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Walking the Line: The White Working Class and the Economic Consequences of Morality

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Abstract

Over one-third of the white working class in America vote for Republicans. Some scholars argue that these voters support Republican economic policies, while others argue that these voters' preferences on cultural and moral issues override their economic preferences. We draw on in-depth interviews with 120 white working-class voters to defend a broadly "economic" interpretation: for this segment of voters, moral and cultural appeals have an economic dimension, because these voters believe certain moral behaviors will help them prosper economically. Even the very word "conservative" is understood as referencing not respect for tradition generally, but avoidance of debt and excessive consumption specifically. For many respondents, the need to focus on morality and personal responsibility as a means of prospering economically—what we call "walking the line"—accords with the rhetoric they associate with Republicans. Deindustrialization may have heightened the appeal of this rhetoric.

Keywords

white working class, voting behavior, political sociology, working-class Republicanism, class and voting

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One-third to one-half of the American white working-class vote Republican, and this is true whether one defines working class by income, education, a combination of the two, or subjective self-identification. This voting behavior has been stable for several decades, as Figure 1 shows: In many presidential elections over the last several decades almost two-thirds of the white working class have favored the Republicans.

Because many observers see Republican economic policies as directly benefiting the wealthy rather than the working class, this voting behavior contradicts dominant theories of political science and political sociology, from Downsian median voter theories to Marxist expectations of class voting. The concern is not simply a contemporary one. A long tradition in the social sciences has examined why working-class voters do not reliably vote for parties of the left that support redistributive measures that would directly benefit the working class.[1]

Recently a large literature has arisen attempting to explain Republican voting among working-class voters, all of it based on survey data such as the National Election Studies, the General Social Survey, or the Pew Values Survey. Much of the debate is over the question of whether white working-class identification with Republicans has *increased* over the last several decades. Findings on this very basic question yield no consensus.[2]

Our concern is different. We do not examine changes in Republican voting over time. Rather, we examine the phenomenon that one-third to one-half of white working-class voters have voted for Republicans decade after decade. In a famous paper, Larry Bartels dismisses the idea that white working-class voters have moved to the Republicans, but he notes, "none of my analysis implies that working-class cultural conservatives do not exist, or that their views are politically inconsequential."[3] Even if the defection to the Republicans has been overstated, we should not dismiss the importance of the white working-class, because if a third or more of white working-class voters are voting for the party that seems to be against their economic interests, there remains something to examine.

Two opposing explanations can be found in the literature on working-class support for Republicans. Some scholars argue that cultural factors explain it. First made in 1970 by Scammon and Wattenberg,[4] this argument was more recently popularized by Thomas Frank in *What's the Matter with Kansas?*,[5] which suggests that issues such as abortion and gay marriage lead these voters to vote against their own economic interests. Scholars continue to find support for this argument, as well as for the argument that racial concerns explain this voting behavior. Shafer and Spady use the Pew Value Surveys to show that between 1984 and 2009 the importance of cultural values to voting increased dramatically.[6] Brint and Abrutyn find that moral traditionalism is a strong predictor of conservative attitudes and Republican identification among evangelical voters.[7] McAdam traces partisan polarization to the success of the civil rights movement.[8] Others see a more nuanced picture and argue that issues such as race and abortion were more important in the 1970s but became less so afterward.[9]

Other scholars categorically deny the role of culture, arguing that it is "directly contradicted by a large and growing body of survey and historical evidence" that shows that voters are more likely to name the economy as the most important problem, that

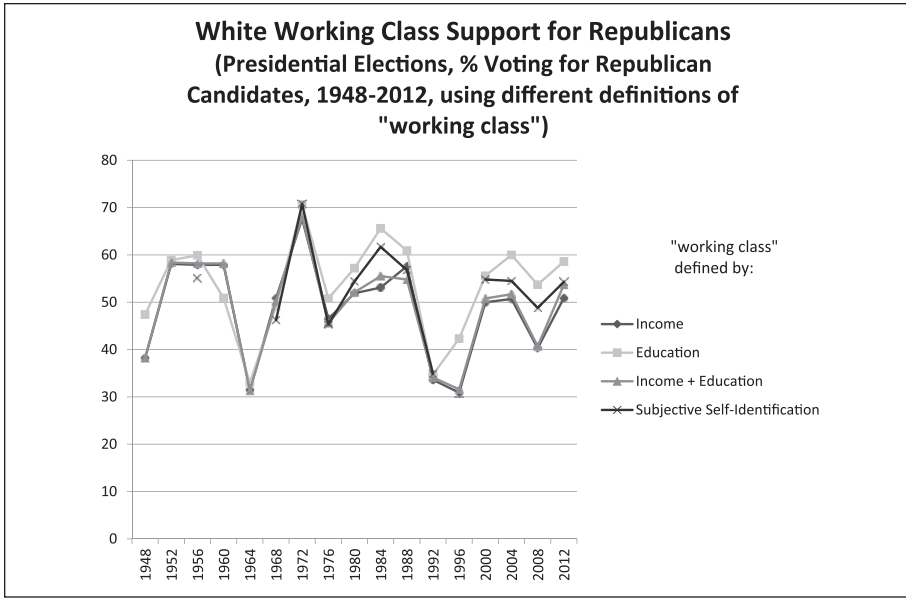

Figure 1. White Working-Class Support for Republicans in Presidential Elections 1948–2012. ***Source:*** National Election Studies, SDA Archive; online at sda.berkeley.edu. Income: less than 33 percentile (1948–2004), less than $35,000 (2008, 2012). Education: less than a BA. Subjective self-identification: working class.

party platforms are more oriented to economic issues today, and that it is higher-income voters who have become more concerned with values.[10] Brooks and Manza find that unskilled workers' attraction to the Republican Party can best be explained by "higher levels of economic satisfaction under Republican administrations (and particularly high levels of *dissatisfaction* in 1980 under a Democratic President) coupled with declining support for the welfare state."[11] They note that this response by the "working-class cuts against an expectation . . . that the growing immiseration of the working-class in postindustrial societies will by itself eventually compel them to support liberal or left political alternatives,"[12] a theme we return to below. Kenworthy, Barringer, Duerr, and Schneider make a compelling case that white working-class voters lost confidence in the ability of the Democrats to manage the economy in the 1970s, because of "perceived stagnation or decline in material well-being among working-class whites during the late 1970s—a period in which the Democrats held the presidency and both houses of Congress."[13] And white working-class voters may well have gained confidence in the ability of the Republicans to manage the economy in the 1980s, which witnessed improvements in inflation, unemployment, and the interest rate.

The morals/culture explanation and the economics explanation are not the only two positions in the debate. An influential strand suggests that white working-class voters who vote for Republicans are simply misinformed, or actively misled by elites.[14] We do not take up this idea here because, although misinformation of voters and persuasion by

elites can certainly be observed in politics, systematic studies find misinformation across the political spectrum.[15] And as Nicholson and Segura show, working-class voters still see Democrats as the party of the people.[16] (Other authors have given yet other explanations for Republican voting among the working class,[17] but none of these has so far managed to generate widespread agreement).

Even restricting our attention to the debate between morals/culture and economics, however, consensus has been elusive. Part of the reason is lack of clarity about how to define the working class (by income, education, occupation, or subjective self-definition?). Different measures yield different results. Another reason is the familiar problem in quantitative scholarship of determining which control variables properly belong in the model (gender, rural geography, family formation patterns?) and which do not. There is also a question of the proper scale of analysis (individual, county, or state level?).

However, an even more fundamental reason for the current stalemate may be the exclusive focus on survey data in the scholarship to date. We may be reaching the limits of what it is possible to glean on this question through intensive analysis of a few large data sets based on short and formalized survey questions. As Brady, Sosnaud, and Frenk note of their own work, their quantitative methods cannot actually explain the pattern they find: "Perhaps one needs to join survey research with intensive interviews, focus groups, experiments and other methods to fully understand the politics of the White working class."[18]

We take up this call to move beyond quantitative analysis of survey data. Despite the sustained interest in this question, there is currently no tradition of qualitative analysis of the voting behavior of the white working class. There is a large qualitative literature on the white working class in general.[19] But those studies do not explicitly focus on political affiliations and voting behavior, analyzing instead broader issues such as the subjective experience of being working class[20] or the transition to adulthood.[21] Thus, despite a great deal of interest, there is a curious absence of in-depth qualitative research on white working-class voting patterns.

We draw on a set of interviews conducted with 120 white working-class voters to present an explanation of white working-class voting behavior that we have not seen in the literature. Our argument is that moral and cultural appeals do matter to these voters, but these appeals have an economic dimension: voters believe that these moral behaviors are the ones that will help them prosper economically. We call adhering to certain moral behaviors in order to prosper economically "walking the line." As we will show below, the survey-based nature of the scholarship has hidden the extent to which moral and cultural beliefs and economic beliefs are complementary for working-class voters. Qualitative interviews reveal why beliefs that help respondents economically have been *misunderstood* to be referencing morality and culture.

Our interpretation is grounded theoretically in a strand of literature that mediates the debate between economics and culture. The economics arguments see a one-shot translation of economic interests onto political behavior. Kenworthy, Barringer, Duerr, and Schneider argue, for example, that Reagan's platform of minimal government intervention appealed because "First, it was simple. Second, it provided a greater-good justification for the tax cuts that many working-class whites desired on material

self-interest grounds." And when the economy improved in the 1980s, "The fact that these improvements occurred under a conservative Republican administration may have reinforced the skepticism some working-class whites developed during the late 1970s about the Democrats' superiority with respect to the performance of the economy. The Reagan administration also reduced taxes—not by much for most working-class Americans, but perhaps enough to generate additional support among those increasingly inclined to see no difference between the parties in terms of their ability to deliver the goods on material issues." [22]

In this understanding, what draws working-class voters is short-term economic self-interest, such as direct tax benefits. The appeal is crassly materialistic, to the extent that the authors call the "greater-good" rationale of the economic program a mere "justification" for benefits that were "desired on material self-interest grounds."

On the other hand, cultural arguments, influenced by semiotic theories that see the relationship between a sign and the object it signifies as essentially arbitrary,[23] reject this notion of action as driven by practical or economic ends. Older cultural theories see action as driven by group identity or loyalty to historical norms, while more recent work argues that cultural values result from needs to create status distinctions or symbolic boundaries between in-groups and out-groups. For example, Michèle Lamont remarks on the central place of morality in the lives of working men and argues that a focus on morals allows working-class men to feel as if they are on top of the status hierarchy.[24] Jennifer Sherman writes about the prevalence of social distinctions based on issues of morality within a rural working-class community and claims: "morality's power lies in its ability to create and sustain these types of social divisions. It is for this reason that morality is often the most potent and visible in situations where few other types of social distinctions exist."[25]

This theoretical perspective about symbolic boundaries and status distinctions has been highly influential in sociology recently, perhaps because it is not clear exactly how to argue against it. Any system of morality will draw lines indicating that some behaviors are moral and some are not, and so it always seems possible to assert that these moral distinctions are driven by the need to create boundaries. Many scholars claim to have proven the point by simply describing the distinctions. We argue that for the symbolic boundaries argument to have any real meaning, the symbolic boundaries must not be derived from or epiphenomenal to economic concerns. The power of the cultural explanation is that it suggests that where no economic reasons exist for drawing distinctions, distinctions will nevertheless be drawn. To the extent that economic reasons *do* exist for drawing distinctions, this explanation is therefore weakened.

We argue below that clear practical and economic reasons exist for the moral distinctions that our respondents give. But although we side with the economic interpretation, our interpretation does not depend on the kind of short-term trading of votes for economic gain that Kenworthy and colleagues envisage. Rather, we draw on the work of Kristin Luker to develop a broader understanding of action that is oriented toward material gain.[26] Luker examines the debate between pro-choice and pro-life abortion activists, and notes that pro-life activists are generally poorer and less well-educated than pro-choice activists. It would seem to be in the short-term economic interests of

poorer and less well educated women to support the right to abortion, since unanticipated pregnancies can severely damage life chances. But Luker argues that precisely these women are drawn to the pro-life position, because it supports a broad conception of motherhood that is ultimately in their own practical, economic interest:

> Having made a commitment to the traditional female roles of wife, mother, and homemaker, pro-life women are limited in those kinds of resources—education, class status, recent occupational experience—they would need to compete in what has traditionally been the male sphere, namely, the paid labor force. . . . In consequence, anything that supports a traditional division of labor into male and female worlds is, broadly speaking, in the interests of pro-life women because that is where their resources lie.[27]

Luker develops an understanding of economically motivated behavior that is broader than a one-shot exchange of money for votes, and we draw on this broader understanding. We argue that our respondents work to sustain a worldview and lifestyle that they see as in their general economic interest, and specific issues and behaviors become implicated in that worldview and lifestyle. This worldview and lifestyle are often articulated in the *discourse* of morality. But this discourse is neither arbitrary, nor driven only by the need to create social status distinctions. Rather, the discourse—and the behavior it reflects—are aimed at very practical economic goals. We differ from Luker in one important respect: whereas Luker sees her respondents actively choosing to commit themselves to traditional roles, we are not certain how much choice there is for our respondents. Most of them do not seem to us to actively choose or prefer lower-income status. We attempt to show below that certain strategies and behaviors emerge from this social location as an attempt to improve life chances, and then become articulated in the discourse of morality.

Data and Methods

We conducted a series of interviews in a town that we call "Pleasant Park," a deindustrializing Midwestern town with a predominantly white (over 95 percent in the last census), semiskilled population. Approximately 12 percent of the adult Pleasant Park population have bachelor's or graduate degrees, and the median household income is about two-thirds of the national median. Pleasant Park is in the Midwestern agrarian belt and continues to sustain an agricultural workforce involved in growing corn, soybeans, and wheat, but its location at the crossroads of two important local thoroughfares allows it to sustain a base of light industry as well. After World War II several large companies opened factories in construction, metal works, and paper products, and at one point over 10 percent of the town's population were employed at the same large plant, which came up often in our interviews and which we call "Tibco."[28]

In more recent decades Pleasant Park, like much of America and the advanced industrial world, has seen a steep decline in the proportion of its labor force involved in manufacturing.[29] The Tibco plant closed in the 1990s, a victim of the automation of its central process, and in the eight years that we have been studying Pleasant Park its

manufacturing base has eroded further as large factories that produced automotive parts and household products have also shut their doors. Although unemployment in Pleasant Park is not unusually high according to official statistics, the jobs currently available are much less well compensated and regular than the factory jobs that have disappeared. Our respondents speculated about the future of the town; some pointed to wind farms as a possible savior, others anticipated a return to Pleasant Park's agricultural days, others foresaw a largely empty bedroom community.

This excerpt from one of our interviews gives a glimpse into how Tibco workers experienced the closing of the plant:

> Larry Reed: Yeah. That was a big secret. That was one of the best-kept secrets. Things were slowing down.
> MP: Oh really? Nobody knew?
> Larry Reed: Nobody knew it and uh when the [company that bought the plant] closed the plant, they came in and there was four people in the plant and management had knew what was going down. They were closing other plants too, but anyway, uh, one of a friend of mine, was a foreman, said they called us in about twenty minutes before the end of the shift, which was when they told everybody. And told us we had a meeting with the foreman. Then they had a mass meeting of the two shifts, which uh president of the company had a, did a recording and told people what was going on, and they handed out people their packets. These people come in and done it. They had a whole security force that came in and everything. And you left, you left. That was it. Just walked out the door.
> MP: You mean that they told you like, that day?
> Larry Reed: They told them at the end of that afternoon, at three o'clock!
> MP: And they had to go.
> Larry Reed: They were gone, yeah.
> MP: So—
> Larry Reed: A few people got invited back to do—
> MP: You got two hours' notice that you lost your job?
> Larry Reed: No they got about twenty minutes' notice.

The trauma of those twenty minutes had long-lasting repercussions throughout the town, as we will see below.

Pleasant Park's political history is a mixture of several different historical legacies. Many families have been Republican since the time of Abraham Lincoln. Other respondents benefited from Franklin Roosevelt's agricultural programs and their families have remained Democratic out of loyalty. The town's manufacturing past also brought unions, and some respondents remain Democratic because of those affiliations. And like much of the country, many Pleasant Park Democrats turned Republican because of Ronald Reagan. Today, the town is predominantly Republican but with a substantial minority of Democrats.

Thus, Pleasant Park is a town with both an agrarian and industrial economic base, and like many such towns it has witnessed deindustrialization. These factors make it

broadly representative of many recent trends that have been cited in the literature on the political behavior of white working-class voters.

We conducted surveys and interviews of Pleasant Park respondents in 2004, 2008, and 2012 during the weeks immediately preceding the presidential election. In each year, we first sent surveys to a random sample of registered voters in Pleasant Park. In 2004 our response rate was 25.4 percent,[30] in 2008 it was 33.3 percent, and in 2012 it was 37.5 percent. Across these three presidential years we also conducted a total of 155 interviews (of which thirty-three were repeat interviews) with 122 survey respondents who were willing to be interviewed. One hundred twenty of the respondents were white,[31] and these are the interviews we draw on in this paper. Interviews were conducted by all three authors, designated by their initials in the excerpts. Interviews were conducted either at the respondent's residence or in nearby public locations, and lasted between forty-five minutes and two hours. Complete transcripts of interviews from all three years are available on the lead author's website. In the narrative that follows all proper names are pseudonyms, including the names of businesses, to preserve anonymity.

Findings: Morality as Economics

For many of our respondents, the main appeal of certain aspects of conservative morality is that they lead to economic success. This is a long-term strategy rather than a one-shot attempt at realizing economic benefit, and therefore requires a sustained attempt at maintaining a certain kind of life. Moreover, these practical goals are held so passionately and sincerely that they are often *articulated* using moral terminology. But the end remains a practical economic one.

The Meaning of Conservative

Our first piece of evidence for the link that respondents draw between conservatism and the kinds of behaviors that allow families to survive and thrive is what our respondents see as the meaning of the word "conservative." Many of our respondents directly associate the word "conservative" with being frugal with money:

> Betsy Collins: As I said, you know, I believe in, I'm conservative. We are conservative people. . . . Especially, being rural, because you don't know if you're gonna have a good year or a bad year, so. If you have a good year you've gotta save because the next year Mother Nature can throw you a hammer and you're like. So, you're naturally gonna lean more conservative. . . . In our occupation you're gonna learn to save.

In addition to beliefs about spending and saving, our respondents equated "conservative" with a particular orientation toward debt:

> MP: Um, and in terms of being liberal or conservative, if one end of the line is being very liberal and the other end of the line is being very conservative, where would you fall?

Helen Newman: Conservative. Not clear at end, but, well I was raised in that era too. Conservative era. I was telling my kids the other day, you know, kids get sooo in debt today, but I said I lived in the time that they thought they needed a new refrigerator, they saved the money and bought it! If they needed a new car they saved the money and bought it! The only thing they charged was a house! And that was for the big down payment! Not today, that I've saw. I'm more of a conservative.
MP: What does being conservative mean to you?
Helen Newman: Mm. That's about it, I think.

To Helen, an emphasis on staying out of debt is the *only* thing that conservative means. Barbara O'Brien gives a similar definition:

MP: And what does conservative mean to you?
Barbara O'Brien: To me, it means being practical with money, saving money if you can't afford to buy something you wait until you save money to do so, you stay out of debt as much as possible.

Rather than invoking conservative behaviors such as avoiding divorce or premarital sex, or issues of conservative morality such as gay marriage, abortion, or stem cell research, Barbara equates the word conservative with a certain approach to money. Later in the interview the respondent talks about her youngest daughter's illness, and her own separation and divorce. That led to the following elaboration of why staying out of debt is so important:

MP: So what about, do you think these experiences that you told me about, you know your youngest daughter and the separation and some other things, do you think they changed how you saw things or affected your values in any way?
Barbara O'Brien: I probably realized that how lucky I was that I didn't, or that we [ex-husband's name] my ex, and I didn't believe in going into debt and anything like that because that way there wasn't, one of us wasn't hung with a big debt or something like that and same way with [current husband] and I, we don't believe in going into debt because one or the other would be hung with it eventually.
MP: So that's been an important thing about not going into debt?
Barbara O'Brien: Debt, yes. Probably one of our most important things is to pay our way as we go.

Barbara has a strongly held and practical reason for being "conservative"—in her eyes, going into debt would have made her life more difficult.

A similar definition of conservative is seen more humorously in this excerpt:

SH: I'm gonna draw two lines like this. One, one on the left side of the line. For the first one would be, I am, um, extremely liberal and the other is I am extremely conservative. Where would you place yourself?
Laura Schultz: Here.

SH: On the very end?
Laura Schultz: Very end.
SH: Okay. So, on the very end of the "I-am-extremely-conservative" part.
Laura's Husband: That don't hold true when it's Christmas shopping time.
Sh: [Laughs] All right. I'm not gonna touch that.
Laura Schultz: [Laughs]
Laura's Husband: You just wait, but, until you get a, you got kids?
SH: I do. [Laughs]
Laura's Husband: Alright! You're getting there!
SH: [Laughs] Um. Uhh… Now another—
Laura Schultz: My kids don't matter. It's the grandkids now.

The joke in this exchange rests on the notion that a true "conservative" is painstakingly frugal around material goods. The exchange is spontaneous, automatically invoked by the mere word "conservative." It reveals how Laura and her husband think about conservatism in an everyday context. This exchange also makes the important point that our respondents do not always live up to their beliefs about the desirability of consuming less.

In general parlance, conservative is understood to refer to a stance favoring traditional attitudes and behavior, and opposing social change. Among our respondents, this definition was entirely overshadowed by the references to saving and spending. Even where the standard understanding of conservative was invoked, it was often followed by a reference to money, as in this excerpt from a very young respondent who lives with his father:

MP: So what do you understand by, you said your father is very conservative.
Bradley Sharpe: Yeah, well, say I go out, go hang out with my friends, and whatever, he wants me home at a specific time. And I'm like okay, I don't know what time I'm going to be done, you know, whenever the party or whatever gets done with. But, I, he's a real penny-pincher. So he, he'll try and buy the cheapest things. And, I don't know. It's really different with him. And uh, I don't know, he, um, as you can see uh, there's nothing really in the house that isn't, hasn't really been made by him or me. Or some. You see that little mirror thing, he made that. He made the table in there. He made the fireplace. Yeah.

Bradley's initial response accords with the notion of conservative as adhering to strict rules. But the second response focuses on conservative as someone who is a "penny-pincher," someone who buys "the cheapest things" or avoids purchases entirely by making household items. This description evokes an ascetic, rule-based lifestyle that is a key feature of what we are calling "walking the line." Bradley's complaints about his father also show us that a "walking the line" orientation is an ongoing and in some cases fraught social accomplishment rather than a foregone conclusion.[32]

The rhetoric of responsible living with regard to spending and borrowing is resonant even for respondents who fail to live up to conservative teachings in other ways.

SH: Is there any single, or set of lessons that you think you learned from your father or your mother that influenced how you see the world now?
Janice Swanson: Pay your bills. That's—and be honest. . . . .and my daughter is the same way. She is very careful with money. So I think that's really important no matter who you are, whether that's Republican, Democrat, or whatever. Don't pay, don't borrow things that you can't pay for.
SH: So that sounds like it's a big issue for you.
Janice Swanson: It is a big issue with me.

Particularly notable about Janice is that she did not live what by many criteria would be a traditional "conservative" life, as she had two children with a man who was married to someone else. She considers whether single women with children should get married, and responds:

> Having a father is not going to make—if you can't be happy—if I don't feel like I'm going to be happy with a person, why should I get married to them just for the sake of getting married? So that just kind of goes through my whole life.

But when explaining why she prefers Republicans, Janice says: "You know, I think there's good and bad but I don't, I guess, I guess I like order. I want things done the right way." This might seem to be a contradiction, as Janice is not leading her life in "the right way" as defined by most of those around her with regard to marriage. But to her, there is no contradiction, because the most important dimension of doing things "the right way" involves economic issues like being "careful with money." In Janice's estimation, doing things the "right way" does not include marrying a man "just for the sake of getting married." There are other reasons why Janice votes Republican, but a key value for her is avoiding debt.

The next exchange, with Kevin Atkins, shows why this focus on being careful with money is so important for this population. Kevin defines himself as conservative, and also mentions his parents:

MP: Were they also very conservative?
Kevin Atkins: Yeah. Yeah, they, yeah [Laughs]. I was just sitting here thinking about 'em. Yeah, they were always conservative, they didn't buy anything unless they could afford it. You know, and they couldn't always afford it, they put it off, or they would buy a lesser, you know. They wanted a new car, well they couldn't afford a new car so they bought a used car.

Kevin remembers his parents' conservatism with affection and amusement. And he explains what happens to those who do not behave in that way:

Kevin Atkins: I saw some of our childhood neighbors that, you know, they have hard times cause they would spend and spend, and all a sudden they got nothing left-over and then, you know, you see 'em lose their house and things like that. . . . And, I mean I saw that as far back as when I was in high school, so. Didn't want, I didn't think that was a good way to go.

For Kevin, not being conservative is a sure way to get in trouble in life.

In sum, for many of our respondents conservatism refers first and foremost to a particular orientation toward material goods: that one should avoid debt and conspicuous consumption. While they do articulate these attitudes in moral terms, they also give clear practical and economic reasons for these beliefs, because getting into debt is a sure way to wreck one's life chances. By trying to behave in "conservative" ways, such as trying to avoid debt, our respondents are implementing a broader strategy for success in life that avoids impulse satisfaction and instant gratification. Their working definition of conservatism focuses on the importance of a lifestyle that avoids the trappings of debt and conspicuous consumption.

Translating Beliefs to Politics

The understanding of conservatism as referencing an attitude toward material goods is translated into politics in several ways. The most direct is that our respondents transfer their strong beliefs that *individuals* should not spend so much and should not borrow so much onto the political sphere: they argue that, similarly, *governments* should not spend so much and should not borrow.

KB: I'd like you to describe the main values you think Democrats and Republicans stand for so I'll just ask you about Democrats first, what values do you think they stand for?

John Harris: You want me to be nice, dontchya?

KB: You can say whatever you want, I'd rather you be frank with me, you know, what you really think.

John Harris: Well, Democrats are liberal. I'm conservative so that has a bearing on my thinking. I was always taught if you don't have the dollar, you don't buy. Look at the trillions that our government is in debt, our nation, and they continue to spend, spend, spend.

John applies his individual-level belief that "if you don't have the dollar, you don't buy" to the proper behavior of the government.

Keynesian economists argue that while saving more and spending less might be a reasonable strategy for an individual or household, during times of economic crisis it can be self-defeating for an economy, because in the broader economy one person's spending is another person's paycheck. While a high savings rate facilitates investment in normal economic times, it may actually worsen a recession if it exacerbates a tendency of individuals to forego consumption during crisis.

The idea that consumption is good for the economy has pervaded American culture in many ways, but we found no appreciation in our population for this line of thinking when it extends to the question of taking on debt. Rather, our respondents draw a simple analogy between a household budget and the national budget:

> KB: So, what do you think are the most important issues this election?
> Marilyn Wolfe: The economy.
> KB: Uh-huh.
> Marilyn Wolfe: It sucks! . . . You know, if I run my bank account the way this government runs its budget, you know what would happen to us? We would all go to jail!

Similarly, a member of the local county and township boards explained that this was exactly her philosophy of governing:

> Peg Hines: You take it very seriously, or should anyway. . . . When you're spending your people's tax money, umm, you run your own personal business or your finances and you certainly don't run in the deficit . . . And I still hold on to the fact that for government, big government, small government, should be the same way. . . . You have so many dollars that needs to go so many places and there's a lot of good causes out there. . . . But it can't go to all of them.

Our respondents' direct analogy between the government's budget and a household's budget yields a simple solution to the problem of government debt: spend less than you take in. That government does not abide by this simple principle suggests to our respondents that politicians are in the grip of the ideology of "spend, spend, spend," which they identify as a "liberal" ideology that is clearly opposed to their own beliefs about good financial practices.

Another way our respondents' sensibilities around conservatism are translated into politics involves Republican appeals to personal morality. Government programs (seen to be supported by Democrats) are criticized for *enabling* excessive consumer spending, and for allowing people to avoid the strict, conservative lifestyle that leads to success. Consider how Theresa Parker veers from a discussion of rising rates of free lunch, which she interprets as the consequence of a breakdown in family values, to candidate Mitt Romney:

> Theresa Parker: I live in a town that when we moved here, 10 percent of the school district was free or reduced lunch. And that was, it was almost an unheard of thing. This last year, [Pleasant Park] is now almost 70 percent free or reduced lunch.
> KB: Really?
> Theresa Parker: They don't believe in, I'm living in a town now where the culture is, I don't have to do it. Y'know, there are four and five generations now that have never had a job . . . . We have lost family values. . . . And last night Romney made a comment and it was just one o' those, I don't even know what they were talking about, because I was kind of doing two other things at the same time.

KB: Sure, sure.

Theresa Parker: And I had it on the TV in the kitchen and in here, but, and I'm not even sure it was a sound clip I heard after when they were rehashing the stuff. He said, y'know, it would be a good idea today for parents to teach their children that it's best to get, to finish school before you have children, and to get married before you have children. And I thought, wow, I haven't heard anybody say that in a long time.

It cannot literally be the case that so many families exist in Pleasant Park in which "four and five generations . . . never had a job," as Theresa's own reference to the dramatic rise in free lunch suggests that this is a recent phenomenon. Theresa is aware of the influence of Tibco's closing on the town; indeed, later in the interview she states, "Up into the eighties, [the town] was fantastic. In the late eighties, Tibco, which was the biggest corporation here, sold out. And from that day on, Pleasant Park went down because eventually this plant was closed. And we lost, well we probably lost four hundred jobs." But Theresa does not draw a connection between the rise of free and reduced lunch and the decline of well-compensated jobs and the rise of poorly compensated jobs since the 1980s. Instead she blames it on "four and five generations that have never had a job." This brings her to family values, which brings her to Mitt Romney, whose words pierce through her busy and harried life and resonate exactly with her thoughts.

Free and reduced lunch was a sore point for several respondents, particularly teachers, and it allows a simple tie between individual consumption behavior and government policies:

Stephanie Ingram: You know that we watch our pennies and the, we don't have the big ol' plasma TV, and being, again being teachers, when you're in the school district and you're watching these kids and you know that they're on free and reduced lunch . . . walking in with shoes that cost more than, you know, your whole outfit. That kind of, just watching it, again and that's where it's disappointing to know that I have friends who are Democrats who are just supporting that.

This respondent equates, and condemns, the behavioral characteristics of free lunch students, *and* the government programs that encourage this behavior, for which she blames the Democrats.

Thus, conservatism as a worldview and lifestyle that privileges staying out of debt, and saving over spending, leads to voting for Republicans because of beliefs that excessive spending is as bad for governments as individuals, and because it leads to condemnation of government programs for enabling excessive spending. Failures to walk the line at both governmental and individual level are associated with Democrats, and walking the line that keeps one debt and trouble-free is associated with Republicans.

Deindustrialization and Morality

To round out this analysis, we discuss in more detail the family life of one of our subjects, Evelyn Wells. Evelyn's case encapsulates what we have been referring to as walking the line—behaving in conservative ways in order to enhance one's long-term economic position. Her case also elaborates how deindustrialization may actually heighten working-class identification with the Republican Party. And a detailed discussion of her case allows us to assess more carefully whether our respondents' arguments about conservatism can be seen as reflecting a need to create status distinctions and symbolic boundaries.

We suggested above that the cultural argument is most powerful if the distinctions that are drawn are not derived from practical or economic concerns. Evelyn does draw boundaries indicating what kind of behavior is moral and what kind of behavior is not. She describes a kind of morality play happening within her family, in which one daughter, Rebecca, is good at walking the line, and the other daughter, Susan, is not. But she has very practical economic reasons for drawing these boundaries:

> Evelyn Wells: I have two daughters, one grandson that I have raised since he was three. He is now sixteen years old and such a good boy gets straight A's and B's and is just a good person.
>
> SH: Why did you raise him, he lived with you?
>
> Evelyn Wells: He has lived here since he was three. I have custody. His mother was hooked on drugs and alcohol and still is. Thirteen years I have been dealing with her. She is a very gorgeous girl if you want to turn around and look at her [indicating a photograph]. My younger daughter has been married for two years and they both have their master's degree and work with computers at [an insurance company]. No children, very happily married.

Later, Evelyn says:

> Evelyn Wells: I am a worker. I have always worked two jobs. I have never been on unemployment or Medicaid. I have always worked. If I can't take care of my family then you know . . . . my dad is like that too. He had that one job all of his life. He never had another job. My daughter Rebecca is kind of like me. And my poor daughter Susan. She went to college, she worked for two years at Tibco, good girl, got good certificates and then they closed the plant and 300 people lost their jobs there and then she went downhill.

Evelyn then relates her ambivalence about the Medicaid program her daughter has enrolled in. The program allows Susan to attend drug and rehabilitation centers, which Evelyn supports. However, Evelyn also believes that her daughter's Medicaid subsidies enable her to live off the government. Evelyn states, "she is bipolar but there is no reason that if she takes her medication that she can't work."

> SH: If she was not on Medicaid could she afford her medication?

Evelyn Wells: Uhm, yes. If she worked. She has no other bills. I mean she lives with a guy up in Chicago . . . . she is doing better right now. For three months she has been a good girl. If she got a job, she has a beautician's license. I sent her to beauty school which cost me $15,000. She got to where she was trading a haircut for a joint. Trading a haircut for some pills. And then I just closed up her shop because I couldn't afford it anymore.

Evelyn goes on to reflect on how she is raising her grandson:

Evelyn Wells: But with Ross not having a mom or a dad and only me, I try to replace love with material things. He has got his drum set, his Xbox, PlayStation, Wii, recliner, his big TV.

SH: And you say that with a little bit of guilt.

Evelyn Wells: Yeah, I do feel guilty because I don't know if he is going to go off to college and expect all this because and I have told him, he knows that I have replaced love with material things and I have explained that to him. The teachers tell me he is one of the nicest students they have. He takes into consideration the students and teachers and he is nicely mannered. He has never had a detention as a junior in high school, so I think I did something right raising him. Of course both of my girls were good students and Susan's classmates just can't believe how she has turned out. So that is it with Ross, he is a very good boy.

SH: So I think you mentioned that your daughter was working at Tibco and she lost her job and that was a turning point for her. Was it just the job loss and not knowing what to do from there? What do you attribute to what happened?

Evelyn Wells: It was the job loss and then I sent her right to beauty school to get her license and then she moved in with a guy who did drugs and it was downhill from there. He didn't hold a gun to her head, it was her choice but I finally stepped in and took Ross because at three in the morning she was driving with her drunk and on cocaine. The cops stopped her, took him, and took her. . . . And I don't want him to hate his mom, which he does tell me he hates her. I say honey you don't. You hate the stuff she does. Because, you know, I am not going to be here forever. . . . I don't want him to think that he can go out in the world and do what he wants and be taken care of by the government like his mom. He knows that she is getting the [name of public aid program], the public aid. I don't think he likes that because his Aunt Rebecca, whom he idolizes, he goes and stays with her once a month for the weekend and hangs out with her and Steve. They work hard for what they got.

Evelyn blames Susan for the spiral that engulfed Susan's life after the job loss at Tibco, and for being willing to accept public aid rather than "working[ing] hard for what they got" like Rebecca. While public aid may be in Susan's short-term economic interest, Evelyn believes that it is undermining the character traits that would lead to Susan's long-term economic welfare. And while deindustrialization can be said to have kicked off the downward trajectory of Susan's life, Evelyn does not blame

deindustrialization or larger structural forces. Instead she understands Susan's life as a case of individual failure, because the counterfactual of Rebecca convinces her that it is still possible, despite deindustrialization or other factors, to make a good living by working hard.

In Evelyn's telling, we can also see Ross, the grandson, starting to learn how to walk the line:

> Evelyn Wells: I don't keep any alcohol in the refrigerator because that upsets Ross. Michael [Evelyn's current husband] will go turkey hunting, in fact he leaves next week for two weeks, and sometimes he will bring back some beers that are left over from the turkey hunt and the first thing Ross will say if he sees it, we hide it in the refrigerator in the garage. He does not like it. It reminds him of his mom. So I don't really look for him to be an alcoholic or pot smoker.

The white working class in America has always prided itself on working hard, but the sudden loss of manufacturing jobs over the last three decades has intensified the moral drama around the issue of being a good worker and a responsible citizen. It is impossible to know how Ross's mother's life might have unfolded if she had not lost her factory job. But the spiral the job loss triggered has overshadowed Ross's childhood, and the lesson he is drawing is not one of deindustrialization or the loss of well-compensated jobs. Instead, it is a lesson about the importance of working hard and staying in school like Aunt Rebecca, "whom he idolizes," and separating himself—physically and symbolically—from his mother and her life choices. Evelyn suggests that Ross has started to compare the statements of the two political parties and look for the one whose rhetoric best matches the most important lessons he is drawing in his young life: "he knows the difference between the Democrats' side per se of giving stuff away free and the Republicans trying to be a little more, and he knows Obama and Romney, of course they discuss it now in school like you wouldn't believe."

Evelyn's case suggests that deindustrialization, rather than generating a coalition in favor of new industrial policies, may create voters anxious about their jobs and responsive to rhetoric about the significant personal efforts such voters make to get and keep jobs.

Finally, although Evelyn and Ross are certainly drawing symbolic boundaries between Rebecca and Susan, these boundaries are not independent of economic concerns. Evelyn's and Ross's lives and difficulties have given them clear practical and economic reasons for the moral boundaries that they draw.

Conclusion

We have shown (1) that our respondents identify the word "conservative" with attitudes toward saving and spending, specifically, avoiding debt and conspicuous consumption; (2) that they translate this set of beliefs into votes for Republicans; and (3) that they have practical and economic reasons for the moral boundaries they draw. We therefore argue that for many of our respondents, Republican voting is part of a larger

strategy of trying to prosper economically by learning, incorporating, and displaying the attributes that they believe lead to economic success, including avoiding excessive spending and debt. When good jobs are scarce, behaviors that are seen as helping in the competition for good jobs and economic success become more salient for working-class voters, and these voters are drawn to politicians who explicitly discuss such behaviors. This may be a more durable feature of the working class, helping to answer the perennial question of why working-class voters do not always vote for working-class parties. Or it may be a specific response to difficult economic times, in which personal behaviors become highly salient in the increasingly desperate quest for jobs and prosperity.

Our explanation, which shows how respondents' economic experiences lead them to favor particular political appeals, emphasizes the social bases of certain patterns of discourse, and sees these discourses as arising from the voters' economic circumstances. Our explanation is compatible with certain other explanations for white working-class voting behavior (e.g., thoses that emphasize the institutional context or race) but in direct contradiction to "cultural values" explanations.

The strength of walking the line rhetoric is reinforced by Pleasant Park's institutional context. The Democratic Party is poorly resourced and organized in Pleasant Park, and unions are declining along with the city's industrial base. In the absence of unions and a strong Democratic Party, no institutions systematically offer alternative interpretations to our respondents. Their suspicions of conspicuous consumption, for example, would seem to resonate with progressive critiques of excessive capitalist consumption. But they are not systematically channeled in that direction, leaving voters to draw their own links between what they understand as "conservatism" and the political field before them. Moreover, in the absence of any institutional context for the development of an understanding of alternatives, respondents such as Evelyn Wells draw conclusions from the individual comparisons in front of them, such as the one between Rebecca and Susan, rather than consider the larger question of what policies might bring back well-compensated jobs. In the absence of strong and competing political institutions offering alternative interpretations, our respondents' grassroots understanding of "conservatism" favors the party that worries about excessive spending. Of course, the reason the Democrats are reluctant to invest heavily in areas like Pleasant Park is they do not see it as worth the effort given these voters' resistance; and what the party registers as voters' resistance may be precisely the dynamic we have identified here, in which difficult economic circumstances heighten the appeal of the rhetoric of personal responsibility. Thus, we think institutional explanations can reinforce our explanation of the social basis of the rhetorical appeal, but cannot provide a complete alternative to our social explanation.

Do our respondents' comments on the need for discipline and self-regulation, or on government subsidizing the consumption habits of the irresponsible, have a racial dimension? We did find racial prejudice among our population, and so that possibility cannot be excluded outright. But although racial issues may strengthen the appeal of the discourse of walking the line, the story of Evelyn and her grandson Ross suggests that this discourse exists as an attempt to discipline themselves as much as a means of

creating boundaries against others. Understanding the walking the line discourse as analytically distinct from racial discourse also helps explain phenomena such as the several weeks during the Republican primaries of 2012 and 2016 when black candidates Herman Cain and Ben Carson—both of whom powerfully incarnated walking the line themes of hard work leading to success in their personal biographies—held front-runner status.

Thus, institutional explanations for white working-class voting behavior that point to the decline of unions, and explanations that highlight the importance of race to conservative voting, can be combined with our analysis, but should be kept analytically distinct from it.

However, there is one argument that our perspective directly challenges: the argument that cultural or social issues are driving white working-class voting behavior. Armed with our perspective, it is possible to reinterpret the scholarship arguing that moral and cultural factors have weighed most heavily for this group of voters. For example, Jennifer Sherman emphasizes morals in her study of a white working-class rural community, but a walking the line perspective suggests these voters' hostility to Democrats can be explained by the simple fact that environmental regulations have destroyed their livelihoods in the timber industry.[33]

Or consider Shafer and Spady's work, which measures cultural values by measuring agreement with the following questions:

> 1. Women should resume their traditional role in society. 2. Peace is best assured through diplomacy/military strength. 3. Police should be allowed to search known drug dealers without a warrant. 4. Dangerous books should be banned from public school libraries. 5. Public school boards should be allowed to fire homosexual teachers.[34]

With the understanding of walking the line that we have developed above, it is possible to see at least two of the five elements that make up the measure as referencing economic rather than moral issues: single-parent families are more likely to be poor, and some of our respondents may therefore conclude that traditional families are the way to greater prosperity; and it is not hard to imagine why Evelyn Wells would agree strongly with question three. Question two does not seem to be about moral or cultural values at all, but rather foreign policy. The other two items do reference culture, but it is not clear that a measure based on those two items alone would yield the greater prominence for cultural values that Shafer and Spady find when they use all five measures together.

Similarly, Brint and Abrutyn find moral traditionalism to be an important variable in explaining conservative and Republican identification. They measure moral traditionalism as agreement with the statements "People should not adjust their moral views to a changing world," "Newer lifestyles are causing societal breakdown," and "Society should not be more tolerant of different moral standards." [35]

But all three statements may indicate economic concerns for our respondents, such as Theresa Parker's fixation on free and reduced lunch. She clearly sees Romney's message that "it would be a good idea today for parents to teach their children that it's

best to get, to finish school before you have children, and to get married before you have children" as leading to a life in which one does not have to depend on free or reduced lunch in school. If the "changing world" and "newer lifestyles" and "different moral standards" are about tolerating people who have children before finishing school and getting married, she disapproves of them because of the economic consequences of these actions.

Of course, she may *also* disapprove of "newer lifestyles" for moral reasons. But that is exactly our point: Theresa does not draw the sharp distinction between moral issues and economic issues that scholarship on this question draws. Her worldview is that *redistributive policies undermine the character traits that help people prosper in the long run*. When Republican candidates appeal to the white working class with a rhetoric of personal responsibility, they are not merely appealing to their fears, their paternalism, or their suspicion of change. They are also appealing to our respondents' firmly grounded sense of how best to ensure their own and their families' economic well-being. The Republican rhetoric of personal responsibility has tremendous salience in our respondents' lives not because it is an arbitrary cultural construct or simply a means of creating status distinctions but because our respondents think it works for them in practical ways, including yielding better economic outcomes. Our respondents demonstrate a pragmatic and utilitarian relationship to moral behaviors, seeing them as a practical guide to thriving in this life, rather than a set of rules oriented to the other world.

The walking the line discourse seems to us to reveal real distress among the American white working class, and we have shown that our respondents have their reasons for adhering to it. It may help to explain contemporary political dynamics, such as why working-class voters are so hostile to immigrants who might take good jobs, supportive of businesspeople running for political office on the strength of their business acumen, or appreciative of tax cuts that show up immediately in their paychecks.

But is walking the line an *effective* strategy in terms of improving our respondents' life chances? It would be glib to dismiss our respondents' focus on personal responsibility as false consciousness. They focus on individual-level factors such as personal responsibility and ignore the larger structural issues, such as deindustrialization, that may also be at work. But as sociologists have recently taught us, the kind of asceticism that our respondents aspire to is also a hallmark of the upper middle class, in which parents strive to ensure that their children are working hard, filling free time with enriching extracurricular activities and steering them away from the temptations of drugs and alcohol.[36] In an unforgiving socioeconomic context where youthful mistakes can have lifelong consequences, it is premature to dismiss our respondents' preoccupation with personal behavior as a mechanism for mobility. On the other hand, it is important to note that although our respondents hold these beliefs about debt and consumption, we have no evidence that their actual behavior with regard to debt and consumption differs substantially from that of the general population.

Walking the line is not the only possible response to deindustrialization. Respondents could engage in collective action to demand political solutions. But in a situation in which the social democratic institutions of the mid-twentieth century are under threat all over the world, the decision to abstain from collective action, and to identify one's

success with economic growth and the capitalist system instead, is understandable and rational. This is especially so because it is possible to see and compare the outcomes of those who do and do not walk the line (like Rebecca and Susan), whereas it is not possible to easily see and compare the outcomes of participating in or abstaining from collective action. In the limited comparison that Evelyn makes between Rebecca and Susan, she is correct: walking the line did lead to better economic outcomes for Rebecca.

One question that arises is why working-class African American and Hispanic voters do not show similar behaviors of voting for Republicans as part of a strategy of economic mobility. Republican policies and rhetoric on race may simply make voting Republican impossible for most nonwhite voters, even if they do believe in the importance of personal responsibility for economic mobility. Or the phenomenon of walking the line may be stronger in rural communities than urban ones. For example, Sherman argues that the respect of neighbors and the community is more important to survival in rural than in urban contexts.[37]

Our qualitative method has limitations. First, because we used an inductive strategy of data collection, we are not able to ascertain systematically exactly how many of our respondents adopt this definition of conservatism as essentially about spending less and avoiding debt. We did not enter this study aiming to explore this question—indeed, it would have been impossible to, as we are aware of *no* prior scholarship that suggests this point—and therefore we did not ask the question systematically of all respondents. The phenomenon only emerged over the course of a long sequence of data collection, as interviewers organically followed the conversation and eventually became aware of the unusual (to us) definition of "conservative" that our respondents were giving. Nevertheless, that so many of our respondents give avoiding debt as the *first or only* thing that "conservative" means suggests we have uncovered an important element of white working-class political sociology that has not been noticed in the scholarship.

The second limitation of our study is that we are not able to ascertain how widespread the phenomenon of walking the line is. It may be restricted to the Midwest, or to towns that have at least some agrarian base. The disadvantage of an in-depth analysis is that it does not allow us to generalize.

Our qualitative analysis has furthered our understanding of white working-class voting behavior by identifying a rationale for Republican voting that could not have been identified through quantitative sources alone, but scholars should now build on our insights to see how widely they can be generalized, should investigate the historical origins of this understanding of "conservatism," and should explore more rigorously how much variance in voting behavior is associated with this pattern of thinking.

Our interviews resonate with previous literature on the white working class that focuses on morality as an issue of great concern among this demographic.[38] But we show that morality has economic consequences. Moreover, "morality" here does not mean the kinds of issues that commentators of politics normally focus on, such as abortion and gay marriage. Although those issues did elicit some concern among our interviewees, the overriding "moral" concern was the moral drama around being a

good worker and behaving responsibly with one's finances—behaviors that our respondents believe will help them survive in an environment that has become increasingly hostile for working-class citizens.

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