonetheless represent a single snapshot in time. For this reason, and by way of background, we also present NES time-series data on party images to see whether the class-based images have changed.

<sup>2</sup> Theoretically, it is possible that both parties may be perceived as representing the working class. Although we examine this possibility, we do not think it likely given how members of party categories are viewed as opposites (see Heit and Nicholson 2010).

<sup>3</sup> Interviewed respondents were selected from the Polimetrix PollingPoint Panel using sample matching. A random sub sample of size 36,501 was drawn from the 2004 American Community Study (ACS), conducted by the U.S. Bureau of the Census, which is a probability sample of size 1,194,354 with a response rate of 93.1% (participation in the ACS is mandatory). For each respondent in the selected ACS sub sample, the closest matching active PollingPoint panelist was selected using the following measure of distance:  $d(x,y)$ . For more information on sample matching see Rivers (2006). Although not ideal for studying vote choice (a problem with NES data as well), the sample bias is quite small when looking at vote choice across a wide variety of offices. The average error across statewide offices for Governor, US Senator, Lieutenant Governor, Attorney General, Secretary of State, and Treasurer equals 0.3%, which says that the sample did not tilt toward one party or another, and for some offices, there is a small Democratic bias, for others there is a small Republican bias. The largest bias occurs with Lieutenant Governors, where the survey overstated the Democratic vote share on average 2.4%. See Ansolabehere (2008) for more details on the 2006 CCES.

## Party Images Over Time

We are not, of course, the first to look at class-based images of political parties. Using the National Election Studies (NES) open-ended questions about party likes and dislikes, Geer (1991) and Baumer and Gold (1995) found that party images are relatively enduring. Although reporting data before Frank's (2004) book, these authors showed that the public perceives the Republican Party as the party of the wealthy and the Democratic Party as the party of the economically disadvantaged. Geer (1991, p. 223), for example, finds this perception the most widely mentioned difference among the parties.

Of all the issues examined, concerns about big business-labor are clearly the most important to the electorate's assessment of parties. From 1952 to 1988, about 35% of the electorate, on average, mentioned concerns about labor or big business in their likes and dislikes about the parties. These attitudes have remained decidedly in favor of the Democrats during that time.

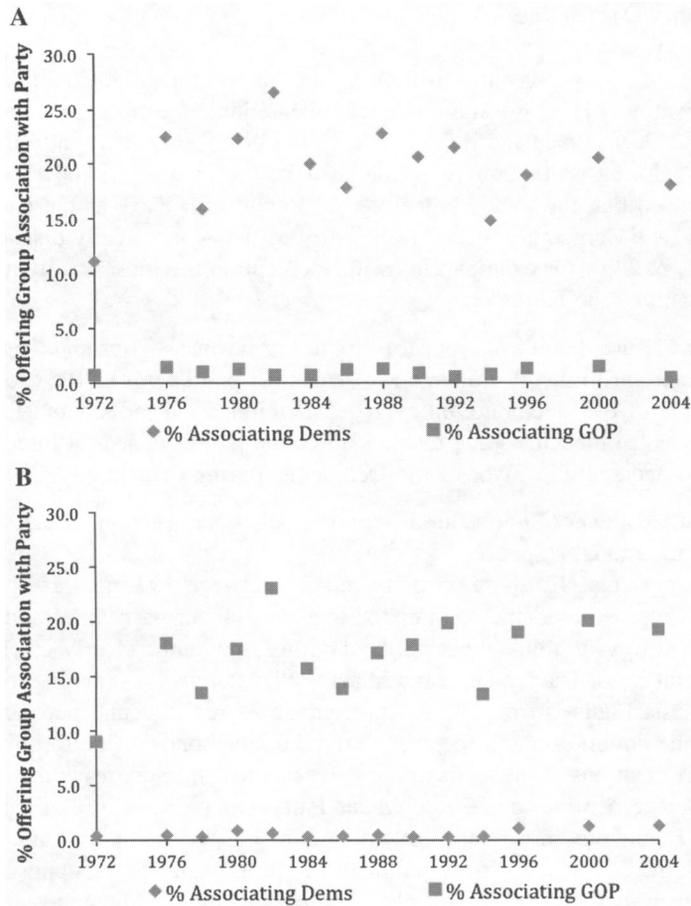
More recently, Brewer (2009) examined party images and found references to social class to be the modal response.

Figure 1 presents NES data on party images between 1972 and 2004. As with previous efforts, we used the open-ended questions about party likes and dislikes. Of the myriad ways to think about political parties, the public clearly gives pride of place to social class. The modal response across likes or dislikes involves references to social class. Figure 1a depicts the percentage of respondents mentioning "the poor" or "the common man" for each party. The diamonds at the top of the time series depict mentions of the Democratic Party whereas the squares at the bottom of the figure depict mentions of the Republican Party. On average, 20% of respondents mentioned Democrats in reference to "the poor" or "the common man" whereas slightly less than 1% did so for Republicans. Figure 1b shows the opposite pattern for "big business" or the "upper class." Once again, the diamonds depict the percentage of mentions for the Democratic Party whereas the squares depict the percentage of mentions for the Republican Party. On average, about half a percent of respondents mentioned the Democrats whereas 17% mentioned Republicans.

If one focuses on the trend in responses in both Fig. 1a, b, especially 2004, there is no evidence to support Frank's argument that the class-based images of the parties have changed. Frank's (2004) prediction that Republicans have supplanted the Democrats as the party of the "common man" or "the poor" is not supported by the data. Indeed, there appears to be little change across years. Furthermore, public perceptions of the GOP as the party of business interests have not waned during this period either.

## Party Images and the "Great Backlash"

Although we find the NES data persuasive, they do not directly tap into the zeitgeist of the "Great Backlash." As found in his criticism of Bartels, Frank (2005) argues that some NES questions (e.g., full employment) do not adequately address the



**Fig. 1** The social class basis of party images. **a** The party of the “common man” or “poor”. **b** The party of “big business,” the “upper class,” or “rich”

phenomenon. In other words, he contends that NES terminology is somewhat removed from the culture war language prevalent in right-wing political discourse. We believe the NES questions from Fig. 1 to have face validity (especially given that they are from open-ended questions), but they probably do not fully capture Frank’s insights about the cultural understandings of class. For this reason, we created our own survey questions to measure perceptions of which party is more sympathetic to the concerns of the common person; that is, more populist. Both questions are from Frank’s (2004, pp. 117–118) discussion of why the GOP is the party of the working class:

1. Thinking about politicians in the two major political parties, which do you think would feel more comfortable having a beer with a truck driver, construction worker, or waitress? (response order randomized)

Democrats  
 Republicans  
 Don't Know

2. Which statement comes closest to your way of thinking about politics?  
 (response order randomized)

The Democrats are the party of the people and the Republicans are the party of the powerful.

The Republicans are the party of the people and the Democrats are the party of the powerful.

Don't Know.

Table 1 presents the distributions on both of these variables, alone and with several demographic and political covariates. On both variables, there is an overwhelming consensus among nearly all segments of American society that Democrats are more likely to share a beer with a working person and that Democrats are for the “people” while the GOP is for the “powerful.” The patterns are highly consistent. In particular, the consistency of three covariates stand out. First, Democrats and liberals are consistently more likely to identify Democrats with populist sentiments than Republicans and conservatives are to identify the GOP as the populist party. Similarly, Republicans and conservatives are significantly more likely to answer “don't know” to each question, rather than identify Democrats with the “people.” Second, in every instance, Independents and moderates see things as the Democrats do, associating the Democratic Party with both populist sentiments. Finally, the results hold across income groups, lending credence to our doubts about the class basis of the GOP surge, as well as across regions, where even in the South<sup>4</sup> Democrats enjoy a populist image.

These two indicators correlate very highly as well ( $r = 0.66$ ). In order to diminish any potential measurement issues associated with a single item, we code the responses from each question  $-1$  to  $+1$  (with DK's at 0), and combine the two variables into an additive index. The resulting variable, *Democratic Populism*, is coded 2 if the respondent identified the Democratic Party on both questions,  $-2$  if they identified the GOP twice, and so forth.<sup>5</sup> The Cronbach's Alpha for this index is .791, above the threshold of acceptability suggesting that the items are, in fact, measuring the same dimension.

We model *Democratic Populism* as a function of four categories of variables. Three of these are selected to specifically test one of the contentions of the Frank (2004) thesis and the Smith (2007) refutation. First and foremost, we test the effects of traditional SES indicators of social class. We operationalize SES with dummy variables created from income and education variables. *Lower Income* and *Upper*

<sup>4</sup> A number of scholars have suggested that any significant change in party image that may have occurred did so in the South. While there is considerable evidence of a Southern realignment, we can find no evidence here that an inversion in the class bases of party images are part of the explanation.

<sup>5</sup> The category zero includes those who answered don't know to both, and those who picked different parties for each question, though respondents with this confusing pattern represent only about 4% of all respondents.

**Table 1** Party images and cultural understandings of class politics

	Question 1			Question 2		
	Democratic Politician more likely to have a beer with working class person (%)	Republican Politician more likely to have a beer with working class person (%)	Don't know (%)	Democrats are the party of the people and Republicans are the party of the powerful (%)	Republicans are the party of the people and Democrats are the party of the powerful (%)	Don't know (%)
All respondents	49	21	30	49	24	27
Income						
Low	51	16	33	46	24	30
Middle	47	22	31	50	22	28
High	49	26	25	47	27	25
Party identification						
Democrat	75	3	22	84	3	13
Republican	23	43	33	10	55	35
Independent	53	16	32	53	16	31
Ideology						
Liberal	77	3	20	89	1	9
Conservative	26	43	31	11	54	34
Moderate	58	11	31	61	11	27
Education						
College degree	54	20	25	59	20	21
No college degree	47	21	31	45	26	30
Region						
South	47	19	34	45	27	27
Non-south	51	22	27	51	22	27

*Note:* Question 1 asked respondents the following question: thinking about politicians in the two major political parties, which do you think would feel more comfortable having a beer with a truck driver, construction worker, or waitress?—Democrat, Republican, Don't Know

Question 2 asked respondents the following question: Which statement comes closest to your way of thinking about politics? 1. "Democrats are the party of the people and Republicans are the party of the powerful" or 2. "Republicans are the party of the people and Democrats are the party of the powerful"

Cell entries are percentages. Some rows may not total 100% due to rounding

*Income* represent two of three income categories, where respondents with household incomes below \$40 K and above \$80 K represent low-income and high-income respondents, respectively. In so doing, middle-income respondents serve as the unexpressed category capturing household incomes in between the top and bottom income segments.<sup>6</sup> We do the same with education, where *High School or Less*

<sup>6</sup> We use these dummy variables to avoid using an irregularly spaced ordinal marker of income. Using that ordinal marker, and correcting it to equal cell ranges, does not change any of the results presented here.

captures respondents with no more than a high school diploma, and *More than College* captures those with advanced and professional degrees, leaving college attendees as the unexpressed category.

The second category of variables includes other economic markers of social class that might not be fully captured by income and education. We examine four specifically. First, *Environment versus Economy* is the respondent's answer to a question about the importance of environmental protection against the importance of jobs and economic growth, identified by Inglehart (1977) and others as a "post-materialist" value and a luxury usually afforded by the well-to-do. Higher values represent a preference for the environment. Second, *Union Membership* captures whether the respondent is or ever has been a unionized worker. Finally, two questions capture support for a *Capital Gains Tax Cut* and a *Minimum Wage Increase*, both signature elements of each party's economic agenda. Each variable is coded such that higher values represent support for the policy. Naturally, we anticipate support for the minimum wage to have a positive effect on the dependent variable and support for a capital gains tax cut to have a negative effect.

A third group of variables represents an effort to identify social markers of class. We have four variables capturing the oft-discussed effect of religion on politics. The *Religiosity Index* captures frequency of prayer and church attendance.<sup>7</sup> *Evangelical* is a dummy variable capturing whether the respondent reports being "born again." *Pro-choice Abortion* is an opinion measure with a four point scale capturing a range of potential legal regimes from a high value for "a woman should always be able" to a low of "abortion should never be permitted." A final variable captures the respondent's belief about whether economic or moral concerns are the appropriate basis for politics.

These variables as a group, and the last one in particular, deserve additional discussion. Among Frank's (2004) claims is that morality has replaced bread and butter issues as the basis of politics for many people, and this change has played a critical role in shaping perceptions of the parties among the working class. We examine this assertion in Table 2. As is readily apparent, across all income groups, partisan identities, ideological groups, regions, and patterns of church attendance, the majority of respondents see politics as focused on economic concerns and not morality issues. Of course, this is not to say that no one feels this way, and we would expect those who feel that morality is the appropriate measure by which to make political choices to strongly favor the GOP. Nevertheless, this preliminary examination suggests that morality has not served as the basis for a substantial revision of partisan perceptions among the working class and is consistent with studies of voting behavior (Ansolabehere et al. 2006; Bartels 2006).

Additional social markers include *Gun Ownership*, personal or a family member's service in the *Military*, and support for *Affirmative Action*. Each of these dummy variables captures dimensions of social experience and contestation that might conceivably reshape how people view the political parties as reflective of their interests. We expect *Gun Ownership* and *Military* to have a negative effect on *Democratic Populism* and *Affirmative Action* to have a positive effect.

<sup>7</sup> The religiosity index is additive, and the Cronbach's alpha is 0.736, above the threshold for acceptability.

**Table 2** Economic or moral issues matter most in politics

	Economic (%)	Morality (%)	Don't Know (%)
All Respondents	75	15	10
Income			
Low	71	16	13
Middle	76	16	8
High	80	14	6
Party identification			
Democrat	87	6	7
Republican	62	26	12
Independent	77	13	10
Ideology			
Liberal	90	5	5
Conservative	61	30	9
Moderate	87	6	7
Education			
College degree	87	8	5
No college degree	71	17	12
Region			
South	72	16	12
Non-south	77	14	9

*Note:* The question asked respondents the following question: which statement comes the closest to your way of thinking about politics?

1. Politics is about economic issues such as jobs, taxes, gas prices, and the minimum wage
2. Politics is about moral issues such as abortion, pornography, and same-sex marriage

Cell Entries are percentages. Some rows may not total 100% due to rounding

The final category of variables includes the usual measures of partisanship and self-reported ideology. We code dummy variables for *Democrats*, *Republicans*, *Liberals*, and *Conservatives*, leaving moderates and Independents as the unexpressed categories. Including these variables could conceivably be critiqued as putting the same variable on both sides of the equals sign, but in analysis not presented, excluding all four has no appreciable effect on the substantive findings we report here. Since their exclusion could raise the critique that the remaining predictors are really just capturing partisanship, we report a model here in which these effects are controlled.

Naturally, we would expect partisans to be more likely to portray their party as the populist advocate, but this is far less true for Republican respondents. Table 3 illustrates the distribution on the dependent variable by party.

It is worth noting that nearly one third of the Republicans answered “don’t know” to both questions, indicating an unwillingness to identify the Democrats as the working class party and, we suspect, a recognition that the GOP isn’t either. Either way, the *Democratic Populism* index is clearly distinct from partisanship variables. We control for party and ideology so to avoid the claim that what the

**Table 3** Index of democratic populism by party ID

Index	Republican	Independent	Democrat
-2	81	31	5
	32.9%	11.4%	2.1%
-1	55	22	4
	22.4%	8.1%	1.7%
0	75	48	18
	30.5%	17.7%	7.6%
1	16	52	44
	6.5%	19.2%	18.5%
2	19	118	167
	7.7%	43.5%	70.2%
Total	246	271	238

Cells report unweighted Ns and column percentages. Percentages may not add to 100 due to rounding error

model is actually predicting is latent partisanship, even though our dependent variable clearly differs from party. By adding in the dummy variables for partisan and ideological identities, we can net these effects out of the dependent variable—to whatever degree they were actually present—and assess the degree to which the remaining predictors are actually associated with populist perceptions of either party.

We also add control variables for *Age*, gender (*Male*), racial and ethnic minority groups, and the region control *South*. In particular, the dummy variable for South is informed by Bartels' (2006) refutation of Frank's (2004) claim regarding large working class white mobilization for the GOP.

The results are presented in Table 4. The clearest result from Table 4 is the failure of conventional SES variables of social class to predict perceptions of populist sentiments about the parties. Neither income nor education appears to have a systematic effect, in large measure, we suspect, because of the relatively modest variance across groups on this dependent variable. Simply put, across income and educational lines, most respondents perceive the Democrats as representatives of the working people. The presence of four additional economic markers of class could be suspected of playing a role in this null result, especially since three of the four are significant predictors. However, excluding these additional economic measures has no effect on the coefficients for socio-economic status, which remain statistically insignificant. Economic attitudes, on the other hand, are significantly related to Democratic populism in a way that is consistent with the belief that Democrats, not Republicans, are the party of the working class. Although *Union Membership* is not statistically significant, *Capital Gains Tax*, *Minimum Wage* and *Environment versus Economy* are significant predictors.

Figure 2 depicts changes in predicted probabilities for the statistically significant predictors while holding constant other variables at their means. The horizontal axis

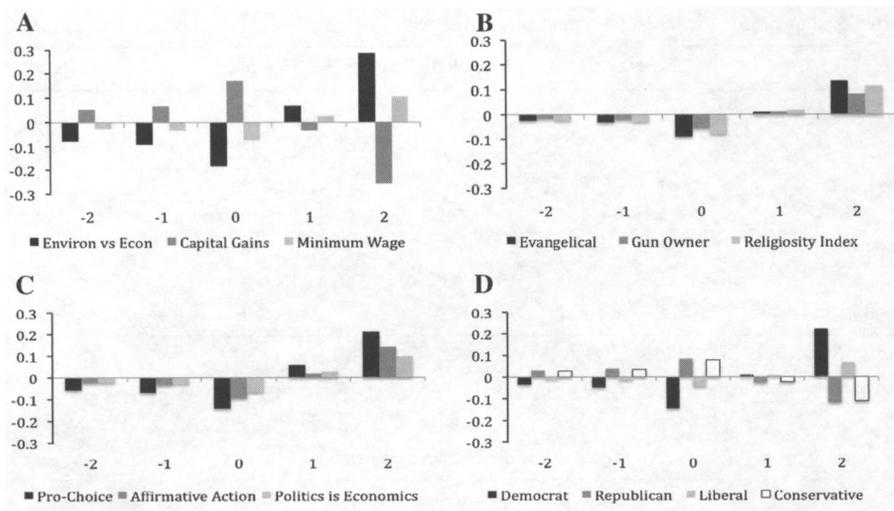
**Table 4** Ordered logit estimates for democratic populism

	Coefficient	SE	$P >  z $
SES indicators of social class			
Lower income	-0.003	0.216	
Upper income	0.001	0.231	
High school or less	-0.445	0.221	
More than college	-0.185	0.241	
Partisanship and ideology			
Democrat	1.002	0.251	***
Republican	-0.604	0.231	**
Liberal	0.306	0.286	
Conservative	-0.559	0.238	*
Economic markers of class			
Environment versus economy	0.373	0.086	***
Capital gains tax cut support	-0.620	0.120	***
Minimum wage increase support	0.269	0.121	*
Union membership	0.092	0.201	
"Values" markers of class			
Religiosity index	0.078	0.048	
Evangelical	0.620	0.236	**
Pro-choice abortion	0.371	0.109	***
Gun owner	0.395	0.195	*
Family/personal military	-0.153	0.200	
Affirmative action support	0.111	0.054	*
Politics is economics not morals	0.249	0.127	*
Demographics			
Age	-0.004	0.007	
Male	0.177	0.208	
African American	0.385	0.414	
Latino	-0.036	0.281	
Asian American	1.143	0.687	†
South	-0.374	0.189	*
Neg log likelihood	-605.43		
LR $\chi^2$	420.8		***
Pseudo $R^2$	0.2579		
$N$	550		

Two tailed significance tests: †  $p \leq .10$ , \*  $p \leq .05$ , \*\*  $p \leq .01$ , \*\*\*  $p \leq .001$

Source: cooperative congressional election study ( Ansolabehere 2006)

corresponds to the range of values of the dependent variable in which higher values correspond to stronger associations of the Democratic Party with populism. Figure 2a shows that support for a *Capital Gains Tax* cut is associated with



**Fig. 2** Changes in predicted probabilities for economic populism. **a** Economic indicators of class. **b** Demographic “values” indicators. **c** Attitudinal “values” indicators. **d** Party identification and ideology. *Note:* positive values of the dependent variable (depicted on the X axis) represent agreement that the Democratic Party is sympathetic to the working class whereas negative values indicate the same for the Republican Party. Changes in predicted probabilities (holding other variables constant at their means) are depicted on the Y axis

approximately a 0.29 decrease in the probability of believing the Democrats to be populist (dependent variable = 1 or 2). Note however that the increase is greater in the “don’t know” category (+0.17) than in the two categories identifying the GOP as the party of the working class (depvar = -1 or -2). By contrast, supporting a *Minimum Wage Increase* increases the probability of seeing the Democrats as populist by 0.13 (dependent variable = 1 or 2).

Though these variables are significantly associated with perceptions of Democratic populism, there is no evidence here that class has somehow inverted. Both of these relationships are highly consistent with conventional understandings of economic interests and class-based politics. If we further examine these relationships, there is evidence to refute both Franks’ (2004) belief in class inversion and Smith’s (2007) claim that the working class has endorsed the GOP economic agenda. Distributions on both variables are presented in Tables 5 and 6. As can be seen, support for cutting the capital gains tax comes primarily from upper and middle income respondents whereas support for raising the minimum wage is high across groups but highest among low income respondents.

Of these alternative measures of economic class, only the assessment of environmental protection against economic concerns shows results consistent with the class inversion claim. As seen in Fig. 2a, respondents favoring the environment are more likely to see the Democrats as the populist party, increasing the probability by 0.41. However, responses to this question did not segment by income group (Chi-square probability = 0.368) but were more or less uniform across class, suggesting

**Table 5** Support for capital gains tax cut by income segments

	Lower	Middle	Upper	Total
Oppose	119 <i>45.08</i>	143 <i>42.06</i>	88 <i>33.85</i>	350 <i>40.51</i>
DK	56 <i>21.21</i>	31 <i>9.12</i>	24 <i>9.23</i>	111 <i>12.85</i>
Support	89 <i>33.71</i>	166 <i>48.82</i>	148 <i>56.92</i>	403 <i>46.64</i>
Total	264	340	260	864

Parson  $X^2(4) = 40.8179$ ; Pr = 0.000

Italicized font numbers are column percentages

**Table 6** Support for increasing minimum wage by income segments

	Lower	Middle	Upper	Total
Oppose	42 <i>15.79</i>	87 <i>25.59</i>	76 <i>29.34</i>	205 <i>23.7</i>
DK	16 <i>6.02</i>	9 <i>2.65</i>	9 <i>3.47</i>	34 <i>3.93</i>
Support	208 <i>78.2</i>	244 <i>71.76</i>	174 <i>67.18</i>	626 <i>72.37</i>
Total	266	340	259	865

Parson  $X^2(4) = 17.7461$ ; Pr = 0.001

Italicized font numbers are column percentages

that even this post-materialist value, the only indicator of “latte liberalism” appearing in the results, is not really reflective of class inversion.<sup>8</sup>

Turning to the “values” indicators, Fig. 2b, c report the effects of religion and other cultural indicators. The *Religiosity Index* is not statistically significant whereas the effect of *Evangelical* identity appears to be positive toward identifying Democrats as closer to the people, increasing the probability by 0.15.<sup>9</sup> This effect

<sup>8</sup> In analysis not presented here, neither split sampling South and non-South respondents, nor using a series of regional interactions on the main explanatory variables, alters our claims. Specifically, ideological and partisan distinctions work as expected in both sub-samples, neither income nor education variables work in each region, and results on both *Capital Gains Tax* and *Environment* versus *Economy* are consistent across both. One distinction worth noting is that *Union Membership* climbs to significance in the expected direction in the South-only analysis, likely a result of the very rare occurrence of unionized workplaces in the South. *Minimum Wage* support falls from significance though the differences between the regions estimated through interaction terms does not reach the conventional level of significance. In short, while the southern realignment is well documented, we find no significantly different pattern of party image and its predictors in the South than in other parts of the country.

<sup>9</sup> Importantly, this effect is not significantly different in the South, nor does it vary when confining the analysis to whites alone. Some have speculated that the Frank hypothesis should only be at work among Anglos, and this may be so, but confining the analysis to whites does not appreciably change our results of interest.

could be assumed to be somewhat confounded by the presence of opinion on *Abortion*, whose effect (illustrated in Fig. 2c) is significant and in a more conventional direction. Pro-choice respondents have a 0.27 increased probability of seeing Democrats as populist, whereas those favoring restrictive abortion laws are 0.13 more likely to see the GOP as close to the people. Importantly, however, multicollinearity is not driving this result, as the two variables correlate at only  $r = -0.36$ . Moreover, exclusion of the *Abortion* variable has no effect on the direction of the effect on *Evangelicals*, though it does become insignificant.

This result, we believe, offers insights to the role religion is playing in partisan identity and behavior. While there is no question that opposition to abortion increases support and affective attachment to the GOP, our results suggest that controlling for the abortion debate, those self-identifying as “born-again” are actually more likely to see the Democrats as the people’s party. Furthermore, the effect of *Evangelicals* remains statistically different from zero and positive even if *Abortion* is removed from the model.

Beliefs about whether politics are about economic issues or moral questions—the effect of which is illustrated in Fig. 2c—appear to trend as we would expect, but we again caution that the vast majority of all cohorts believe politics are not about morality, and the effects estimated in the predicted probabilities are among the least notable. *Gun Ownership*, illustrated in Fig. 2b, is marginally significant and positively related to identifying the Democrats as the populist party, increasing the probability by 0.10, a somewhat surprising result but perhaps explained by the presence of another control variable capturing the regional distinctiveness of the *South*.<sup>10</sup> Fig. 2c also shows support for *Affirmative Action* is clearly associated with populist views of Democrats, increasing the probability of picking the Democrats by 0.16, a result that is robust given our controls for both gender and racial and ethnic sub-populations.

Figure 2d reports results from partisan and ideological measures. Not surprisingly, the party and ideology variables work exactly as we expected, with the exception of *Liberals*, who appear no more likely than moderates to see the Democrats in this light. Gender, race, military service, and other demographics have no effect. Taken together, it appears that party identification, ideology, and some political attitudes affect perceptions of the parties but they do not reach beyond politics in the way that Frank (2004) and other backlash authors contend. Thus, respondents who are already favorably disposed toward Republicans because of “culture war” issues are likely to view the GOP as the party of the common person, but few others hold this view.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup> In the split sample analysis previously mentioned, this positive effect on gun ownership disappears in a South-only analysis.

<sup>11</sup> Another potential concern is whether the pattern hypothesized by Frank would be best observed among the politically attentive. Our results, then, could have been undermined by their absence among those less interested in the political process. We are skeptical of the possibility that the most attentive members of the electorate have bought this line of rhetoric, and in results not presented here, we find that confining the analysis to just those who report being very interested in politics does not change the central findings of the paper—we observe no evidence of class inversion in party image, even among this more attentive group.

## Conclusion

We examined the argument that the Republican Party has replaced the Democratic Party as the political party representative of the American “common man”—the party of the people, if you will. Following the rich literature on party images, we did not find evidence that the class-based images of the parties have changed over time. Furthermore, based on caricatures of the parties taken directly from Frank’s influential book, *What’s the Matter with Kansas?*, our own questions about economic populism we also found little evidence for the argument that the mass public, the working class, or religious conservatives have followed the lead of conservative elites in agreeing that Republicans have become champions of the “common folk”. Indeed, the only groups that appear to hold this view of the GOP are Republican Party identifiers and conservatives. But even among these groups, we see a lot of hesitancy. In contrast to Democrats and liberals, Republicans and conservatives are as likely as Independents and ideological moderates to offer a “don’t know” response.

We do not disagree with Frank (2004) that conservatives have made strong attempts to alter the meaning of class in America in order to position the Republican Party as the party of the people. Indeed, all one needs to do is listen to conservative talking heads to hear criticisms being made of an effete liberal elite who are trying to impose their secular, un-American values on hard-working, morally upright, ordinary Americans. But as mentioned, the framing of party images, like all issue framing, does not happen automatically. Instead, people consciously and deliberately think about frames and will likely reject them if they run counter to a person’s predispositions or if they are communicated by a noncredible source (Druckman 2001).

Moreover, perhaps Frank (2004) and many of us that carefully pay attention to all things political are forgetting that most people simply don’t follow politics. Gelman et al. (2007) argue that reporters and the pundit class, like everyone, are susceptible to biases such as Tversky and Kahneman’s (1974) availability heuristic; a heuristic wherein remembered experiences rather than statistical rules inform judgment. After witnessing repeated Democratic Party losses, especially in poorer red states, and hearing an earful of conservative radio and television programming, it is not surprising that an astute observer of American politics such as Frank would conclude that Republicans have fundamentally changed the meaning of class and party politics.

There are two primary objections to our conclusions. First, the questions from our survey using Frank’s terminology only appeared during the 2006 election, an election year that ushered in Democratic Party control of the House of Representatives and the U.S. Senate. Although this is a limitation of our research, the argument made by backlash authors is that party images had undergone a fundamental transformation. Since Frank (2004) was writing about the 2004 election, it seems unlikely that the type of transformation he is explaining could be undone in two years. Party images do change, but as Carmines and Stimson (1989) demonstrate these types of changes happen over the long-term. Furthermore, the NES data depicted in Fig. 1 suggest that the relative position of party images, at least with respect to economic populism, did not change during this time. Although the NES questions are different from the questions we wrote about economic populism, they nonetheless seem to capture much of the same impressions about parties.

Yet, and secondly, there remains the obvious observation that the Democrats have lost a lot of elections in recent decades. There are idiosyncratic reasons for losing elections. For example, national security played a pivotal role in 2004, an issue that clearly advantaged Republicans. Furthermore, although the Democrats lost the 2000 presidential election, Al Gore won the popular vote. Nevertheless, the empirical regularity of Republican success, running on non-majoritarian economic messages, requires some explaining.

There is little doubt that social conservatism has played a role in some of these losses. It is important to point out, then, that we are not dismissing the importance of social issues and religious identity to recent election outcomes (see Brewer and Stonecash 2007). Furthermore, our data show that after controlling for party identification and ideology, respondents who take conservative positions on “culture war” issues such as abortion and affirmative action are less likely to view the Democrats as the party of the ordinary American, common man, or working class. This result suggests that these types of issues appeal to individuals who are already receptive to the Republican Party, but even for many of these respondents they appear to move to the don’t know category rather than hold the view that the Republicans are the party of the common person. Thus, social conservatism might be *directly* shaping the political preferences of some, but it is not happening indirectly by inverting party image and class identity.

And therein lies the central implication of our findings. Rather than running away from economic populism, Democratic candidates and their party may be better served embracing this image. Although there is evidence that voters lie between the two parties on economic issues (Gelman and Cai 2008), our findings suggest that Democratic candidates might be well served by stressing how they are the party of the working class “common” people.

It is possible, of course, that continued efforts at inculcating this message of class inversion by high-profile political and media personalities—Fox News, Sarah Palin, and the like—could eventually find traction in parts of the working class or “common people.” It may have, in fact, modified views at the margin. But three decades after Ronald Reagan hopped on his horse, two decades after George H.W. Bush highlighted his fondness for pork rinds, six years after George W. Bush bought his ranch, and decades of a growing conservative media presence, our data show little movement in the core identification of the economic beneficiaries of the two parties and little evidence that the Democrats identification with the vulnerable in the society has fallen victim to a purported fondness for Volvos or NPR among some of its adherents.

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