AN EAC REPORT

The Left's Coalition Crisis: Understanding the Massive Divide Between Working Class and College Educated Voters, and How to Bridge It

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RESEARCH FOR IMPACT

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

> *"Politics involves genuine relationships with people who are genuinely other people, not tasks set out for our redemption or objects for our philanthropy."*
>
> - Bernard Crick

Is there a single change that could simultaneously protect democracy, spur progress on climate change, protect abortion rights, and build support for a sane immigration policy? Yes: for the left to develop the cultural competence to bridge the diploma divide between college grads and voters without degrees. Doing so requires the savvy to:

- First, consistently embrace a populism that decries a rigged economy where hard work fails to yield a stable middle-class life; and
- Second, rigorously avoid reinforcing right populism's narrative that liberal college grads look down on Americans without college degrees.[1]

Accomplishing these steps will require a cultural shift among liberal college grads, who need to understand how the logic of their lives differs from that of working-class Americans.

This report aims to help the left develop class competence. We report on the results of the Class Gaps Poll, which compares the political attitudes of working-class people with those of the liberal college grads who hold outsized sway over the progressive agenda and imagination. If progressives want to build working-class support, they need to connect with people whose top priorities are paychecks, prices, and personal safety. It's not just about winning elections, as crucial as that is when democracy is under attack. It's about understanding that people need a sense of personal and economic security before they will support the changes progressives are calling for.

The far right's success stems from its ability to mine working-class values in the service of a powerful anti-elitist narrative that weaponizes:

- the tension between elites' pride in being global citizens vs. working-class loyalty to country and community into fights over immigration, climate change, and patriotism;

- the tension between elites' focus on self-expression and personal fulfillment vs. working-class people's focus on self-discipline and personal responsibility, which gets channeled into fights over abortion, LGBTQ+ rights, and redistribution;
- the tension between elites' "sophistication" vs. working-class traditionalism into culture wars over trans rights, religion, and gender roles;
- the tension between elites' sense that personal security is a given and working-class people's sense that security is a priority into fights about border control, gun control, and police misconduct;
- the resentment working-class people feel against elites into fights over regulation, taxation, and other issues.

The path past far-right populism is to change each of these dynamics.

The Class Gaps Poll found that aligning policy priorities, and messaging with working-class values can dramatically increase working-class support for progressive goals. This will require changing messaging, policy priorities ("tactics"), or both; we call this "reframing." Class-competent reframing can have dramatic results in building cross-class support. But it will require college-educated liberals to cede some power to connect with working-class people. The key isn't centrism. It's class competence—the ability to understand that upper-middle class language and values that make perfect sense in the context of upper-middle-class lives—often fail to resonate with the working class. Building a coalition doesn't mean ignoring the cherished values of college-educated progressives any more than it means ignoring the values of working-class Americans. It means building coalitions between the two groups, which will require acting on the insight that other people are, truly, other people. This report has six sections.

Section 1. Respect working-class priorities: if you want to defend democracy, prioritize economic and personal security issues

- **Defense of democracy** is college-educated liberals' second highest priority but it's only 19th for working-class people. Working-class support for a defense-of-democracy message stayed stubbornly at about 50%; it's above 90% for college-educated liberals.
- **Economic security is the highest working-class priority.** Ten out of the top 12 working-class priorities were economic. Working-class people were 16.1 points more likely to prioritize economic issues than college-educated liberals. Non-elites of every racial group prioritize economic issues more than same-race elites.[2] What's more,

there's a surprisingly wide range of progressive economic policies that receive overwhelming support across class.

- **"Affordability" alert.** While economic issues are a high priority for college-educated liberals, they focus chiefly on costs. Working-class people do, too, but they also focus on the other side of the "affordability" equation: jobs, wages, and working conditions. There's a potentially powerful cross-class coalition in the making around economics: the precarity that has long infected working-class life is increasing for younger college grads—and AI will only make things worse.
- **Personal security is higher priority for working-class respondents than college grads in every racial group.** When listing priorities, the three largest gaps all concerned personal security. Compared with college-educated liberals, working-class respondents prioritized securing the border by 28.3 points, lowering the crime rate by 21.8 points, and adding more police by 19.3 points. This pattern holds across racial and ethnic groups, though it is less pronounced among Latino and Black respondents.

Section 2. Replace a politics of scorn with genuine cross-class respect

- **Liberal college grads live in a class bubble where virtually everyone agrees.** Many climate and culture-war issues receive near-universal support from liberal college grads. These "Identity Issues" shape what it means to be a college-educated liberal.
- **Working-class people don't share that consensus.** "Wedge Issues" (the five issues with the largest class gaps, where liberal college grads run 20+ points more supportive) include defense of democracy (+40 points), LGBTQ+ rights (+32 points), immigration (+32 points), climate (+29 points), and abortion rights (+26 points).
- **Abandon the "politics of scorn."** The conjunction of Identity Issues and Wedge Issues encourages liberal college grads to treat those who disagree with them as morally deficient rather than persuadable—which just strengthens right populism's "elites are looking down on you" narrative.

Section 3: Reframe to resonate with working-class values

- **Largest effects.** Class-competent reframing increased support for universal childcare by 27.8 points, climate change action by nearly 24 points, trans girls on sports teams by 23 points, and a path to citizenship for immigrants by 22 points.

- **Widespread effects.** Reframing substantially increased support for progressive policies in six issue areas: the care economy, climate change, LGBTQ+ rights, abortion rights, public safety, and immigration. We found minimal increases from reframing on defense of democracy and gun policy.

Section 4. Understand how working-class values reflect working-class lives

- **Deep loyalty to community and country** reflect working-class people's reliance on family and neighbors for things elites typically buy (like childcare)—and that being American is one of the few high-status categories they inhabit.
- **The high value placed on self-discipline** reflects what's needed to succeed in blue-, pink-, and routine white-collar jobs that require workers to get to work, on time, every day, without an "attitude"; self-development often isn't on offer.
- **The military, religion, and traditional family and gender roles are all highly valued** both as aids to self-discipline and as sources of social honor unmoored to one's place in the capitalist pecking order.
- **Personal security is not taken for granted;** working-class people often see the world as threatening because, for them, it often is.
- **Resentment of experts** reflects chafing against a college-educated elite that controls working-class lives.

Section 5. Reframe issues to tap working-class values, which increased support for:

- **Accountability for police misconduct** from 53% to 82%
- **Childcare** from 55% to 83%
- **Trans girls on sports teams** from 20% to 43%
- **A path to citizenship for immigrants** from 48% to 70%
- **Climate change initiatives** from 59% to 76%
- **Abortion rights** from 50% to 61%

To achieve these results, liberal college grads will need to cede some power in the interest of building cross-class coalitions. All reframings that increased working-class support changed messaging; many changed tactics, too.

Section 6. Recognize how class interacts with race

- **The class gap exists for each racial group, but the size differs.** It's much larger for whites (30 points) than Latinos (19 points) and African Americans (12 points).
- **The smaller class gap among Latinos** reflects that working-class (particularly foreign-born) Latinos are somewhat more progressive than working-class whites on culture and climate issues.
- **The smaller class gap among African Americans** reflects two factors: 1) Black liberal elites are more conservative than their white counterparts; and 2) working-class Black people are more progressive than their white counterparts.

Introduction

In country after country, the group that has veered far right is middle-status voters worried about their economic prospects: precarity, not poverty, drives far-right populism.[3] That's why we focus on the middle 50% of Americans whose incomes range from roughly $40,000 to $100,000. They have lived through decades of deindustrialization, the offshoring of stable manufacturing jobs, and the hollowing out of once-thriving communities across the Rust Belt and beyond—leaving many in households that earn enough to get by but face real uncertainty about whether the next generation will do as well as the last. Labor's share of productivity has fallen to its lowest on record: 54.2%, down from 70% in 1947, and many working-class Americans just don't see a viable path to the American dream.[4] Most Americans are playing by the rules—budgeting responsibly, providing for their children's futures, paying their taxes, giving back to their communities. But they're losing ground in a rigged economy and corrupt political process. Frustrations over these issues combine with a sense that cultural and political elites neither understand nor respect their lives, fueling the far right.[5] The Class Gaps Poll compares these "Middle 50%" or "working-class" Americans with college-educated Americans who vote or lean Democrat and have an income in the top 25% ("liberal college grad" or "college-educated liberals.")

In the United States, the path forward from authoritarian drift requires consistently winning more working-class votes because the math heavily favors the party that wins working-class voters. Noncollege voters made up 62% of the national electorate in 2024 (according to data from Catalist), and their share is even higher in key states that decide elections. According to data from the Cooperative Election Study (CES), noncollege voters were 65% of voters in Michigan and Wisconsin, 62% in Pennsylvania, 64% in Arizona, and 63% in Georgia. The working-class share of the electorate is 24 percentage points larger than that of college-educated voters (62% vs. 38%), and there is little indication that turnout rates among upper-middle-class and upper-class voters are likely to rise fast enough to compensate for working-class losses anytime soon. Moreover, the Electoral College, the Senate, and the geography of congressional districts all give disproportionate power to states and regions with large working-class electorates. Without expanding their current share of the working-class vote, the odds are slim of building a sustainable coalition capable of rolling back the threat of

authoritarianism. The left needs more working-class voters, so they need to learn how to reach them.

The right connects with working-class voters by turning every issue into a culture war: "Whenever you're in a jam, trick [liberals] into a cultural fight," joked a conservative strategist. This culture-wars pivot triggers liberal dismay, followed by condescension and moral opprobrium toward voters who disagree with liberals on culture and climate issues—which hands the far right a powerful tool they use to appeal to more working-class voters. The same culture-wars playbook has worked for Republicans since the 1970s. This report lays out how to beat it.

When the left's lack of class competence is mistaken for a defect in working-class voters, it's self-defeating. While working-class voters are less progressive than college-educated liberals on many culture and climate issues,[6] they have become increasingly progressive on most of these issues over time,[7] and in this report we show there's no reason why progressives can't connect with working-class people when their approach is grounded in respect, the right policy priorities, and messaging that speaks to values working-class voters already hold.

> **I'm not elite!** Many college grads think of the truly wealthy as elites and see themselves as middle class. Yet upper-middle-class college grads are seen as elites by lower-middle-class Americans (think: a mechanic married to a bookkeeper). Because liberals see themselves as champions of the oppressed, acknowledging class privilege can trigger identity threat, which occurs when a cherished identity is threatened. One of us (Joan) spent the last decade as a DEI trainer, so we're well aware that acknowledging privilege is a heavy lift. But, as many learned during the racial reckoning, it's possible to move from denial of privilege to acknowledge it—and then get curious about how others' lives differ from your own.

The "politics of purity" has been much criticized, and for good reason. Research shows that making a political issue into a moral one impedes compromise to accommodate divergent interests.[8] And yet… politics is *about* values, so insisting that *either* side abandon its values won't work if we hope to hold both together in a single coalition. The problem arises when class-parochial values of college-educated liberals drive a purity politics that alienates large chunks of the working class—when insisting on your own values while denigrating those of others becomes an exercise of class privilege.

A key finding of this report is that college-educated liberals live in a class bubble where virtually everyone agrees with them on culture and climate issues—but working-class people don't. This makes it very difficult for liberal college grads to see that their views reflect a particular class position, and that people who are situated elsewhere in the class hierarchy will typically hold different positions on issues that college-educated liberals care about deeply. The key to getting outside elites' bubble is data.

For data, we turn to polling. It's obviously important in electoral politics; it's also relevant for social justice advocates. They won't—and shouldn't—invariably embrace the most popular policies, because often advocates' goal is to widen the "Overton window," so reforms that once seemed unthinkable become first thinkable, then achievable. Yet social movements still need an evidence-based approach that allows them to build popular majorities for the causes they embrace. Particularly important is the data to assess when advocates are so out of sync with public opinion they risk hurting the causes they seek to help. It's sad to say, but support for both LGBTQ+ rights and climate initiatives has fallen in recent years.[9] Class competence can help turn that around.

Research Base

The foundation for our analysis is a new survey, the Class Gaps Poll, which was conducted between January 29 and February 17, 2026 and fielded by Verasight, the results of which are described and analyzed here for the first time.[10] We crafted this survey to explore class gaps and compare common messaging with new class-competent reframings. As a proxy for the middle-status voters who've veered far right, we use noncollege grads with household incomes in the middle 50%. As a proxy for upper-middle-class, college-educated liberals, we use college grads who are or lean Democrat and have household earnings in the top 25%.

To further validate and contextualize the findings of the Class Gaps Poll, we conducted what we believe is the most comprehensive review available to date of polls documenting class differences on the economic, environmental, and social issues that form the core of progressive activism in the United States. This review includes a deep dive into the three major long-standing longitudinal surveys most commonly used by political scientists: the Cooperative Election Survey, the American National Election Survey, and the General Social Survey. In addition, we use data from other commonly used, reputable, nonpartisan surveys that include class breakdowns on specific issues. (See online appendix).

To explain *why* values differ so much by social class, we draw on a range of literature from sociology, anthropology, and political science. The key is to understand that class is not only expressed through economics, but also as a social identity expressed through cultural differences in values, tastes, and everyday experience. Our approach draws upon Jared Abbott's work with the Center for Working Class Politics and Joan C. Williams's *Outclassed: How the Left Lost the Working Class and How to Win Them Back*.

Because our goal is to help build coalitions that are multiracial as well as cross-class, our Class Gaps Poll oversampled people of color to better understand how the experience of class differs by race.[2] Creating coalitions shouldn't entail selling out one's deepest commitments, including antiracism. It's important to pinpoint which group of working-class Americans progressives can hope to persuade.

Racism is one of the strongest predictors of voting for the far right, but that doesn't mean all far-right voters are motivated chiefly by race and racism. A 2017 report documents that roughly 40% of 2016 Trump voters held progressive economic views, but they were divided into two groups with very different attitudes toward race. About 20% were "American Preservationists": being white and Christian was central to their identity, and they had cold feelings toward people of color and immigrants. Progressives can't appeal to these voters nor would it be strategic for them to try. But a second group, about 19% of Trump voters, were "Anti-Elites," whose feelings toward people of color didn't differ much from those of non-Trump voters; they were more open to progressive views on some key culture and climate issues. Winning even a modest percentage of Anti-Elites could help to create a sustainable coalition capable of delivering on progressive ideals.

Roadmap

Section 1 documents that working-class priorities differ dramatically from those of college-educated liberals. To counter far-right populism effectively, the left must center economics and security, which are key working-class priorities. Defense of democracy isn't.

On hot-button culture and climate issues, the path forward entails several steps. The first is to stop reinforcing right populism's "elites are looking down on you" script. Section 2 documents that college-educated liberals live in a class bubble where virtually everyone agrees on culture and climate issues—but working-class Americans don't. This engenders a politics of scorn that fuels the far right.

Section 3 shows how working-class support for progressive culture and climate policies can be sharply increased. The key isn't "centrism," it's class competence: reframing culture and climate issues in ways that resonate with working-class values by changing messaging, or tactics, or both. The next step is to understand *why* working-class values differ from those of college-educated liberals. Section 4 explains how each group's values work for them in the context of lives deeply shaped by social class. Section 5 goes issue by issue and provides top-level takeaways for building cross-class coalitions on abortion rights, climate change, immigration, the care economy, public safety, guns, LGBTQ+ rights, and guns. Section 6 begins a discussion of the complex subject of how the experience of class differs by race. (The subjects of Section 5 and Section 6 will be explored more deeply in white papers to be published soon.)

Section 1

Working-class priorities differ from liberal college grads'—so if you care about the defense of democracy, talk about economic and personal security

One precondition for forging cross-class coalitions is to respect that working-class priorities often differ from those of college-educated liberals.

Most of working-class respondents' top priorities are economic. Ten of working-class respondents' top 12 priorities in our Class Gaps Poll are economic. Seven concerned prices: affordable basics (#1), protecting Social Security and Medicare (#2), lowering rents and housing costs (#3) and drug prices (#5), protecting health insurance subsidies (#7) and Medicaid (#9), and affordable childcare (#11) . This makes sense. If you worry about paying the bills, that naturally becomes a top concern. Three priorities concern a steady income stream and a secure economic future: raising wages (#6), creating jobs (#10), and boosting economic growth (#12).

Working-Class Top 12 Priorities

Each issue's win rate: the share of head-to-head matchups in which working-class respondents chose it as the more important priority. Higher bars indicate stronger priorities.

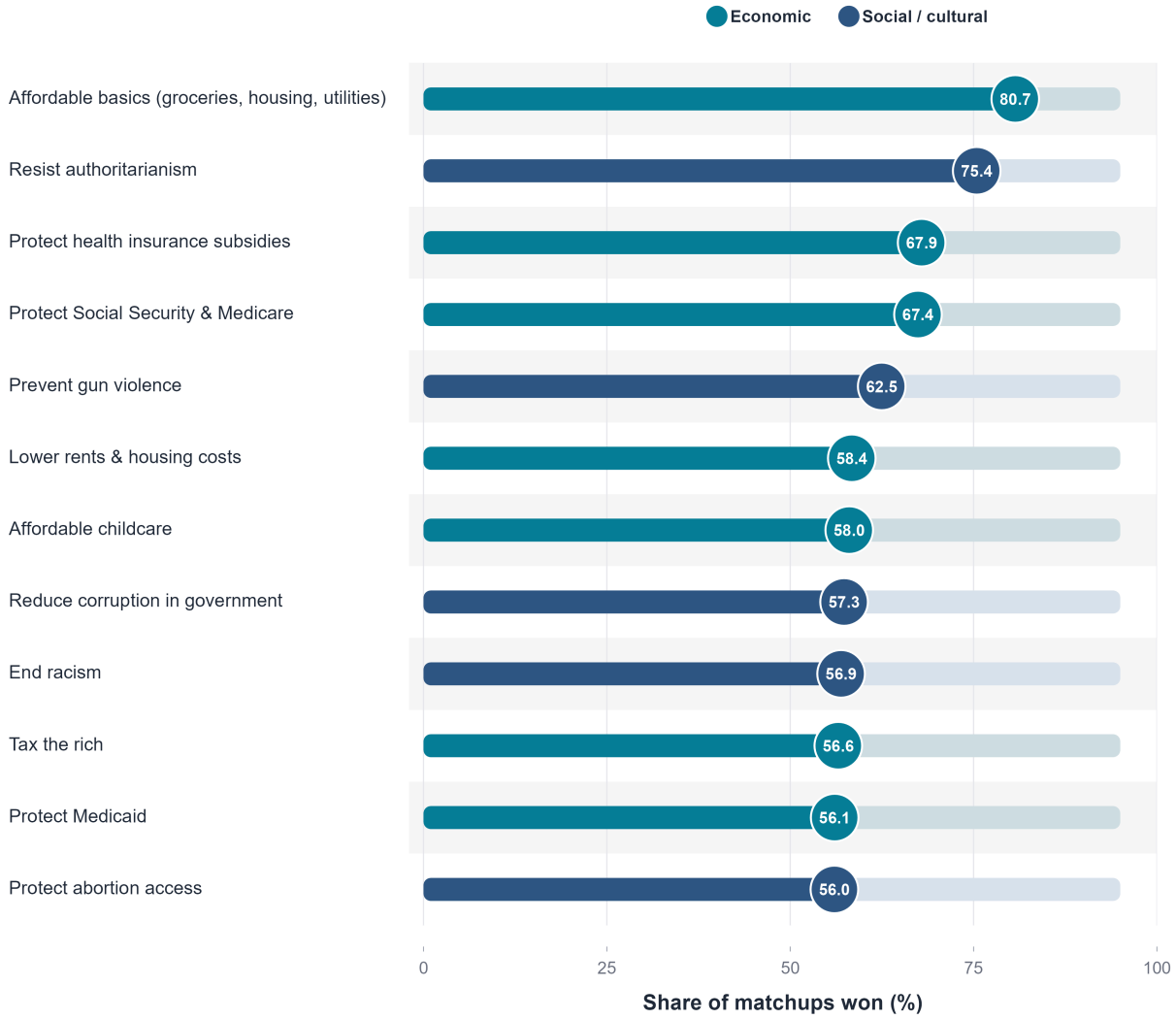


Source: Class Gaps Poll, fielded by Verasight, Jan. 29 – Feb. 17, 2026 (n = 5,770 U.S. adults). Weighted to Dec. 2025 CPS and Pew NPORS partisanship benchmarks. Each respondent evaluated 10 randomly assigned pairs from 30 policy priorities. Win rate = share of matchups a priority was chosen. **Working class** = middle 50% of income distribution and no four-year college degree (n = 1,704). **Liberal college graduates** = Dem-leaning, BA+, top income quartile (n = 617).

Fewer economic concerns make it into college-educated liberals' top dozen priorities, and many that do rank lower on the list. In addition to affordable basics (#1), college-educated liberals joined the working class in prioritizing protecting health insurance subsidies (#3), Social Security and Medicare (#4), lower rents and housing costs (#6), and affordable childcare (#7), but many top issues of college-educated liberals had to do with non-economic issues that were not prioritized by working-class respondents, notably resisting authoritarianism (#2), preventing gun violence (#5), and ending racism (#9).

Liberal College Graduates' Top 12 Priorities

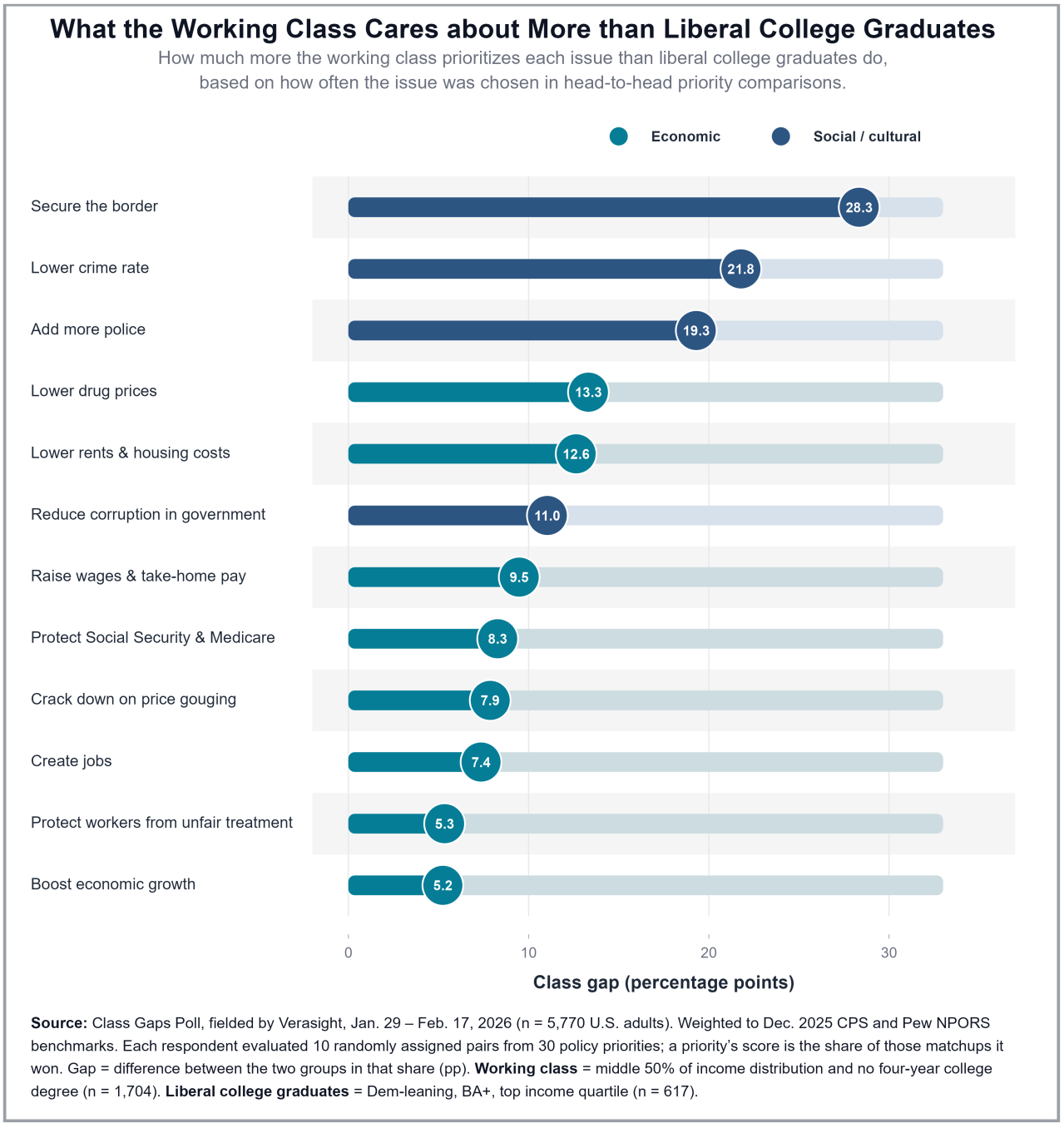
Each issue's win rate: the share of head-to-head matchups in which liberal college graduates chose it as the more important priority. Higher bars indicate stronger priorities.



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A key point, often overlooked, is that economic priorities differ across class: working-class respondents prioritize creating jobs, raising wages, and economic growth but liberal college grads don't. College-educated liberals apparently still assume they can access good jobs without government help and care chiefly about prices. Tellingly, current debates about "abundance" and "affordability" center college grads' concerns about prices while often ignoring working-class concerns about stable employment with decent pay.[13] A message with

stronger cross-class appeal would remember that affordability has two sides: wages and jobs as well as costs.



Race matters. Working-class people of all races prioritized raising wages, but among liberal college grads, only Latino and Black ones did. Another racial difference: white working-class respondents prioritize economic growth more than white college liberals, but among Latinos and African Americans the reverse holds—college liberals prioritize it more than working-class

people of their own race, as shown below. This may reflect that Black college grads, on average, earn far less and have dramatically lower wealth than white college grads.[14]

Share prioritizing economic growth, by race and class (%)

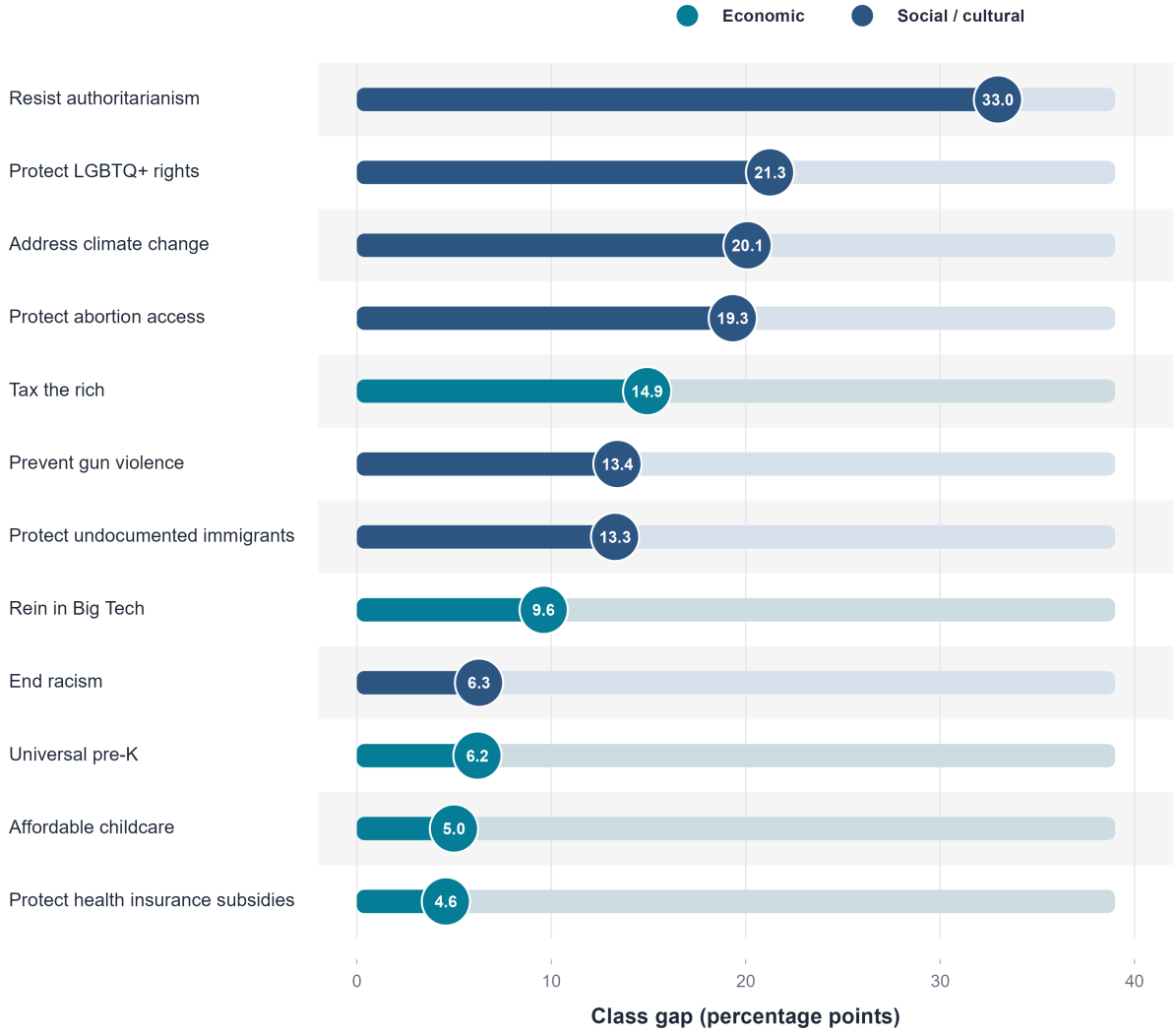
Black		Latino		White	
Liberal elite	Middle 50%	Liberal elite	Middle 50%	Liberal elite	Middle 50%
62	55	54	40	41	57

Top working-class priorities also show how effective the far right has been at directing anti-elitist anger toward political elites—working-class respondents express more anger against corruption in government than elites do, although they recognize corruption ("price gouging") by business elites, too.

Liberal college grads prioritize culture and climate more than working-class people do. The figure below shows that liberal college grads care more than the working class about resisting authoritarianism, culture and climate issues, and ending racism. Another key contrast: liberal college grads' anti-elitist anger focuses on the 1% and business elites ("tax the rich" and "rein in Big Tech"), not political elites.

What Liberal College Graduates Care about More than the Working Class

How much more liberal college graduates prioritize each issue than the working class does, based on how often the issue was chosen in head-to-head priority comparisons.

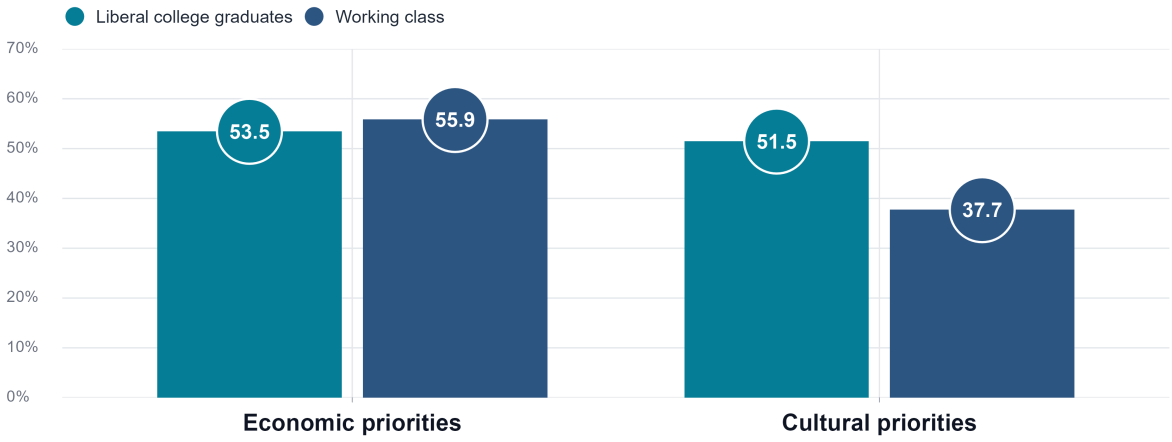


Source: Class Gaps Poll, fielded by Verasight, Jan. 29 – Feb. 17, 2026 (n = 5,770 U.S. adults). Weighted to Dec. 2025 CPS and Pew NPORS benchmarks. Each respondent evaluated 10 randomly assigned pairs from 30 policy priorities; a priority's score is the share of those matchups it won. Gap = difference between the two groups in that share (pp). **Working class** = middle 50% of income distribution and no four-year college degree (n = 1,704). **Liberal college graduates** = Dem-leaning, BA+, top income quartile (n = 617).

While liberal college grads prioritize economic, cultural, and climate issues about equally, working-class respondents prioritize economic issues far more than culture and climate ones, as shown in the figure below. Liberal college grads prioritize progressive climate and culture-war issues an average of 13.8 points more than the working class.

Economic vs. Cultural Priorities: Working Class vs. Liberal College Graduates

In head-to-head priority matchups, working-class respondents favored economic over cultural priorities by 16 percentage points more than liberal college graduates.

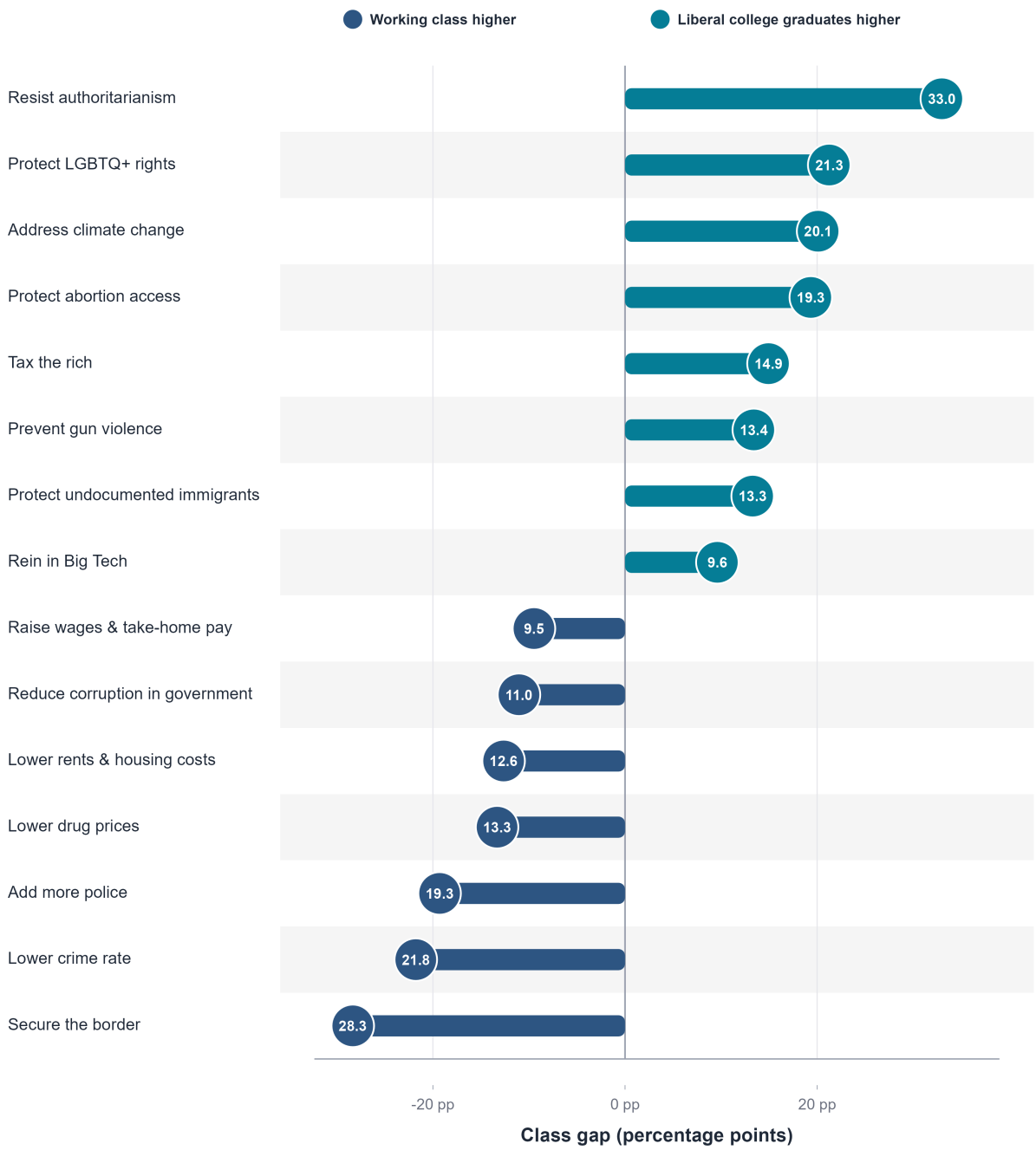


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The figure below shows how this plays out in specific issue areas.

Largest Priority Differences Between the Working Class and Liberal College Graduates

The issues where the two groups' priorities diverge most—bars extend toward whichever group prioritizes the issue more.



Source: Class Gaps Poll, fielded by Verasight, Jan. 29 – Feb. 17, 2026 (n = 5,770 U.S. adults). Weighted to Dec. 2025 CPS and Pew NPORS partisanship benchmarks. Each respondent evaluated 10 randomly assigned pairs from 30 policy priorities. Difference = liberal college graduates' win rate − working-class win rate (pp). **Working class** = middle 50% of income distribution and no four-year college degree (n = 1,704). **Liberal college graduates** = Dem-leaning, BA+, top income quartile (n = 617).

This is why, for liberals, the key is to keep the focus on "the economy, stupid": Given the divergence between liberal college grads and the working class in terms of the degree to which each prioritizes climate and culture issues, economic populism is what the left has to offer the working class. This helps explain why Kamala Harris lost noncollege voters by 14 points.[15] She centered two issues—defense of democracy and abortion rights—that liberal college grads prioritize but most working-class Americans don't. The lesson is not that working-class voters are unreachable. It's that you can't reach them if you don't prioritize the issues they care most about. Thankfully, liberal college grads also care deeply about economic issues, even slightly more than they do about cultural issues.

Defending democracy is top-priority for liberal college grads—but not the working class. Defense of democracy is the liberal college grads' #2 priority but it's a dramatically lower priority for working-class respondents (19th out of 30). Resisting authoritarianism was a much higher priority for college-educated liberals than working-class respondents in every racial group (+42.1 points for whites, +22.4 for Latinos, and +15.0 for African Americans). Liberal college graduates in all three racial groups rank resisting authoritarianism among their top dozen priorities (1st for whites, 4th for Latinos, and 12th for African Americans), but no working-class group does—it ranks between 18th and 22nd.

> Why didn't Biden's support of unions help him more? The Class Gaps Poll found that college-educated liberals were 14 points more positive toward unions than working-class respondents. Though 60% of working-class respondents were positive toward unions, many didn't prioritize "workers' rights": it ranked only 15 th (out of 30). Support for unions is vital to increase the working-class share of productivity in the long run—but politicians shouldn't assume that support for unions is sufficient to attract working-class voters in the short run. In the short run, support for unions needs to be complemented by policies that promise access to jobs that support a stable middle-class life.

Every defense of democracy policy we tested garnered support from over 90% of liberal college grads but only an average in the low 50s of working-class respondents, with the largest difference between liberal college grads and the working class on any issue (mean class gap, +40 points). Can reframing the defense of democracy around working-class values help bridge this gap? Only a little.

The reframing that works best spoke not about "authoritarianism" nor "defense of democracy" but about kitchen-table economics: 58% of working-class respondents agreed that, "When Donald Trump ignores the rules, prices rise, jobs feel less secure, and it gets harder for

working families to keep up." The item with the lowest working-class support was silent on economic issues and focused solely on Trump as a threat to liberal democracy: "Donald Trump has shown a willingness to ignore constitutional checks and balances and concentrate power in an imperial presidency." The left has to choose between connecting with working-class Americans and pleasing constitutional law professors.



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The good news is that this successful rewording increases working-class support to 58%. The bad news is that it's still 35 points lower than support among liberal college grads. On average, working-class reframing enhanced the appeal of defense of democracy policies by only 3.5%. The real cost of centering the defense of democracy is that it means that working-class economic concerns are sidelined. We stoutly support the Resistance to protect the rule of law and constitutional norms, but the best way to defend democracy is to win back more middle-status voters by putting economics, not #Resistance, in the forefront.

Focusing on the link between authoritarianism and corruption is especially valuable because working-class respondents prioritized reducing corruption 11 points more than liberal college grads. Prior research suggests that non-elites' view of corruption isn't limited to what's illegal. Often working-class people use "corruption" to name what they see as a pressing problem:

that the political and economic systems are rigged by elites against working people.[16] Corruption is not just a good governance issue; it's working-class language for what elites call "resisting authoritarianism" or "defending democracy."

Personal security is also a top priority for working-class respondents. Safety issues are not nearly as consistently prioritized as economics, but the three largest divergences in priorities all concern security. As compared with liberal college grads, working-class respondents care more about securing the border (+28.3 points), lowering the crime rate (+21.8 points), and adding more police (+19.3 points) than liberal college grads do.

Important racial differences emerge. Working-class respondents of each group[17] prioritize border security more than same-race elites but the gap is much larger for whites (+42.7 points) than for African Americans (+14.6) or Latinos (+11.6). The same pattern continues for Latinos and whites on security issues involving police. Working-class respondents of both races prioritize "more police" more than same-race elites; again, the gap is much larger for whites (+26.2 points) than Latinos (+12.2). "Lower the crime rate" shows the same pattern: both working-class whites (+28.8 points) and Latinos (+29.8 points) support it more than same-race elites. In contrast, there's little difference between Black liberal college grads and working-class African Americans on "lowering the crime rate" and "police misconduct." "More police" follows the same pattern among Black respondents as among whites and Latinos: Black working-class respondents prioritize it (+12.1 points) more than Black liberal college grads. On security issues, both race and class play important roles, as shown below.

Share prioritizing public safety, by race and class (%)

	Black		Latino		White	
Priority	Liberal elite	Middle 50%	Liberal elite	Middle 50%	Liberal elite	Middle 50%
Lower crime rate	66	63	21	51	32	61
Secure the border	9	24	13	25	10	52
More police	19	31	21	34	18	44

The role of security has received far less attention than economics. Class differences on security aren't as central as economics (nothing is) but security deserves more attention than it gets. The higher priority working-class people place on security helps explain why border security and policing helped elect far-right governments in several countries, including the United States in 2024 and Chile in 2025. The reasons for these class differences are further explored in Section 4.

The big-tent coalition on economics. There's huge potential for creating cross-class coalitions on economic issues if we can only get climate and culture issues right. Affordable basics like groceries, housing, and utilities were the #1 priority of every class and racial group we studied. Prior polling shows the following policy proposals command over 75% support from both the working class (WC) and liberal college grads (LCG):

- Lower prescription prices: 87% WC vs. 94% LCG
- Don't reduce Social Security: 85% WC vs. 77% LCG
- Spend $150 billion/yr. on infrastructure: 80% WC vs. 96% LCG
- Expand Medicaid: 78% WC vs. 95% LCG
- Negotiate Medicare drug prices: 80% WC vs. 100% LCG
- Spend more on education: 82% WC vs. 91% LCG
- Raise minimum wage: 77% WC vs. 87% LCG

But in framing economic messages, the key is not simply to list a few meaningful but marginally impactful policies—or to fight over what those policies should be. The key is a simple, consistent message that we need to return to an economy where hard work leads to a stable life. That's a message with profound appeal to working-class families who lost blue-collar stability a generation or two ago. Equally important, the same message will have ever-increasing appeal to younger college grads who are facing difficulties in finding good jobs in their 20s and affording houses, childcare, and health insurance in their 30s. Centering this message is all the more important given that AI threatens college grads with more precarity in the future.[18]

Section 2

Liberal college grads live in a class-parochial bubble where virtually everyone agrees, engendering a politics of scorn that fuels the far right



Photo: Robin Jonathan Deutsch

The left will not be able to forge sustainable cross-class coalitions until it stops reinforcing right populism's "elites are looking down on you" script and learns to respect the values of working-class Americans. Liberal candidates have learned not to call people who disagree "deplorables" in public, but many college-educated liberals still think of them as deplorable. This popular lawn sign[19] aptly describes widespread "feeling rules" about who merits our empathy.[20]

Note what's missing: the sign decries injustices based on race, gender, and immigration status but leaves out economic inequality or the declining relative fortunes of the American working class—caring about those is apparently optional. Also note what's there: insults. If your priorities aren't race, gender, and immigration, you're so beyond the pale that you don't even understand the importance of love or kindness.

The chattering classes compound the problem. After Trump's 2016 victory, columnist Frank Rich urged liberals to "let them reap the consequences of voting against their own interests," while Daily Kos founder Markos Moulitsas quipped that we should "be happy for coal miners losing their health insurance—they're getting exactly what they voted for." The problem is not what a few columnists say, it's that many liberal college grads believe these things—and working-class people know they do.[21] The result is a politically costly politics of scorn.

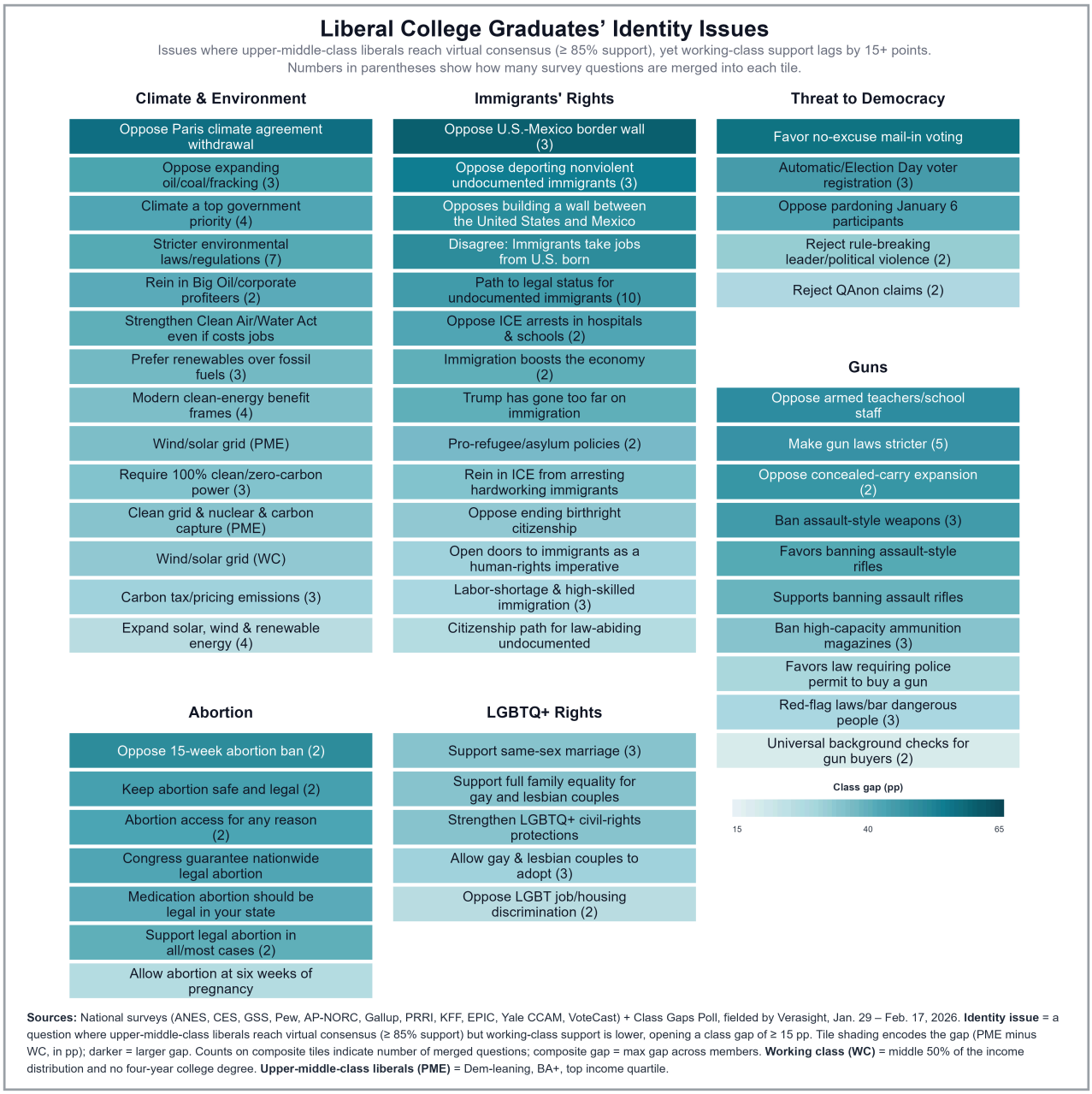
These attitudes undercut the persuasiveness of social justice advocates. For example, liberal college grads pride themselves on defending democracy and often talk about it nonstop, depicting themselves as the Forces of Good combatting the Forces of Evil. This intimates that people who prioritize economics over democracy are dimwitted, unethical, or both. Yet many

working-class Americans feel (with good reason) that democracy has failed them: inequality predicts low trust, including low trust in institutions.[22] The appropriate response is to secure a better future for all Americans, not belittle the victims of economic globalization. The phrase "climate deniers" is another example. It signals that anyone who doesn't prioritize climate change action is engaged in self-delusion. It's possible to increase working-class support for climate change action, as shown in Section 5, but this is not how to do it.[23]

"Disdain for the less educated is the last acceptable prejudice," is the pithy phrase of philosopher Michael Sandel.[24] Despite the warnings of Sandel and many others, this disdain has proven to be a habit that's hard to break. It's time to understand why.

Climate and culture are "Identity Issues" for many liberal college grads. Among college-educated liberals, there's near-universal agreement (over 85%) on many climate and culture issues—such unanimity that we call these "Identity Issues," because they're integral to what it means to be an upper-middle-class liberal. The chart below summarizes prior polling, which found near-unanimity on many issues related to climate change, immigrants' rights, abortion rights, LGBTQ+ rights, guns, and authoritarianism across all publicly available surveys that had data with breakdowns by class, including the three major long-standing longitudinal surveys most commonly used by political scientists as well as other, specialized surveys (see Methodology). Prior research found that progressive activists report the most pressure of any group to conform to the opinions of their own group.[25]

Holding certain political priorities and beliefs is an integral part of the identity of being an upper-middle-class liberal. In the figure below, the darker the shade, the greater the class gap.

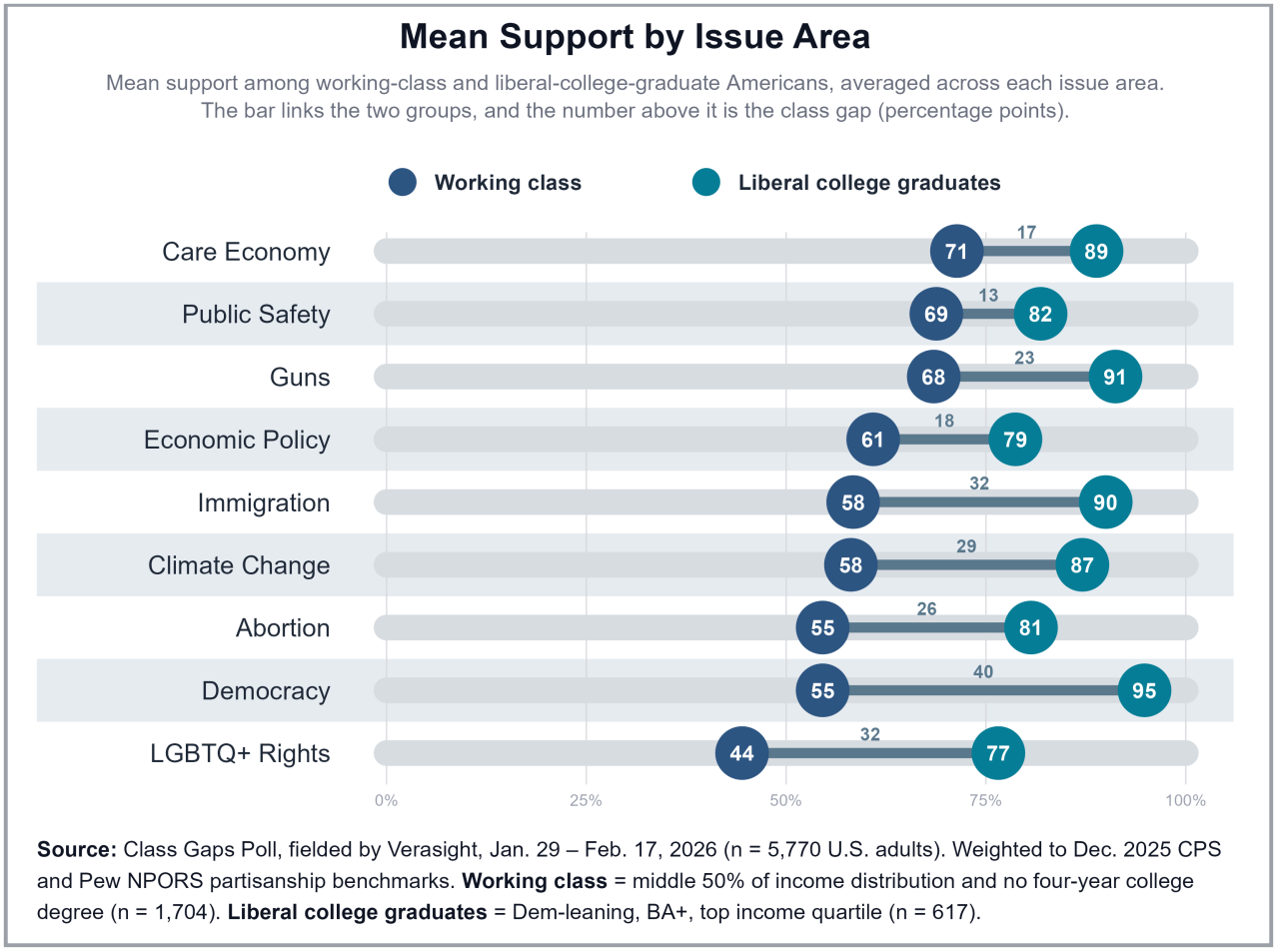


Additional survey questions merged into this heatmap are listed in endnote 114.

When liberal college grads live in an echo chamber where they have few friends or family who disagree, it becomes easy to caricature anyone who disagrees as ignorant, unethical, or both. Neither calling people ignorant nor moralizing at them helps get things done: past research has shown that turning political issues into moral issues impedes progress by making compromise unacceptable.[26]

"Wedge Issues" emerge when working-class people don't share the assumed consensus. A crucial step in ending the politics of scorn is for liberal college grads to

understand that, though nearly everyone around them agrees on climate and culture-war issues, working-class people often don't. The chart below shows average support for progressive positions among working-class respondents compared to liberal college graduates. Large class gaps show sharply lower working-class support of LGBTQ+ rights, which college-educated liberals support +32 points more than working-class respondents. Liberal college grads also support the defense of democracy +40 points more than working-class respondents, along with immigration (+32 points), abortion (+26 points), and climate initiatives (+29 points). We call these Wedge Issues because the right uses them to drive a wedge between liberals and the working class.



Source: Class Gaps Poll, fielded by Verasight, Jan. 29 – Feb. 17, 2026 (n = 5,770 U.S. adults). Weighted to Dec. 2025 CPS and Pew NPORS partisanship benchmarks. **Working class** = middle 50% of income distribution and no four-year college degree (n = 1,704). **Liberal college graduates** = Dem-leaning, BA+, top income quartile (n = 617).

The areas of greatest divergence are trans rights, authoritarianism, immigration, climate change, and abortion rights. On average, liberal college grads are 28.6 points more progressive than working-class respondents—and they're progressive on virtually all the issues and questions we tested.

These graphs tell a different story than the familiar claim that working-class voters vote against their interests. When a party credibly campaigns on the economic priorities they care most about, working-class voters reward it—they are responsive to their material interests, not indifferent to them. But voting is just one choice among the options actually on offer, not a first preference expressed in a vacuum. When both parties treat working-class economics as secondary, or stake out positions that are too similar to tell apart, that dimension drops out of the decision—not because it stopped mattering, but because it no longer separates the candidates. What's left is the dimension on which the parties visibly differ: the cultural Wedge Issues that campaigns foreground precisely because they split the electorate. A voter who would have preferred an economic populist, but was never offered one, falls back on whatever else is salient. The behavior looks irrational only if you ignore the menu. It reflects a failure of political supply, not voter irrationality.

This combination of Identity Issues and Wedge Issues fuels a politics of scorn. The caricature of working-class voters voting against their own self-interest strengthens right populism's "elites are looking down on you" narrative. This disdain is one of the key cultural forces fueling far-right populism. It's fueled by bias, as documented by studies in Europe as well as the United States. European university graduates show more bias against the less-educated than any other stigmatized group tested, including Muslims and people who are poor, blind, or obese, found a 2018 study.[27] The same is true for American college grads: they dislike, and are more biased, against the less-educated than any other stigmatized group, including African Americans.[28] College grads tend to blame less-educated people for their social disadvantage.[29]

Social psychologists document that higher-status people typically see lower-status people as lacking in competence.[30] White elites have learned to check this impulse in the context of racial hierarchies; elites need to do so with respect to class, too. Acknowledging privilege is never fun, but failing to do so is inconsistent with the left's commitment to equal dignity for all regardless of race, gender, or class. It's also self-defeating. Insulting people is not an effective way to persuade them.

Section 3

Class competence can sharply increase working-class support for progressive policies on hot-button culture and climate issues

A common assumption is that the way to connect with working-class voters is to abandon progressive positions and adopt centrist ones.[31] There's an important kernel of truth in this: because liberal college grads' priorities and values often differ from working-class people's. Insisting that elite preferences *always* take precedence will be seen as an off-putting exercise of class privilege. Yet not *always* getting your own way isn't the same as *never* getting your way. Building a coalition requires give-and-take from all sides. Just as working-class people won't always compromise their priorities and values, neither will liberal college grads. Luckily there's no need for that.

> *"In America we have the hungry, we have veterans, we have mental illness, we have so many problems in our own country that we at this point in time just can't be concerned with, I feel bad but…our country's in dire straits financially."*

The key isn't centrism; it's mutual respect accompanied by class-competent reframing. Untold amounts of money have been spent on new messaging and narratives designed to persuade people to embrace progressive positions. Too often, the respect piece is left out, so the message people hear is that elites are trying to manipulate people *again*. Moreover, changing messaging alone works only some of the time. Why? Consider a college-educated abortion rights advocate. Would they be persuaded by conservative messaging describing the fetus, vividly and empathetically, as a vulnerable child in need of protection? No, because class-linked feeling rules convince advocates of abortion access (including ourselves) not to think of an early-stage fetus as a person.

The millions of dollars poured into creating empathetic narratives of vulnerable and deserving immigrants as "our neighbors" are likely to be similarly ineffective. Because the working class's imagined community is local or national, not global, they may well feel sorry for immigrants but not see them as their responsibility (see box above, which quotes from a white working-class man).[32]

Changing messaging has large effects on some issues, while changing tactics along with messaging often has even larger effects. Some guidelines are in the box below.

HOW TO REFRAME

R-E-S-P-E-C-T. An effort to reach across class must begin with genuine respect—otherwise it will be seen as just another effort by elites to manipulate non-elites.

Ditch the jargon: Avoid policy-heavy language and talk the way everyday people talk (e.g., "subsidized childcare" becomes "affordable childcare").

Sound like a populist, not an activist: For example, "climate action" becomes "rein in corporate profiteers."

Make it personal: Connect abstract policies to concrete benefits. The biggest reframing gains came from linking climate change to lower bills and better jobs (up to +24 points) and advocating for affordable childcare so parents can get to work (up to +28 points).

Connect with working-class values: Even on hot-button issues like abortion, public safety, and transgender rights, reframing around working-class values consistently moves public opinion in a progressive direction. For a full explanation of those values, see Section 4.

The largest effects show dramatic increases in support for progressive issues. The effects were also widespread: all nine issue areas we examine showed increased support after reframing (though the magnitude of the effects varied widely).

Largest Working-Class Framing Effects

The 15 policies where describing the policy in working-class terms raised support the most, compared with the standard wording.



Source: Class Gaps Poll, fielded by Verasight, Jan. 29 – Feb. 17, 2026 (n = 5,770 U.S. adults). Weighted to Dec. 2025 CPS and Pew NPORS partisanship benchmarks. Effect = support for the working-class framing minus support for the non-working-class framing, in percentage points, among the **working class** (middle 50% of income distribution and no four-year college degree; n = 1,704). Tactics items use the PME vs WC split; baseline items use the Original vs WC split.

On most issues, working-class reframing did not diminish, or even increased, average support among liberal college grads. Guns and democracy were the exceptions: working-class

reframing decreased liberal college grads' support, though only by small margins. But reframing in those arenas was not very effective, anyway. (Section 5 discusses guns to complement the discussion of democracy in Section 1.)

Reframing can help unpopular policies. The average gain for unpopular policies (baseline support below 40%) was 9.2 points. The average gain for moderately popular policies was 6.8 points (40–60% support), where people aren't already dug into their opinions. And even highly popular policies (above 60% support) saw an average gain of 7.9 points. Reframing had little effect on either gun policies or defense of democracy questions. All issues are not equally moveable.

How moveable is working-class support, by issue area

Highly Moveable	Moderately Moveable	Not Very Moveable
• Climate change • Care economy • Immigration (when framed well) • LGBTQ+ rights (popularity of tactics varies widely)	• Abortion rights • Public safety	• Guns (ceiling effect) • Defense of democracy

Progressives—advocates, funders, donors, and voters—all tend to be liberal college grads who are used to having their cherished Identity Issues framed in messaging and tactics that best reflect their worldview. The good news is that there's no need to "throw the groups under the bus"[33] and embrace, for example, an "all of the above" climate change strategy that advocates the rapid expansion of fossil fuels as well as renewables. But the sobering news for progressives is that winning working-class support will require giving up some power to control messaging, tactics, or both. This doesn't make sense if working-class people are just unenlightened. It *does* make sense if working-class values express the logic of working-class lives. Section 4 explains how they do.

Section 4

Understand how working-class values reflect working-class lives

The logic of life differs for different classes of people because they "make a virtue of necessity": in other words, they cultivate values and dispositions that will serve them well in their particular social and economic context. People make a virtue of necessity, which is why class is expressed not only through economics but also through cultural differences.[34] Understanding this is important because it helps explain why working-class people's values differ from liberal college grads'. This section discusses how the far right has weaponized five key aspects of working-class culture, tapping a half century of ethnographies, memoirs, and social psychology (see box).[35]

How the right weaponizes five tensions in working-class culture

Tension	Liberal college grads' values	Working-class values	Political battles this tension fuels
Globalism vs. place loyalty	• Pride in being a "global citizen" • Nationwide/global networks	• Deep loyalty to community and country • Dense local networks	• Immigration • Patriotism • "America First" appeals • Climate change
Work and self-development vs. family and self-discipline	• Pride in elite jobs • Self-actualization and personal growth	• "Family comes first" • Pride in hard work • Personal responsibility • Stability over freedom	• Abortion rights • Trans rights • Welfare & redistribution • Work requirements
"Sophistication" vs. traditionalism	• Ironic distance from tradition • Sophistication as a taste for the new	• Religion, military, and traditional gender roles as sources of honor and stability	• Culture wars broadly • Role of religion • Gun rights
Safety as a given vs. safety as a priority	• Live in safe neighborhoods • Focused more on justice than safety	• See the world as threatening • Protecting family and following the rules seen as core duties	• "Law & order" • Border security • Defund the police
Admiring vs. resenting experts	• Respect for credentialed expertise • Regulation as rational problem-solving	• Resentment of professionals • Trust in small business • Admiration for hard-earned success	• Taxation • Business regulation • Anti-elite populism • "Deep state" narratives

The tension between elites' globalism and working-class place loyalty fuels fights over immigration and patriotism. For centuries, elites distinguished themselves from

non-elites through a taste for high culture: opera, classical music, and "fine" art.[36] That system waned after the 1980s; today's elites pride themselves on their sophisticated tastes for music and food, and on exploring other countries and cultures.[37] Cosmopolitanism is a way elites signal that they're members of a globalized elite. A taste for cosmopolitanism also makes sense for material reasons: elites' job markets are typically nationwide or international, and their jobs often require them to be comfortable interacting smoothly with elites from other countries (though not with non-elites from their own country).

In sharp contrast to elites' globalism, non-elites tend to be intensely rooted in the communities they grew up in: 68% of white noncollege voters (who were predominantly Trump voters) live within a two-hour drive of where they grew up.[38] While elites expect their children to grow up and fly away (preferably to pursue a high-status and/or lucrative career), non-elites typically expect their children to remain in their networks even as adults.[39]

Non-elites' place loyalty reflects the higher value they place on community and solidarity, as documented both in social psychology and ethnographies.[40] Traditionally, this reflected blue-collar workplaces where safety depends on colleagues. "We've got to watch out for each other first," said a miner. Rural residents, too, are more likely to value community—indeed, many would have moved away to pursue better economic opportunities if they didn't feel a strong sense of place loyalty.[41]

Place loyalty also reflects that non-elites tend to get jobs through their small, dense "clique" networks. That's also how they handle childcare, elder care, and help with fixing the roof.[42] In other words, non-elites use their local clique networks to protect themselves from the rigors of a market that would otherwise consign them to poor-quality childcare, eldercare, and roof repair.

Place loyalty also reflects considerations of social honor. Elites' social honor is portable: a surgeon can show up in Korea, Canada, or the Congo and he's still a surgeon. Non-elites' social honor isn't portable: if you sell tires, you want to be surrounded by people who know you're not just a tire salesman—you're also a deacon at church, coach of the kids' baseball team, a volunteer firefighter. A person of substance.

The tension between globalism vs. place loyalty shapes the "feeling rules" that underlie immigration debates: elites' imagined community is global whereas working-class people's

imagined community is local or national. Typically, non-elites are more patriotic for the same reason elites are less patriotic: everyone stresses the highest-status categories they belong to, so elites stress their membership in a (global) elite while non-elites stress that they're Americans—it's one of the few high-status categories they inhabit (see box).[43] A 2020 poll found that being American was an important part of the identity of 79% of Americans with (at most) a high school degree, but only 43% of predominantly college-educated progressive activists.[44] The Class Gaps Poll found that mean support of progressive immigration policies is higher among elites of each racial group than among working-class people of the same racial group. In every racial group, liberal elites support progressive immigration policies far more than working-class people of the same race, as shown below.

"I've always kind of been a made-in-America person…If I'm looking at a bucket made in Wisconsin for $8, you know, and a bucket made in China for $5.50, I'm going to buy the $8 bucket. There is just something in my soul that tells me, hey, I'm going to do that."

Immigration: support by race and class (%)

Black		Latino		White	
Liberal elite	Middle 50%	Liberal elite	Middle 50%	Liberal elite	Middle 50%
81	65	86	66	87	47

Non-elites' more limited geographical horizons are accompanied by more limited time horizons because the challenges of daily life are more unforgiving. A sign held by a Yellow Vests protester in France says it best (see box).[45] The inexorable drumbeat of the end of the month focuses working-class attention on policy priorities that promise concrete benefits in their daily lives. When benefits are more long-term, politicians need to become "educators in chief," as the Biden administration learned to its chagrin with the Inflation Reduction Act.

"The elites talk about the end of the world when we are talking about the end of the month."

The tension between elites' focus on self-expression and personal fulfillment and the working-class focus on self-discipline and personal responsibility shapes fights over abortion, trans rights, and

redistribution. "Family comes first" is a common blue-collar refrain. Family life is highly valued as a sphere of autonomy that's jealously guarded from intrusion by bosses and bureaucrats. "Blue-collar men put family above work and find greater satisfaction in family than do upper-middle-class men," notes an ethnographer who has studied both.[46] "Family is the realm…of life that gives them intrinsic satisfaction and validation—which is crucial when work is not rewarding and offers limited opportunities."[47] Working-class families don't take for granted their ability to provide family stability; sustaining "a successful nuclear family was one of his life's greatest achievements," notes an ethnographer of a rural white man.[48]

Working-class kids are raised to be successful in working-class jobs. Hence the focus on self-discipline—the kind that gets you up, every day, on time, without "an attitude," to a job as an order-taker. Elites' central value is self-development because that's what's required (and permitted) in their jobs: to be at the top of your game, you need to express yourself, assert yourself, and "take ownership." Working-class families' insistence on self-regulation may seem heavy-handed but these families can't count on second chances. In sharp contrast, elites prepare their children for a world where material success and security are taken for granted and the focus is on self-actualization and personal growth: the ability to think for yourself, to articulate your preferences, and challenge authority through logic.[49]

"Working-class kids who had really absorbed the rubric of self-development" would face a "terrifying battle" when faced with repetitive and unfulfilling jobs, notes Paul Willis.[50] Social psychologists document that middle-status people often trade creativity for self-discipline.[51] This serves them well in pink-, blue-, and routine white-collar jobs where creativity can get you fired because your boss sees you as low in status, with little to offer.[52] Elites' felt entitlement to career and sexual self-actualization explain why abortion and LGBTQ+ rights feel, to them, so urgent. Elites of every race support abortion rights at higher rates than working-class people of the same race, though the class gap is much smaller for African Americans.

In every racial group, liberal elites support progressive abortion policies far more than working-class people of the same race.

Abortion: support by race and class (%)

Black		Latino		White	
Liberal elite	Middle 50%	Liberal elite	Middle 50%	Liberal elite	Middle 50%
73	63	86	62	82	51

As always, cultural preferences intertwine material conditions with considerations of social honor. Whereas elites pride themselves on their prestigious jobs and college degrees, working-class Americans pride themselves on their work ethic.[53] Work isn't just a way of earning money; it's also a way of earning merit. To quote Joe Bageant, in *Deer Hunting with Jesus: Dispatches from America's Class War*:

> *Life is about work for the American redneck.... For all these people work is an obsession and has been for generations stretching back to the textile mills, the homesteads of the West and Midwest, the immigrant labor farms of West Virginia in Colorado and Montana, the subsistence farms of the South. The forbearers of today's rednecks were people for whom not working meant their families would starve. Literally. So the work ethic is burned into their genetic code. (Incidentally, I am not talking about white trash here. I am talking about rednecks, the difference being that rednecks work themselves to death and will never accept a handout.) White trash folks do not have the same hang-up.*[54]

Offensive words aside ("rednecks," "white trash"), this captures a little-known dynamic that's a central driver in American politics: between hardworking, settled families and their hard-living neighbors whom they fault for their failure to keep their nose to the grindstone. (This is all over JD Vance's autobiography.)[55] Pride in hard work, points out historian Daniel Rodgers, turns "necessity into pride and servitude into honor."[56] In *Becoming*, Michelle Obama describes how her father never missed a shift in 26 years of work and highlights why this steadiness was so crucial (see box).[57]

This working-class work ethic influences attitudes toward redistribution—for example, why noncollege Americans of every racial group support work requirements for food stamps more than college grads of the same racial group.[58]

"One missed paycheck could leave you without electricity; one missed homework assignment could put you behind and possibly out of college."

Across 11 European countries, among supporters of leftist parties, "those with higher levels of education show more support for redistribution than those with less education."[59]

While Americans' support for redistribution policies is far lower than in Europe, far more believe that something has gone seriously wrong with a labor market where the rich are paid too much and everyone else is paid too little.[60] Americans support interventions to create a fair labor market at far higher rates than they support government redistribution. Especially noncollege grads: "less educated voters appear to prefer [an].... economic program that aims to promote domestic employment and wages," concluded a 2023 National Bureau of Economic Research working paper. It estimated that about half of Democrats' loss of less-educated voters over the past several decades stems from Democrats' focus on redistribution instead of a fair labor market.[61]

> .. . over the past few decades [liberals have]...gotten into the position of appearing to oppose and scorn widely cherished institutions—conventional nuclear family, religion, patriotism, capitalism, wealth, norms of masculinity and femininity, then saying 'vote for me.' Doesn't sound like a winning strategy... -Jennifer L. Hochschild

The tension between elites' "sophistication" and working-class loyalty to traditional institutions fuels culture wars. Working-class people value tradition both as an aid to self-discipline and because traditional institutions—religion, the military, and traditional family and gender roles—all offer social honor unmoored to one's place in the capitalist pecking order. Middle-status people tend to be more conservative because of their fear of falling out of the middle class.[62] The poor may feel they can take more chances because they have little to lose; elites may feel that they can take more chances because they have so much economic, human, social, and cultural capital that they can recover even if they meet substantial bumps in the road.

Non-elites endorse traditional gender roles for a straightforward reason: even if you're not a rich man, you can be a "real" man (or woman). [62] Gender ideals are social ideals non-elites can attain, unlike class ideals. Non-elite men's traditionalism also reflects a broader tendency: when men's masculinity is threatened, they tend to "overdo gender" by asserting masculine traits along a different axis of masculinity that they feel they can successfully claim.[64] Hence when more married men lose their jobs, the number of firearm background checks rises:[65]

men whose provider status is fragile may choose different terrain on which to establish their masculine cred.

The traditional breadwinner-homemaker family often looks good to families who today need two jobs to get by. In a society without adequate childcare, that often means "tag teaming," where mom works one shift, dad works a different shift, and each parent cares for the family while the other is at work. The price is right, but the cost is high: tag-team families have three to six times the national divorce rate.[66]

"Clean, beautiful. I believe that, for the first time, I saw in the mirror how [Christ] saw me. He showed me who I am to Him. "

Non-elites also value religion and the military more than elites do, again for both material and symbolic reasons. The military offers American non-elites what social democracy offers Nordic ones: stable full-time jobs with pensions and subsidized health care, childcare, and higher education. Military service also offers social honor unmoored to one's educational accomplishments. So does religion: "I'm successful now because I know Jesus Christ…I don't put success on a monetary level," a letter carrier told an ethnographer, comparing himself favorably to his brother (who was a congressman).[67] Arlie Hochschild noted that the folks she met in Louisiana talked of "being *churched*" with as much pride as her crowd in Berkeley talked of being highly educated.[68] Whereas elites use language of merit as an aid to self-worth, non-elites often turn to religion (see box).[69] Religion also improves physical health: a rigorous study found that, "after adjustment for age, sex, race, and chronic medical conditions, churchgoers had a 46% reduction in all-cause mortality."[70] Religious people generally have better mental health than the general population, too, with the link more pronounced in the less-educated.[71]

Working-class loyalty to traditional institutions stands in sharp contrast to what elites like to see as "sophistication," which signals elites' high human capital to others in the elite. Sophistication today mandates a distanced or disdainful attitude toward traditional gender roles, family roles, and religion. This is deeply felt as condescension, a belittling of non-elites' sincere beliefs. Hochschild found her subjects deeply wounded when their Christian morality was depicted as homophobic ignorance.[72] The tension between non-elites' traditionalism and

elites' "sophistication" fuels culture wars over abortion, gun control, LGBTQ+ rights, and the role of religion in contemporary life.

Race matters. The class gap in support for LGBTQ+ issues is much higher among whites (elites support +30 points more) than African Americans (+11 points)—but the absolute level of support among Black elites is dramatically lower. In fact, Black liberal college grads' average support for LGBTQ+ rights is only about 10 points higher than working-class whites'—a full 20 points lower than white liberal college grads' support.

LGBTQ+ rights: support by race and class (%)

Black		Latino		White	
Liberal elite	Middle 50%	Liberal elite	Middle 50%	Liberal elite	Middle 50%
60	49	77	55	80	50

The high value working-class people place on safety and security shapes fights over border control, gun safety and police misconduct. Lowering the crime rate is one of only two non-economic issues in working-class respondents' top 10 priorities: it's 8th for working-class respondents but 26th (out of 30) for liberal college grads. This reflects, in part, that elites can take safety for granted because they typically live in safe neighborhoods with good police protection whereas non-elites often can't. But there's also something deeper going on. "Many of the men I talked to perceive their environment as threatening," notes one ethnographer. "They believe in the importance of 'not trusting anyone,' and one or two even scolded me for conducting interviews in the living rooms of strangers."[73] Polling data shows that non-elites see the world as a far more dangerous place than elites do. White men without college degrees are more likely (53%) than college grads (44%) to say that they are very or somewhat worried that they or their families will be the victims of a violent crime, while white women without degrees (62%) are much more likely than their counterparts with college degrees (46%) to worry about safety.[74] Latinos of all genders worry as much (63%) as white women without degrees, while both male and female African Americans see the threat of violent crime at about the same level as white men without degrees.[75] This is why cries for "law and order" have such resonance.

Working-class men see themselves as responsible for providing security, and pride themselves on "keeping the world in moral order," to quote one ethnographer.[76] Being a protector is among the top five values for Black blue-collar men; it's a central value for white blue-collar men, too.[77] Both Black and white blue-collar men see the world as a dangerous and uncertain place because, for them, it often is (see box).[78] Working-class attitudes toward public safety shape debates over crime, police misconduct, and border security.

> *"I will do anything to make sure my family stays secure. Physically, emotionally, financially….If there's something they need you to do, you do it, regardless of the sacrifices you have to make to do it you do it, no questions asked. That's it."*

This respect for order is accompanied by a respect for following the rules that's often misinterpreted as authoritarianism. One prominent political scientist codes people as "authoritarian" if they believe "it's important to behave properly"; that "people should do what they're told"; that "tradition is important"; that "it's important to live in secure surroundings"; and that government should secure people from threats.[79] These items don't mention antidemocratic leaders but do present a pretty precise description of the cultural dispositions of the working class. They value following the rules because, while being "disruptive" may work for Silicon Valley bropreneurs, breaking the rules just gets you fired in a blue-, pink-, or routine white-collar job. What academics decry as authoritarianism working-class people call personal responsibility.

These values deeply shape fights over immigration, given that undocumented immigrants, by definition, have not followed the rules. Those rules are unfair and in chaos: we get it. But that doesn't change the fact that "what don't you get about 'it's illegal'" has working-class resonance. Border security is a higher priority for working-class respondents of every racial group than for same-race liberal college grads. Working-class whites and Latinos also rank issues related to policing higher in their priorities than same-race college-educated liberals. The importance of class does not mean race does not matter: class gaps are largest among whites, and the experience of African Americans is unique because of the long history of using "high crime" as an excuse for racist policies.

Working-class people tend to admire the self-made rich but resent "elites" (both economic and political), which shapes attitudes toward taxation, regulation, and small business. Members of the elite tend to assume that working-class people want to be

like them. Not necessarily: despite working-class skepticism of economic and political elites, their feelings toward the rich themselves are more ambivalent than college-educated progressives', who often decry "the 1%."

Managers are seen as college kids "who don't know shit about how to do anything but are full of ideas about how I have to do my job."

Working-class resentment reflects the power college grads wield in everyday life, where managers' power is often resented (see box above).[80] Resentment of professionals extends to bureaucrats, who may be seen as yet another set of college grads who "know nothing about my life but are perfectly willing to tell me how to live it." Attitudes toward government also reflect "agency capture." A Louisianan told an ethnographer with "a flash of indignation…'My nephew used to raise hogs. And you know a hog can stand almost anything. Because of the bad water, my nephew had to cook the slop you fed them. But the hogs got out of the pen and went to drink the Bayou water and died. The health unit came down on my *nephew* for not keeping his hogs away from the bad water, but they *didn't do nothing about the bad water*.'"[80] Another ethnographer found resentment against the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, whose regulations were seen as having "little understanding of the practicalities of everyday life in the north woods."[82] This resentment and distrust fuels vaccine hesitation (see quote from Appalachian woman in box).[83]

"If we as hillbillies are slow to take the vaccine—and let me say that I've had two doses—it's because we don't trust the pharmaceutical companies nor the government. Because that oxycontin should have been regulated by the government. And Purdue Pharma should not have made the millions and millions they made off my people."

COVID-19 shutdowns also had harsh effects on small businesses, which are the most trusted institution in the United States.[84] "To many American workers, self-employment—however remote a possibility—seems to offer a more realistic chance to escape from working-class subordination than does a socialist transformation," wryly noted sociologists Reeve Vanneman and Lynn Weber Cannon.[85] "The main thing is to be independent and give your own orders and not have to take them from anybody else," a machine operator told an ethnographer.[86] Hats off to the abundance agenda for highlighting how regulations can make it hard to get things done—a problem of particular

concern to small businesses that lack the specialized staff and knowledge needed to navigate complex regulatory regimes.[87]

All this shapes attitudes toward government and regulation. Polling by Gallup found that only 28% of working-class respondents want to increase government regulation of business, with a huge (+45 points) class gap. Meanwhile, trust in government is near historic lows, at 17%.[88] It's no mystery why: again, inequality is associated with less trust in political institutions.[89] Trust in large corporations is even lower—it fell from 30% in 1999 to 16% today[90]—and 2024 data from the American National Election Study (ANES) and the General Social Survey (GSS), alongside polling conducted by the Center for Working-Class Politics (CWCP), show how broadly that suspicion of economic elites runs in the working class. In a 2024 survey of Pennsylvania voters, the CWCP found that 74% of noncollege Pennsylvanians said the wealthiest 1% serves its own interests rather than the country's, and roughly seven in 10 said the same of Wall Street, the pharmaceutical and insurance industries, multinational corporations, big political donors, and lobbyists.[91] In a separate national survey, CWCP analysis revealed that working-class respondents agreed by large majorities that government is "run by a few big interests" (87%), that "business leaders profit at the expense of ordinary people" (76%), and that there is real "conflict between ordinary people and those in power" (87%). Working-class people do not need to be persuaded that the economic elite exists or that it serves itself.[92]

If the working class distrusts the government and resents professionals, their feelings toward the wealthy themselves are ambivalent—and they retain real admiration for the self-made. "Every Latino man wants a big-ass truck. There's nothing wrong with that," to quote Arizona Senator Ruben Gallego. "You get your troca, start your own job, and you're going to become rich, right?"[93] (Troca is Spanglish for pickup truck.) "There's a lot of people out there who are wealthy and I'm sure they worked darned hard for every cent they have," a receiving clerk told an ethnographer.[94] This helps explain why "tax the rich" is not a high working-class priority—in fact, white college grads are the only group for whom it's high-priority (9th).

The pattern shows up cleanly in the data. In the 2024 ANES, 85% of college-educated Democrats favored raising income taxes on millionaires; among working-class Americans, only 60% did. And while 90% of college-educated Democrats rejected the idea that the country would be better run by "successful business leaders"; among the working class, 65% did.[95] In a

2022 CWCP poll, 70% of college-educated liberal Democrats reported feeling resentment toward rich people, compared with only 49% of working-class respondents. Working-class people don't necessarily want to lose their working-class roots; they want more money, and they are less likely than highly educated liberals to collapse a self-interested system into the personal villainy of the rich.

That asymmetry is a significant part of what makes anti-elite rhetoric work—or backfire. Attacks on "the rich" as a category can fall flat with working-class audiences who admire the self-made and don't personally resent the wealthy; attacks on a "rigged system" or "the greedy few" work startlingly well because they target specific groups of corrupt elites without indicting individual strivers or economic elites as a whole. The same surveys show that working-class anti-elite anger lands hardest not on the rich but on the governing elite—bureaucrats, Congress, parties—where working-class respondents are roughly 20 to 30 points more likely than college-educated Democrats to call government corrupt and wasteful, and about 20 points more likely to distrust it.[96] The intensity of working-class anti-elitism is at least equal to that of college-educated liberals; what differs is where it points. These ambivalent attitudes shape what anti-elitist rhetoric works.

These five patterns show up clearly in polling data. We generated a battery of questions in our Class Gaps Poll to capture this matrix of class values, and used responses on those questions to generate a quantitative Working-Class Values Scale (WCVS). We then looked at the correlation between the WCVS and survey responses by the two demographic groups we studied (liberal college grads with household incomes in the top 25% and noncollege grads with household incomes in the middle 50%). We found that the WCVS strongly predicts which of these groups a respondent belonged to. The WCVS shows remarkably similar patterns of political and social attitudes as our income/education/ideology-based measure of class. In short, the working-class values we have identified *do* play a key role in explaining the class gaps we describe throughout this report.

Section 5

Issue-by-issue results

This section crystallizes our findings issue by issue. (When this section uses the term "both groups," it refers to both liberal college grads and the working class.)

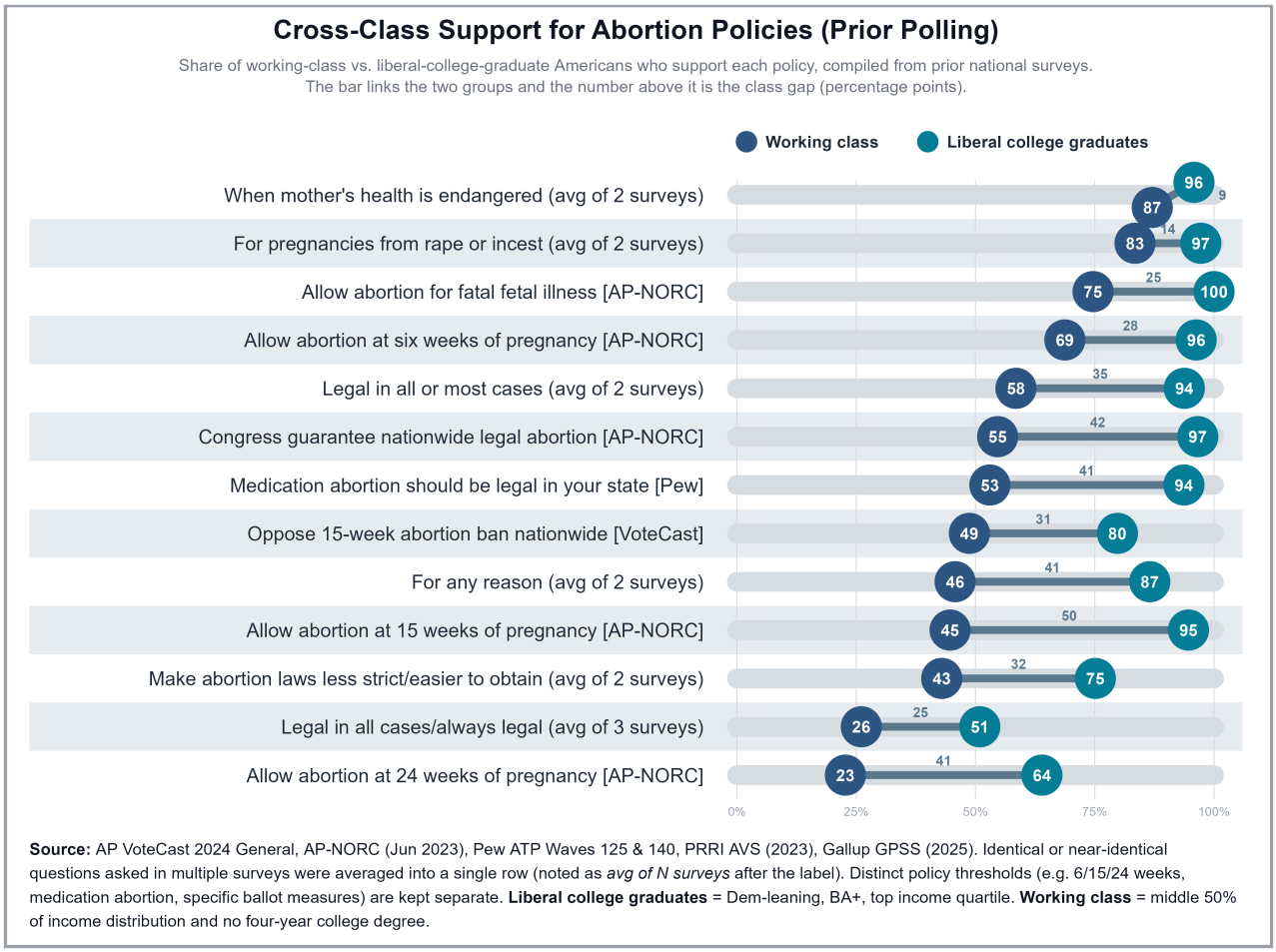
ABORTION RIGHTS AT A GLANCE

Big class gaps in both support and priority	Liberal college grads run 26 points more supportive of abortion rights than working-class respondents (81% vs. 55%). Abortion rights are also a dramatically higher priority for liberal college grads than working-class respondents: they're ranked as liberal college grads' 12th highest priority but working-class respondents ranked them 25th (out of 30).
Not much consensus	Over 75% support exists from both groups for abortion when a pregnancy endangers the mother's health, and in cases of fetal death, rape, and incest.
Reframing is moderately effective	Class-competent reframing that 1) anchors abortion rights in working-class people's "family comes first" ethic and 2) taps into distrust of government meddling raises working-class support from 50% to 61%. Changing messaging proved more effective than changing to a more "centrist" policy focus.

Elite Liberals and the Working Class View Abortion Very Differently

Abortion rights are an Identity Issue for liberal college grads (81% support)—but only 55% of working-class respondents support them. That 26-point mean gap is the fifth-largest class gap we found across any policy domain. Liberal college grads also prioritize abortion rights dramatically more highly (12th out of 30) than working-class respondents (25th), one of the largest prioritization gaps we found. Abortion is high-priority for many liberal college grads because it resonates with their felt entitlement to career and sexual self-actualization. Those aren't central working-class values; in fact, working-class people's "family comes first" ethic can weigh in favor of preserving a pregnancy.

Our findings are broadly consistent with prior polling, which found that only about a quarter of working-class respondents think abortion should always be legal (22–29%), compared to about half of liberal college grads (49–52%). In prior AP VoteCast and AP-NORC surveys, just under half (45-49%) of working-class respondents opposed a ban on abortions after 15 weeks, compared to 80-95% of liberal college grads. Less than a quarter (23%) of working-class respondents in a recent AP-NORC poll endorse abortion at 24 weeks, compared with two-thirds (64%) of college-educated liberals.



Source: AP VoteCast 2024 General, AP-NORC (Jun 2023), Pew ATP Waves 125 & 140, PRRI AVS (2023), Gallup GPSS (2025). Identical or near-identical questions asked in multiple surveys were averaged into a single row (noted as *avg of N surveys* after the label). Distinct policy thresholds (e.g. 6/15/24 weeks, medication abortion, specific ballot measures) are kept separate. **Liberal college graduates** = Dem-leaning, BA+, top income quartile. **Working class** = middle 50% of income distribution and no four-year college degree.

Not Much Consensus

Across prior polling, working-class respondents and liberal college grads share similar views on a narrow but consequential set of cases:

- **Abortion in cases of fatal fetal illness:** greater than 75% support from both groups.
- **Abortion when pregnancy endangers the mother's health:** greater than 86% support from both groups.
- **Abortion in cases of rape or incest:** greater than 82% support from both groups.

Since the overturning of *Roe v. Wade,* high-profile cases in Texas have educated the public about hospitals refusing to help women until their health or future fertility are seriously endangered—and that women who are denied abortions may be required to carry fetuses that

have died or soon will.[97] It's important to know there's a consensus that these things should not happen.

Reframing Can Increase Support

The most effective rhetoric combined the "family comes first" ethic with distrust of government meddling in family life. Here's the largest improvement:



The class-competent reframing produced an 11-point jump in working-class support, from 50% to 61%. Support among liberal college grads remained extremely high at 93%. Note that this message mentions no restrictions on abortion. Instead, it centers working-class values to defend free access.

Key Takeaway: Moderation Was the Weaker Play

We also tested a range of "centrist" variants, and none outperformed the class-competent reframe above. Given the prior polling (also discussed above) around 15- and 24-week limits, we tested various formulations proposing 15-week limits with later-term exceptions for the mother's health and safety. These drew 70–79% support from liberal college grads and 48–56% support from working-class respondents. The single most popular centrist message was very restrictive, limiting abortion after 15 weeks only to protect the physical safety of the mother and child, with 56% working-class and 79% liberal-elite support. That message did modestly raise working-class support over a plain pro-choice framing (50%), but it was the weaker strategy on both fronts: the class-competent version of unrestricted access to abortion drew more working-class support (61% vs. 56%) and far more from liberal college grads (93% vs. 79%). Moderating toward restrictions only gained ground against the weakest alternative: it beat the plain pro-choice wording with the working class by six points, but trailed the class-competent version with both groups.

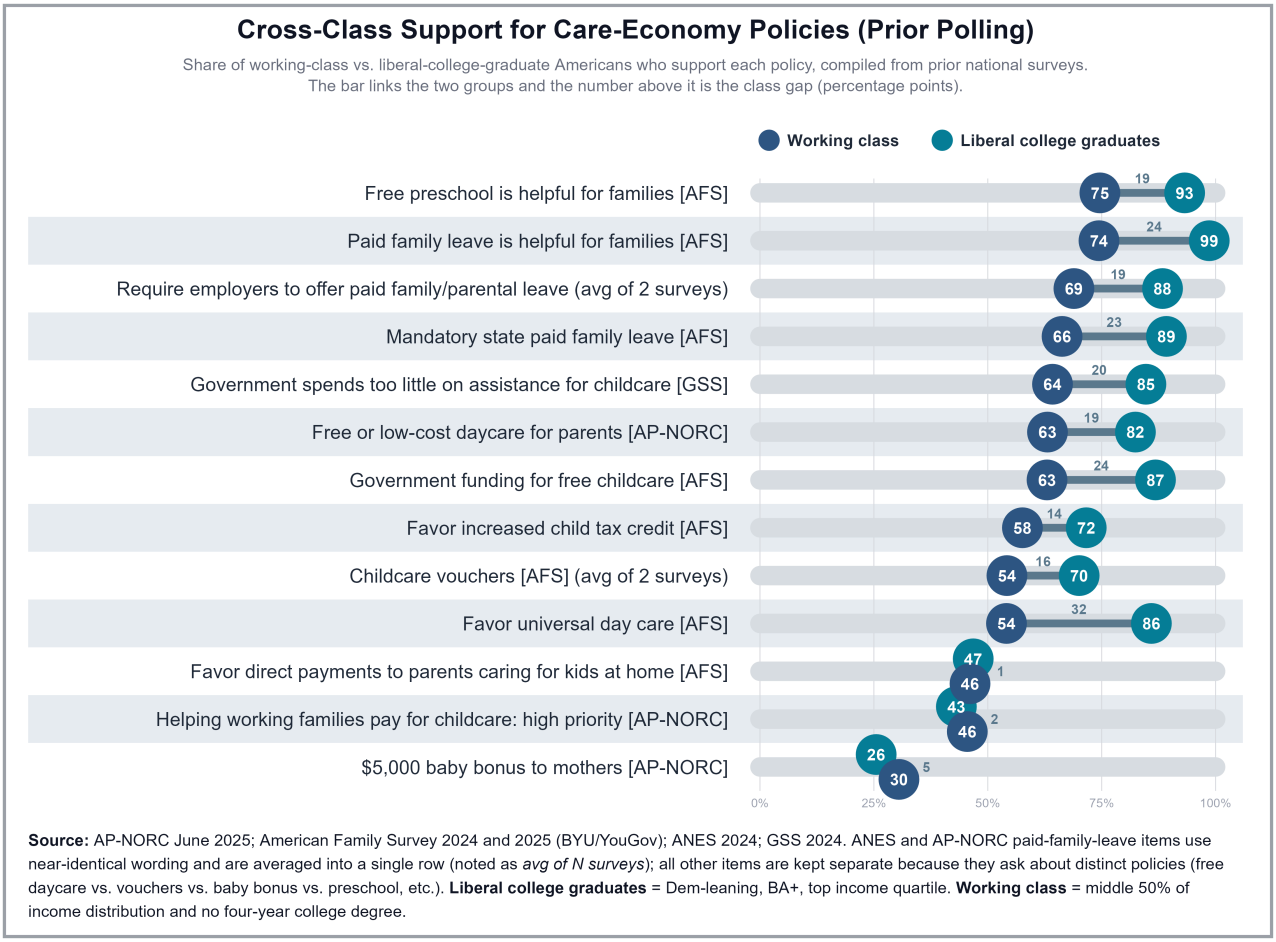
An analysis isolating the effect of word choice found that working-class respondents preferred "women" over "people" when referring to those seeking abortions. Also, working-class respondents preferred allowing later-term abortions for reasons relating to physical safety rather than simply "health and safety."

CARE ECONOMY AT A GLANCE

Care economy policies have high support; childcare has high priority	Childcare is a high priority both for liberal college grads and working-class respondents: it's liberal college grads' 7th highest priority and working-class people's 11th (out of 30). Class gaps on care economy issues average 17 points, the second lowest mean we observed for any issue. Super-majorities of both groups support care economy policies: about two-thirds of working-class people and over 80% of liberal college grads.
Broad consensus	All four care-economy policies tested draw over 70% support from both groups: paid parental leave (regardless of reframing) and childcare, child tax credits, and universal pre-K (when framed in class-competent language).
Reframing is very effective	The single largest effect we found for any issue (28 points) came from linking childcare to personal responsibility and the working-class work ethic. It lifted working-class support from 55% to 83%.

High Support for Care Economy Policies: Affordable Childcare is High Priority

The Class Gaps Poll found strong support for policies to help balance work and family: mean support is 89% for liberal college grads and 71% for working-class people. These results are broadly consistent with prior polling, which also showed that care work policies are Identity Issues for liberal college grads, with roughly two-thirds of working-class respondents supporting them.



Source: AP-NORC June 2025; American Family Survey 2024 and 2025 (BYU/YouGov); ANES 2024; GSS 2024. ANES and AP-NORC paid-family-leave items use near-identical wording and are averaged into a single row (noted as *avg of N surveys*); all other items are kept separate because they ask about distinct policies (free daycare vs. vouchers vs. baby bonus vs. preschool, etc.). **Liberal college graduates** = Dem-leaning, BA+, top income quartile. **Working class** = middle 50% of income distribution and no four-year college degree.

The big surprise came when we examined priorities. Paid leave, which has received the most attention, ranked as a very low priority for both groups (27th for liberal college grads, and 22nd for working-class people). In sharp contrast, affordable childcare is top-priority for both groups: 7th for liberal college grads and 11th for working-class people. Universal pre-K similarly ranked very low: 24th for working-class people, and 23rd for liberal college grads.

The class gaps on care-economy issues were substantial but smaller than on most other issues. Prior polling shows class gaps in the high teens to low twenties on most items (see the figure above), and our own Class Gaps Poll shows the same pattern: universal childcare produced the largest gap, at 30 points, followed by universal pre-K at about 23. The two smallest gaps were paid parental leave and child tax credits, at about 12 and 11 points respectively—working-class support falling within roughly a dozen points of liberal college grads.

The American Family Survey found near-identical, lukewarm support for direct payments to parents caring for kids at home (46% working class, 47% liberal college grads).

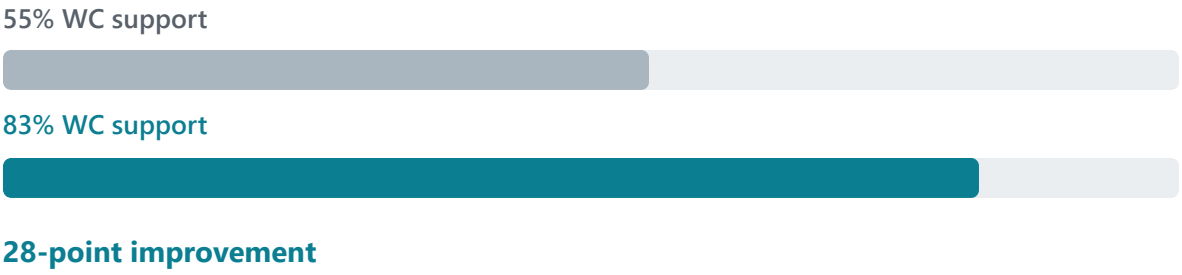
Working-Class Reframing Sharply Increases Support

When we tested the most commonly discussed care economy policies, we found that messaging matters a *lot*. Working-class reframing performed on average 16 points better than identical policies without it, one of the two largest mean effects we found across the entire study.

The single largest movement on any question in the study—28 points—came when we linked universal childcare to the working-class ethic of hard work and personal responsibility. The standard formulation ("a universal system of subsidized childcare") drew 55% working-class support; the working-class-resonant version drew 83% support, narrowing the class gap on this issue from 30 points to 13 points.

Universal Childcare

LIBERAL ELITE-RESONANT FRAMING	WC-RESONANT REFRAME
"Do you favor or oppose a universal system of subsidized childcare?"	*"Do you favor or oppose ensuring that all children have access to affordable, high-quality childcare so parents don't need to quit jobs they need to support their families?"*

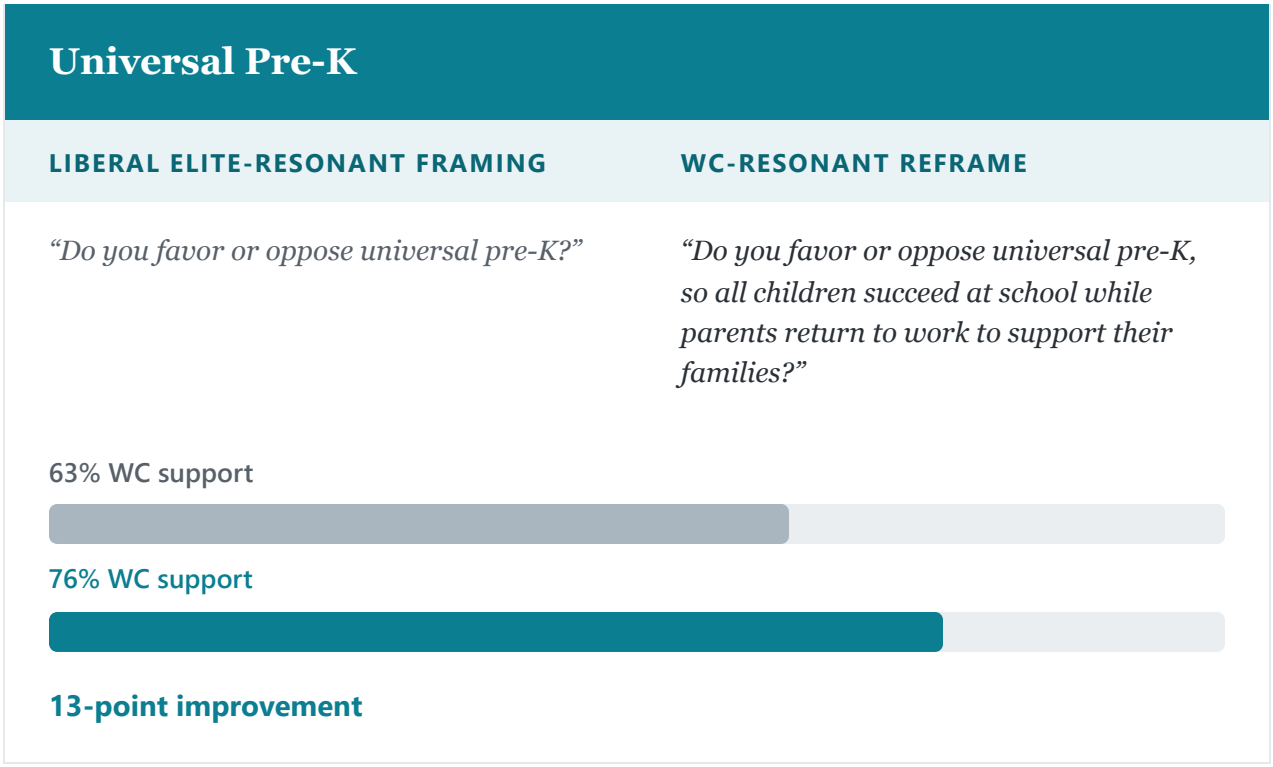


28-point improvement

The same pattern emerged for child tax credits, though less dramatically. The standard liberal framing—emphasizing child-poverty reduction—drew 73% working-class support. Reframing the policy as helping hardworking parents pay for childcare so they can keep their jobs lifted working-class support to 79%. This reframing also raised liberal college-grad support by 6

points—another reminder that class-competent reframing typically does not trade off against elite support.

We also see a substantial class reframing effect in the case of universal pre-K. By adding language that taps the working-class ethic of hard work and personal responsibility, we saw an increase in working-class support for universal pre-K from 63% to 76%.



Working-class support for universal pre-K is solid—63% under the standard framing, rising to 76% when reframed—fitting given that it has been passed in red states like Georgia, Oklahoma, West Virginia, Florida, and Alabama.[98] Our standard-framing result (63%) is in line with previous surveys.[99] A 2021 Civiqs/Daily Kos poll found 61% of Americans without a college degree favored free pre-K for all three- and four-year-olds, and the American Families Survey found 54% of working-class respondents endorsed "universal day care" as a good idea.[100] A couple of surveys run somewhat higher: a 2022 Education Next poll found 70% support among respondents without a college degree for government-funded pre-K for all four-year-olds,[101] and the American Families Survey found that 75% of working-class respondents agreed that "free preschool is helpful for families"—though the latter asks

respondents to evaluate a benefit rather than endorse a policy, which is a distinction that makes a difference.

Key Takeaway: Both Groups See Childcare as Higher Priority Than Paid Leave

Care economy policies generally have high support but low priority. The exception is childcare: both working-class and liberal college-grad respondents see affordable childcare as a moderately high priority. They see paid leave as a low priority, which is notable because care economy advocacy at the federal level has tended to center on paid leave. Notably, some recent political campaigns have centered on affordable childcare as an “affordability” issue.

LGBTQ+ RIGHTS AT A GLANCE

Large class gaps in both support and priority	We found a large class gap on LGBTQ+ rights: liberal college grads run 32 points more supportive than working-class respondents (77% vs. 44%). There's also a large prioritization gap: working-class respondents ranked LGBTQ+ rights dead last (30th out of 30 priorities) while liberal college grads ranked them 20th, the second-largest priority gap on any issue.
Limited but important consensus	Across prior polling, just one LGBTQ+ item clears 75% support among both groups: letting gay and lesbian couples adopt children (95% liberal college grads vs. 78% working class). One other comes close: protecting LGBTQ+ people from discrimination in jobs and housing (95% vs. 69%). Both rest on the same working-class logic: families come first, and people who work hard should not be fired or evicted for who they are.
Changing messaging is effective; changing tactics even more so	Working-class framing on one of the most polarizing LGBTQ+ questions—trans girls on girls' sports teams—moves working-class support from 20% to 43% and liberal college-grad support from 34% to 48%. Even reframed, support stays relatively low. Pivoting from sports to antidiscrimination in adoption, jobs, or housing sharply raises working-class support.

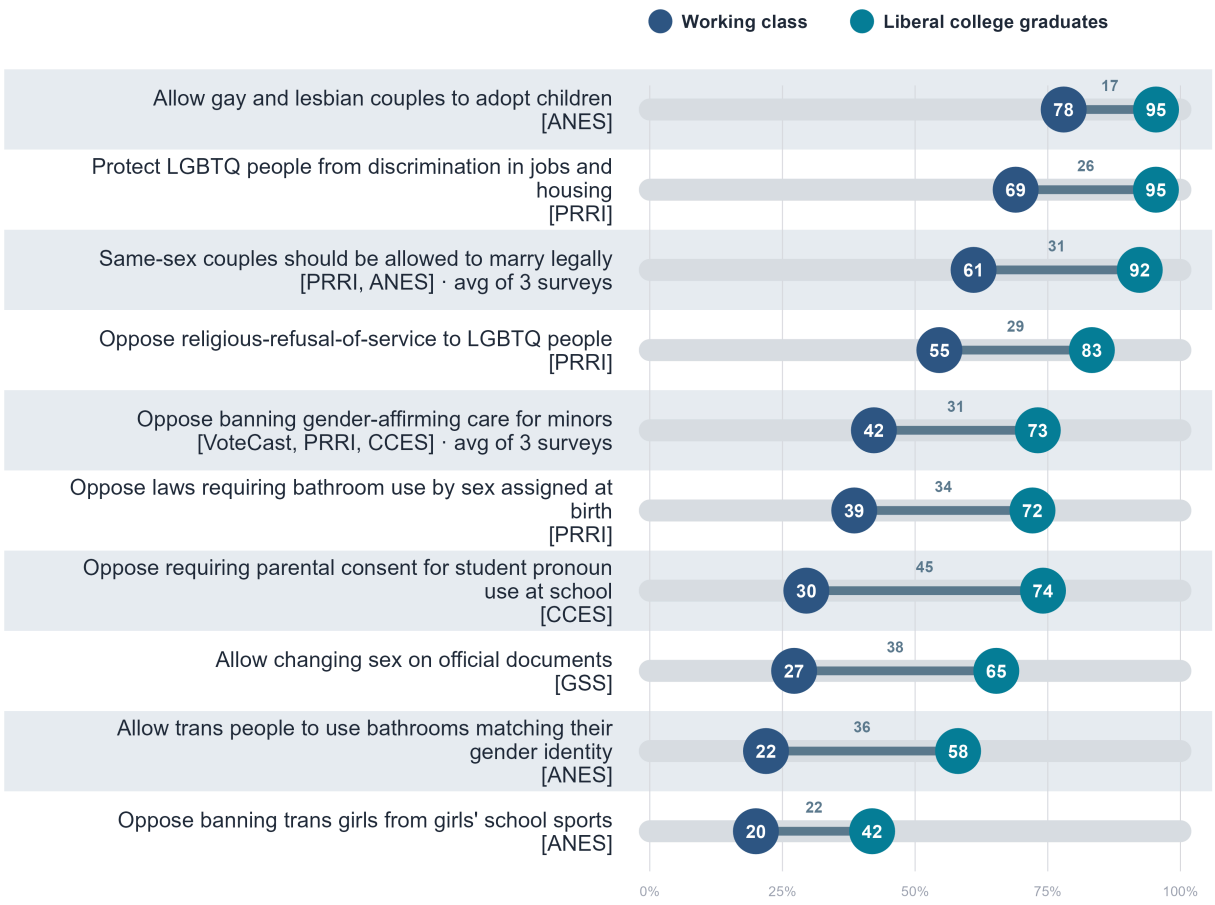
Liberal College Grads and the Working-Class View LGBTQ+ Rights Very Differently

More than three-quarters (77%) of liberal college grads support LGBTQ+ rights but fewer than half (44%) of working-class respondents do so. That 32-point mean support gap is the third-largest class gap we found across any policy domain. LGBTQ+ rights also saw one of the largest prioritization gaps: working-class respondents ranked LGBTQ+ rights dead last—30th out of 30—while liberal college grads ranked it 20th, the second-largest priority gap on any issue. LGBTQ+ rights resonate with liberal college grads' focus on self-actualization. Working-class respondents' lower endorsement reflects the higher value many place on traditional gender roles.

Our findings are broadly consistent with prior polling. The cross-class graph below pulls comparable LGBTQ+ rights items from a range of major recent surveys and shows the same overall shape we found in our own data: large class gaps across most items, with the steepest gaps on policies targeted specifically at trans people. Marriage equality shows a 31-point class gap, with 92% support from liberal college grads as opposed to 61% working-class support (averaged across three surveys). Measures targeted at trans people produce even wider gaps and substantially lower working-class support. Allowing trans people to use bathrooms matching their gender identity draws 58% support from liberal college grads versus just 22% working-class support—a 36-point gap. Opposing bans on gender-affirming care for minors averages 73% support from liberal college grads versus 42% working-class support across three surveys, a 31-point gap. Even among liberal college grads, fewer than half (42%) oppose banning trans girls from girls' school sports, and among working-class respondents just 20% do—a 22-point gap. The pattern is clear: cross-class agreement is rare on LGBTQ+ rights, with the steepest gaps on measures that focus exclusively on trans people.

Cross-Class Support for LGBTQ+ Rights Policies (Prior Polling)

Share of working-class vs. liberal-college-graduate Americans who support each policy, compiled from prior national surveys. The bar links the two groups and the number above it is the class gap (percentage points).



Source: AP VoteCast 2024 General, PRRI AVS (2023), ANES 2024, CCES 2024, GSS 2024. Identical or near-identical questions asked in multiple surveys were averaged into a single row (noted as *avg of N surveys* after the label). Distinct policy questions (bathroom access, sports participation, document changes, religious refusals, etc.) are kept separate. Non-policy items (perceptions of discrimination, movement attitudes, representation aspirations) are omitted. **Liberal college graduates** = Dem-leaning, BA+, top income quartile. **Working class** = middle 50% of income distribution and no four-year college degree.

Limited but Important Areas of Consensus

We found limited room for building cross-class bridges around LGBTQ+ policies. Across prior polling, just one LGBTQ+ item clears 75% support among both groups: letting gay and lesbian couples adopt children, at 78% working-class support and 95% support from liberal college grads. One other comes close: protecting LGBTQ+ people from discrimination in jobs and housing, at 69% working-class support and 95% support from liberal college grads.

What Working-Class Reframing Does

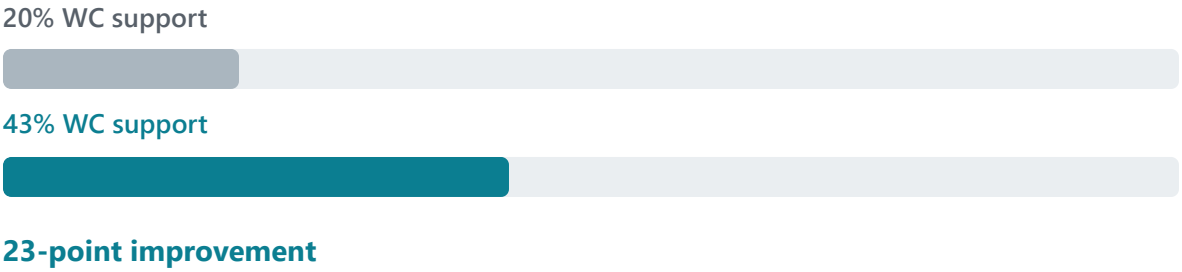
The surprisingly high endorsement of LGBTQ+ adoption rights reflects the working-class commitment to the family as a sphere of autonomy that shouldn't be intruded upon by the government, and the value placed on stability ("a stable, loving home"). Letting gay and lesbian couples adopt "if they can give kids a stable, loving home" draws 92% support from liberal college grads and 61% support from working-class respondents. There's still a class gap, but overall support is high across class. The same underlying policy, framed more abstractly as "guaranteeing full family equality and protecting the parenting rights of LGBTQIA+ families," drew nearly identical 92% liberal-elite support but working-class support dropped to 58% (still surprisingly high), suggesting the stable-loving-home framing does limited but real work with working-class respondents. Prior polling found even higher rates of working-class support for LGBTQ+ adoption, including an ANES poll that placed working-class support at 78%.

Our messaging used the same parents' rights frame that the right has used so effectively to undermine LGBTQ+ rights. After the Supreme Court ruled that the Constitution requires states to recognize gay marriage, the right did what the left too rarely does: sustained research. "In many ways, the trans sports ban was the test balloon in terms of how they can frame these things," said Nadine Smith of a liberal group in Florida. "Once they opened that parents' rights frame, they began to use it everywhere."[102] The parents' rights frame, of course, pits the rights of working-class parents to control what goes on in their families against the interference of busybody college-educated bureaucrats who think they know better.

When we tapped the same parents' rights frame to drive up support for trans girls on girls' sports teams, the results were striking. A baseline question asking about a law to "ban transgender girls from participating in K-12 girls' sports" appealed to only 20% of working-class respondents and 34% of liberal college grads. But a reframed version asking about a law that would "allow the government to overrule the decisions of parents and coaches when they allow a child who was born male but lives as a girl to participate in K-12 sports" appealed to 43% of working-class respondents and 48% of liberal college grads—more than doubling working-class opposition to the ban and shrinking the class gap from 14 points to just 5 points.

Trans Girls on Sports Teams

LIBERAL ELITE-RESONANT FRAMING	WC-RESONANT REFRAME
"Several states have considered laws that would ban transgender girls from participating in K–12 girls' sports. Do you favor, oppose, or neither favor nor oppose such a law?" (Progressive position = oppose)	*"Several states have considered laws that would allow the government to overrule the decisions of parents and coaches when they allow a child who was born male but lives as a girl to participate in K–12 sports. Do you favor, oppose, or neither favor nor oppose such a law?" (Progressive position = oppose)*



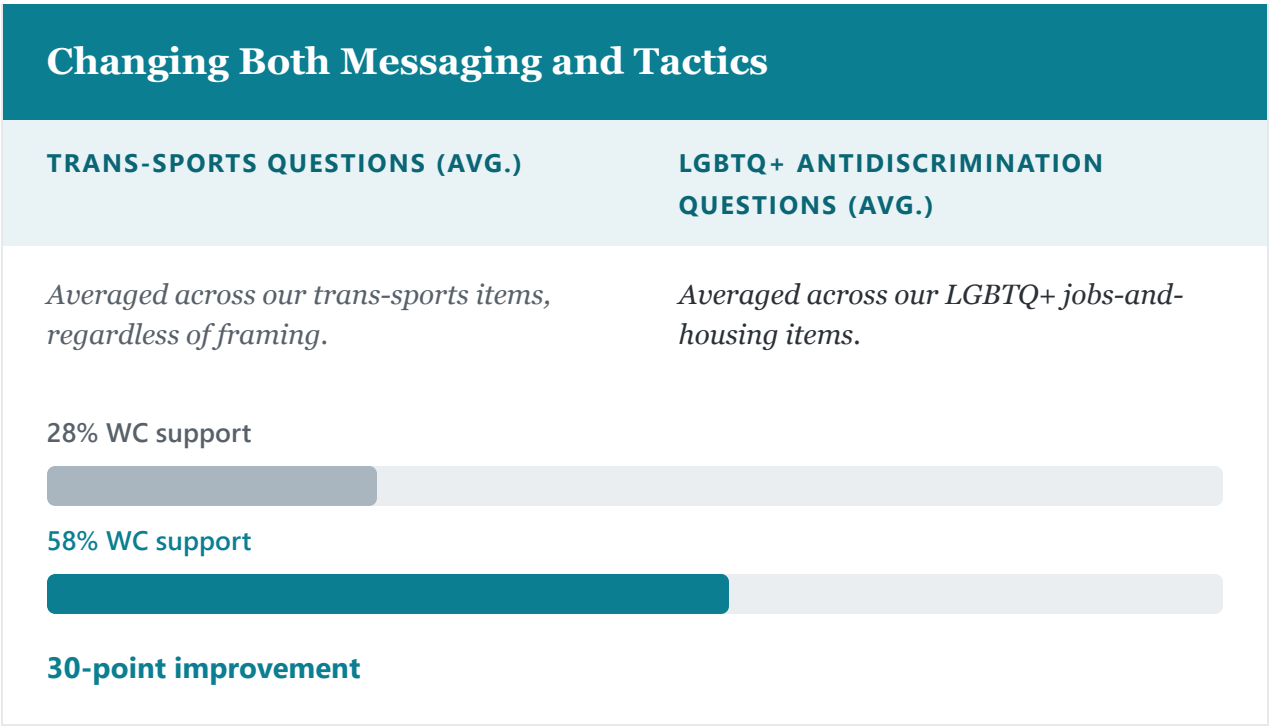
Yet even framed in class-competent language, less than half of working-class respondents support allowing trans girls on girls' sports teams, joined by 48% of liberal college grads. Moreover, our two attempts on the Class Gaps Poll to increase support didn't work, yielding only 22–28% working-class support and 44–50% support from liberal college grads. A prior ANES poll found that only 20% of working-class respondents opposed banning trans girls from girls' sports teams.

Why has trans girls on sports teams become so central to the debate on LGBTQ+ rights? The right chose to give it center stage because polling showed that this framing helped sway public opinion against LGBTQ+ rights. "We threw everything at the wall," said Terry Schilling, president of the American Principles Project, a conservative advocacy group.[103] "What has stuck is the issue of trans identity, particularly among young people."

As noted above, placing adoption rights at center stage sharply increases working-class support. The same is true when policies that eliminate discrimination against LGBTQ+ people in jobs and housing. Those garner up to 58% working-class support, along with nigh-universal

support from liberal college grads (92–93%). The high endorsement for eliminating discrimination in jobs and housing reflects the working-class view that hard work should yield a stable life: people who work hard shouldn't be fired, nor should people who pay their rent be evicted, just because of who they are. The Class Gaps Poll actually found lower levels of working-class support for job and housing antidiscrimination than some prior polls, which found up to 66% working-class support. A prior Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI) poll placed working-class support for antidiscrimination at 69%.

Changing Both Messaging and Tactics



Policies that relate only to transgender rights tend to garner lower levels of support than those that include a broader swathe of the LGBTQ+ community. Support for guaranteeing minors' access to gender-affirming care was 39% among working-class respondents under the standard wording, which asked about "prohibiting minors from receiving" such care, rising to 50% when the same policy was framed as allowing the government to second-guess parents' decisions when doctors say the care is needed — an 11-point gain. Among liberal college grads the same reframing moved support from 47% to 64%. This is the same parents' rights frame that moves working-class opinion on trans girls in sports. This support was in line with prior ANES, AP VoteCast, and Cooperative Election Study (CES) polling, which found that an average of 42% of working-class respondents opposed bans on gender-affirming care.

Working-class support is still lower (37–43%) for trans people to be able to get IDs that reflect the gender they live as, though liberal elites' support is higher (75–84%). Framing this as practical paperwork ("driver's licenses and other IDs so their paperwork matches how they live") rather than as abstract recognition ("legal gender recognition… to affirm their autonomy and dignity") added 6 points of working-class support and 9 points of liberal-elite support. A prior GSS poll placed working-class support for policies to allow trans people to update their documents to reflect their current gender at 27%.

Key Takeaway: Working-Class Reframing Drives up Support for Trans Girls on Sports Teams but Antidiscrimination Statutes Poll Much Higher

Working-class messaging can more than double working-class support for trans girls on sports teams, but we found no framing that gained majority support from either working-class or liberal college-grad respondents. Support for antidiscrimination legislation in employment, adoption, and housing all poll much higher, with support from up to three-fourths of working-class respondents and over 90% of liberal college grads. These data can help open up discussions among advocates about whether to change messaging, tactics, or both to build working-class support for LGBTQ+ rights in the future.

CLIMATE CHANGE AT A GLANCE

Major support gap and low priority	Liberal college grads run 29 points more supportive of climate change initiatives than working-class respondents—the fourth-largest class gap we found (87% vs. 58%). There is a 20-point prioritization gap: working-class Americans ranked climate change as only their 27th priority (out of 30); liberal college grads ranked it 15th.
Limited consensus	Support from both working-class and liberal elites clears 75% support on expanding solar and wind farms.
Reframing is extremely effective	Changing away from attacks on fossil fuels to focus instead on lower energy costs, good blue-collar jobs, and rebuilding American industry—a "build, baby, build" reframing—pushes working-class support to 76% while holding support among liberal college grads at 90%.

Elite Liberals and the Working Class View Climate Change Very Differently

Climate change is an existential issue but that doesn't mean it's a top priority for working-class Americans, who are often more focused on the end of the month than the end of the world. Average support for addressing climate change among working-class respondents in our Class Gaps Poll ran around 58%, but working-class respondents placed the issue 27th (out of 30) in their priorities. Climate change showed the third largest priority gap in support of any issue. Given that climate change is not a working-class priority, advocates need to link it to something that is.

Doing so may help raise climate change in liberal college grads' priorities, too. Surprisingly, for them it ranked only 15th. Among liberal college grads, however, support for climate change initiatives is an Identity Issue, with 87% support.

The mean class gap across the climate and environment battery of our survey is 29 points (87% liberal college-grad vs. 58% working-class). This is a testament to how effectively Big Oil has corroded working-class support for environmental policy. Happily, the class gap is not uniform: it runs widest on items asking about confronting fossil-fuel interests or eliminating fossil fuels, and narrows sharply on items that pitch clean energy in terms of pollution, utility bills, good-paying jobs, and competition with China. Climate action to rein in Big Oil produces the widest class gap, with support from 91% of liberal college grads versus just 50% working-class support—a 41-point gap. Committing to 100% clean energy by 2050 also receives majority working-class support, but the class gap is nearly as wide (86% vs. 51%, a 35-point gap). On the other hand, the class gap falls sharply to just 15 points when shifting to a clean energy power system is focused on pollution, lower utility bills, good-paying jobs, and competition with China.

The Class Gaps Poll also finds a strong racial dynamic in concern for climate change. The only group that ranked it in their top 10 priorities were white liberal college grads (who ranked it 6th out of 30).

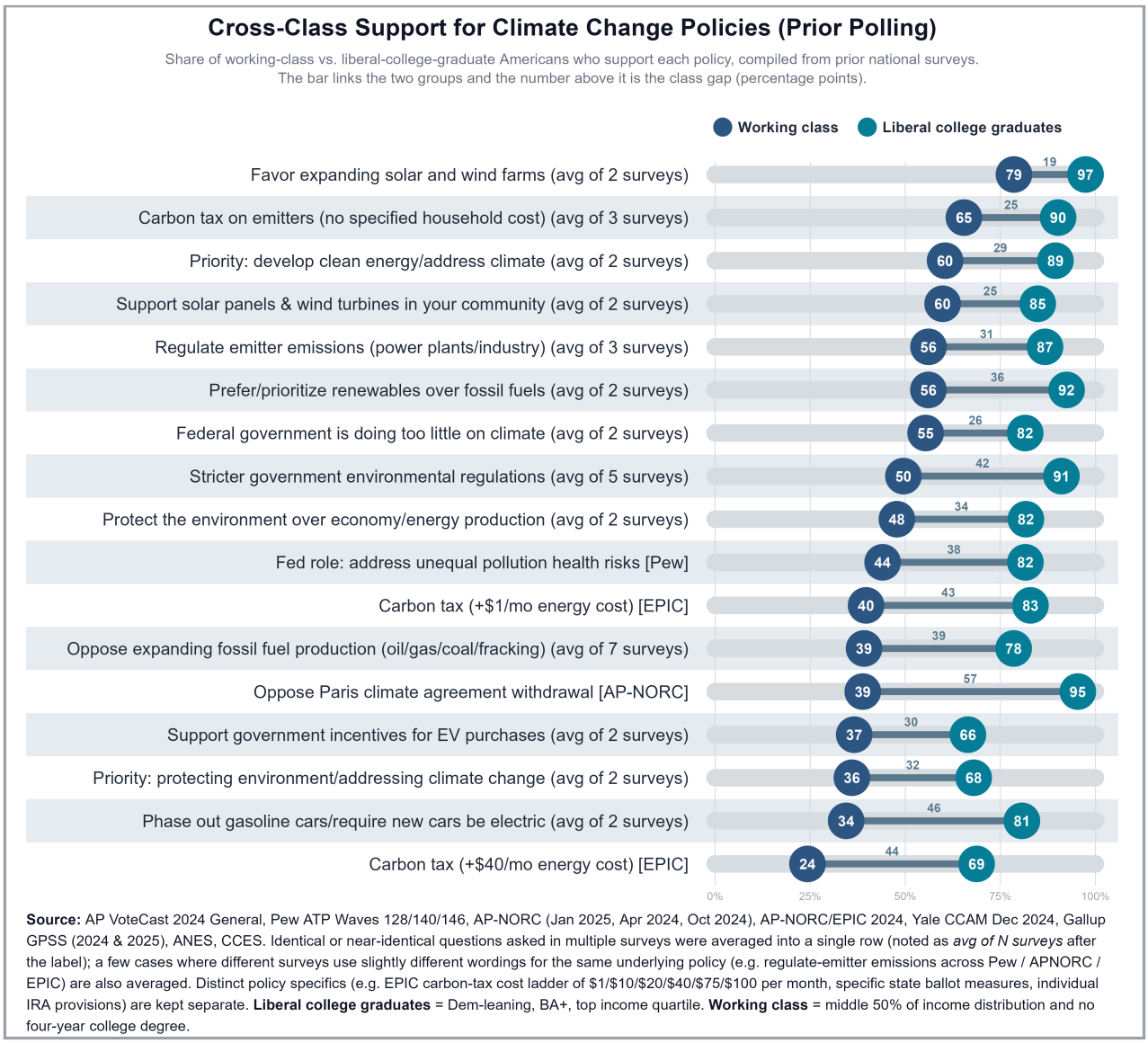
Climate change priority rank, by race and class (out of 30)

White		Latino		Black elite	
Liberal elite	Working class	Liberal elite	Working class	Liberal elite	Working class
6th	27th	23rd	26th	22nd	26th

In general, our findings are in keeping with prior polling, which found extreme class gaps on some issues, such as opposition to withdrawing from the Paris climate agreement (95% liberal elite but only 39% working-class support, a 57-point gap).

One of the least popular policy formulations highlights how much money climate change initiatives will cost households. A carbon tax that costs households just $1 a month draws only 40% working-class support (vs. 83% liberal elite, a 43-point gap). Working-class support collapses to 24% (vs. 69% liberal elite, a 44-point gap) if you raise the projected cost to $40 a month. Strikingly, when no household cost is specified and the carbon tax is described as falling on emitters, working-class support jumps to 65%, but a 25-point class gap remains.

EV policies to encourage electric over gas-powered vehicles fare similarly poorly: only 37% of working-class respondents favor government incentives for EV purchases. This probably reflects that EVs are associated with elites, both because they are more expensive than conventional cars and because popular culture associates EVs with elites: *South Park* describes Prius owners driving around "in an ocean of smug."[104] Just 34% of working-class respondents favor phasing out gasoline cars or requiring new cars be electric, even though 81% of liberal college grads favor the latter, producing one of the largest climate policy class gaps we observed (46 points). It's worth examining whether EVs are associated with elites, and how to change that.



Source: AP VoteCast 2024 General, Pew ATP Waves 128/140/146, AP-NORC (Jan 2025, Apr 2024, Oct 2024), AP-NORC/EPIC 2024, Yale CCAM Dec 2024, Gallup GPSS (2024 & 2025), ANES, CCES. Identical or near-identical questions asked in multiple surveys were averaged into a single row (noted as *avg of N surveys* after the label); a few cases where different surveys use slightly different wordings for the same underlying policy (e.g. regulate-emitter emissions across Pew / APNORC / EPIC) are also averaged. Distinct policy specifics (e.g. EPIC carbon-tax cost ladder of $1/$10/$20/$40/$75/$100 per month, specific state ballot measures, individual IRA provisions) are kept separate. **Liberal college graduates** = Dem-leaning, BA+, top income quartile. **Working class** = middle 50% of income distribution and no four-year college degree.

Working-Class Reframing is Extremely Effective in Increasing Support

To build on prior polling showing widespread agreement on expanding wind and solar farms (supported by 97% of liberal college grads and 79% of working-class respondents), we tested several formulations that pitched green energy as promising concrete economic gains for working-class families. The results were dramatic. To summarize our approach, we tested messages that stressed:

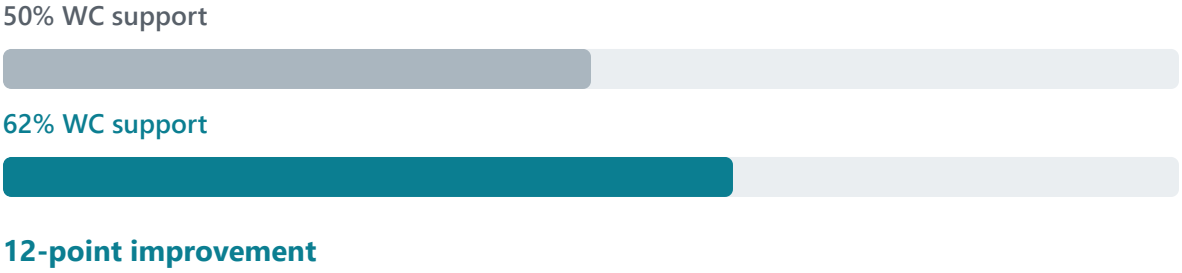
- Rebuilding the energy system to reduce energy costs and pollution while creating good-paying blue-collar jobs (supported by 90% of liberal college grads and 75% of working-class respondents)
- The same proposal paired with a "beat China" frame (90% liberal college grads and 76% working class).

The most modest reframe preserved the standard "transition to an energy economy by 2050" frame and just linked that message with lower energy bills, new local jobs, and pollution concerns. This reframe tapped into working-class place loyalty in two ways: by highlighting new *local* jobs and protecting *communities*. We also tapped into working-class worries about pollution, highlighted in prior polling as a working-class concern.[105] Working-class support rose from 51% to 57% while support from liberal college grads held steady at 88%.

Reframing climate change in anti-elitist language that focused on climate change's negative effects garnered similar levels of support. Note that being *specific* about *how* Big Oil's actions affect individuals' daily lives increased support by 12 points.

Rein in Corporate Profiteers

LIBERAL ELITE-RESONANT FRAMING	WC-RESONANT REFRAME
"Do you favor or oppose decisive climate action now to stop Big Oil from externalizing the costs of fossil fuels while pocketing the profits—leaving families, communities, and taxpayers to pay for pollution, disasters, and rising insurance costs?"	*"Do you favor or oppose reining in out-of-control corporations who profit from pollution while working people pay the price—families lose their homes to floods and wildfires, home insurance becomes unaffordable, and mechanics are stuck fixing cars in 117-degree heat?"*



12-point improvement

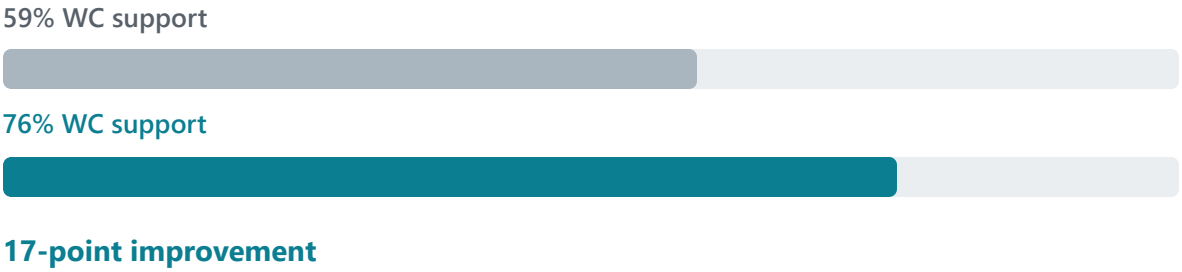
Abandoning any focus on fossil fuels and talking instead only about kitchen-table economics dramatically increased working-class support. While advocating for major investments and acknowledging increased costs drew only 59% working-class support, reframing the same investment as rebuilding the American energy system, lowering costs, and reshoring manufacturing—"build, baby, build"—pushed working-class support to 76%. Liberal elite support remained at 90%. This message melded five themes with working-class resonance:

- Concerns over rising costs
- The promise of a broad range of well-paid blue-collar jobs (naming them specifically so that people could imagine them in their communities)
- Working-class patriotism/anxieties about being outcompeted by China
- Concerns over pollution
- A catchy phrase that signaled the survey respondent was in on a joke—"drill, baby, drill" became "build, baby, build."

This performed the best of any climate change reframing.

Blue-Collar Jobs, Antipollution, and Outcompete China

LIBERAL ELITE-RESONANT FRAMING	WC-RESONANT REFRAME
"Do you favor or oppose major investments in energy efficiency and cleaner power to reduce pollution and address the climate crisis even if this raises the cost of energy a little?"	*"Do you favor or oppose rebuilding our energy system to tackle rising energy costs and pollution while growing the economy and creating millions of new jobs in construction, manufacturing, and energy upgrades here at home—rather than sending jobs and investment overseas to China—'build, baby, build'?"*



17-point improvement

A common formulation is that climate change will hurt marginalized communities the most, which is certainly true. However, "prioritizing marginalized people, particularly Black, brown, and indigenous communities most affected by climate change" drew just 37% working-class support and only 72% support from liberal college grads, the lowest on any climate change question. Race matters a lot on this question, as shown by the chart below.

Prioritizing marginalized communities: support by race and class (%)

Black		Latino		White	
Liberal elite	Middle 50%	Liberal elite	Middle 50%	Liberal elite	Middle 50%
75	64	83	51	73	27

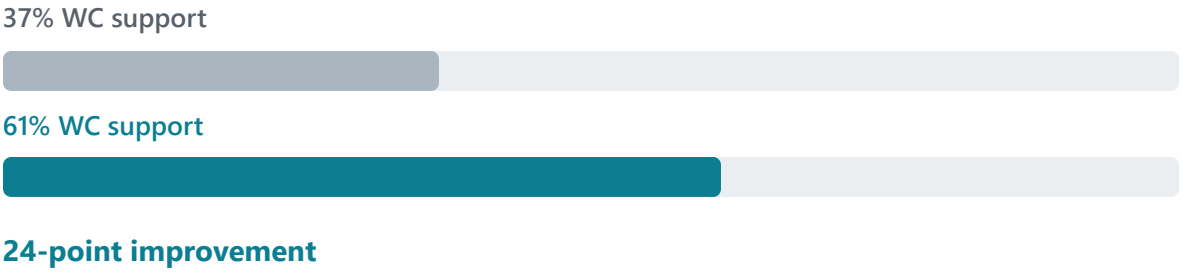
This formulation was overwhelmingly popular among elites across the board, while enjoying solid but lower support among working-class African Americans, barely clearing 50% support among working-class Latinos, and falling to just 27% among working-class whites. That's not

surprising, because the phrase “particularly Black, brown, and indigenous communities” can be read as prioritizing the needs of marginalized people of color but leaving out marginalized white people.

We tried to come up with an item that would garner a higher level of support while preserving the idea of communities left behind. We found a formulation that raised working-class support from 37% to 61%, but there’s a cost: we centered white communities rhetorically (“coal communities”). Environmental justice advocates will have to grapple with whether this is worthwhile in order to build support for climate change policies that will help Black, brown, and indigenous communities along with working-class white ones.

Marginalized Communities

LIBERAL ELITE-RESONANT FRAMING	WC-RESONANT REFRAME
"Do you favor or oppose prioritizing marginalized people, particularly Black, brown, and indigenous communities most affected by climate change?"	*"Do you favor or oppose prioritizing projects in coal country and working-class communities across the country that would fuel the next generation of economic growth, like large-scale batteries, lower-carbon cement and steel, and carbon-capture infrastructure?"*



Key Takeaway: Don’t Throw out the Baby with the Bathwater

Disillusionment at the lack of support for the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) may have soured advocates on the idea of linking climate change with jobs. But don’t throw out the baby with the bathwater. The IRA had a couple fatal flaws:

- The messaging. The IRA was consistently messaged as “the largest climate investment in our history,” not as a jobs bill. Prior polling shows that only about a quarter of working-class respondents say the IRA helped the U.S. economy (23%) or working-class people (20%).
- The name. The IRA was transparently a climate change bill disguised as something it wasn’t, which may have triggered the anti-elitist sentiment that elites were trying to manipulate people.

The rapid repeal of the IRA was painful, but the key message isn’t that linking climate change with jobs won’t work. Instead, the key message is that the IRA was repealed when Biden left office, while the CHIPS and Science Act—messaged solely as a jobs bill—survived. So, if you care about climate change, talk about costs and jobs.

Another key challenge is that no group other than white liberal college grads place climate change in their top 10 priorities. More work is needed to raise the salience of this issue for other groups before climate change can serve as an effective coalition-building tool.

IMMIGRATION AT A GLANCE

Big support and priority gaps, though border security is low-priority	Upper-middle-class liberals run 32 points more supportive of immigrants' rights than working-class voters—the third-largest class gap in our study. While working-class respondents gave "border security" low-priority (21st out of 30), they also preferred Trump's immigration policies over Biden's by nearly two-to-one, even while a majority said Trump has "gone too far."
Some consensus	75%+ support from both groups for: DACA protections, deporting violent criminals, high-skilled immigrants, and immigration to fill a labor shortage.
Reframing is very effective	Class-competent reframing produced some of the largest reframing effects we found, increasing working-class support by up to 22 points without significant cost to elite support. Working-class reframing of ICE accountability increases working-class support from 47% to 59%. Shifting focus away from deportation policy and onto a path to citizenship framed in working-class resonant terms increases working-class support by 22 points, from 48% to 70%.

Liberal College Grads and the Working Class View Immigration Very Differently

Immigrants' rights are an Identity Issue for liberal college grads, with roughly 90% support. Working-class support is dramatically lower, at 58%. That 32-point gap is the third-largest class gap we found across any policy domain (behind defense of democracy and LGBTQ+ rights). Clearly, current advocacy framings fail to connect with a broad swathe of working-class Americans.

The single largest class gap we found in prioritization on any issue was on border security (28 points difference). The good news, however, is that border security isn't currently high-priority: working-class respondents ranked it as their 21st priority (out of 30). Perhaps border

security is a lower priority now than in 2024? We could not find any priority polling to assess this.

The huge class gaps in both support and prioritization make immigration fertile ground for anti-elitist fervor. No far-right movement has been successful without mobilizing grievances over immigration. This issue works for the far right because it combines five elements into a very powerful package: economic anxieties (immigrants "taking our jobs"); racial anxieties (fear of a country that's not majority-white);[106] cultural anxieties (reflecting the tension between elites' cosmopolitanism and non-elites' place loyalty);[107] a distaste for public disorder ("disorder at the border"); and dislike of people who don't follow the rules.

The growing unpopularity of the current administration's deportation policies should not be mistaken for support for what went before.[108] Asked in February 2026 whether they preferred Biden's or Trump's immigration policies (*after* the killings of Renee Good and Alex Pretti), only 36% of working-class respondents said Biden's, compared with 78% of liberal college grads. At the same time, 56% of those same working-class respondents agreed that "Trump has gone too far, with masked men arresting ordinary hardworking people instead of just deporting criminals." Many working-class people are uneasy with how Trump's policies were being executed but they still prefer them to Biden's by nearly two-to-one.

Prior polling highlights low support for certain policies. Some individual polls show support for increasing immigration running as low as 12–17% among working-class respondents (and only about 21–28% among liberal college grads), and support for refugees and asylum seekers as low as 20–29% (and 45–53% for liberal college grads). Roughly twice as many working-class respondents (60%) see immigration as a threat to democracy, compared to 29% of liberal college grads (SSRS, July 2023).

Too often, immigration advocacy is framed around liberal college grads' cosmopolitan sympathies without attending to the higher premium working-class Americans put on place loyalty and public order. Many working-class people also view undocumented immigrants as a potential job threat. Only 45% of working-class respondents disagree that immigrants take jobs from Americans, compared to 95% of liberal college grads (KFF, September 2024). Particularly in rural areas, the agencies enforcing immigration law (ICE, Border Patrol) may represent job opportunities, because they offer some of the few stable, well-paid jobs available

to people without college degrees. These factors shape very different sentiments surrounding immigration enforcement than those of liberal college grads.

The Hidden Consensus

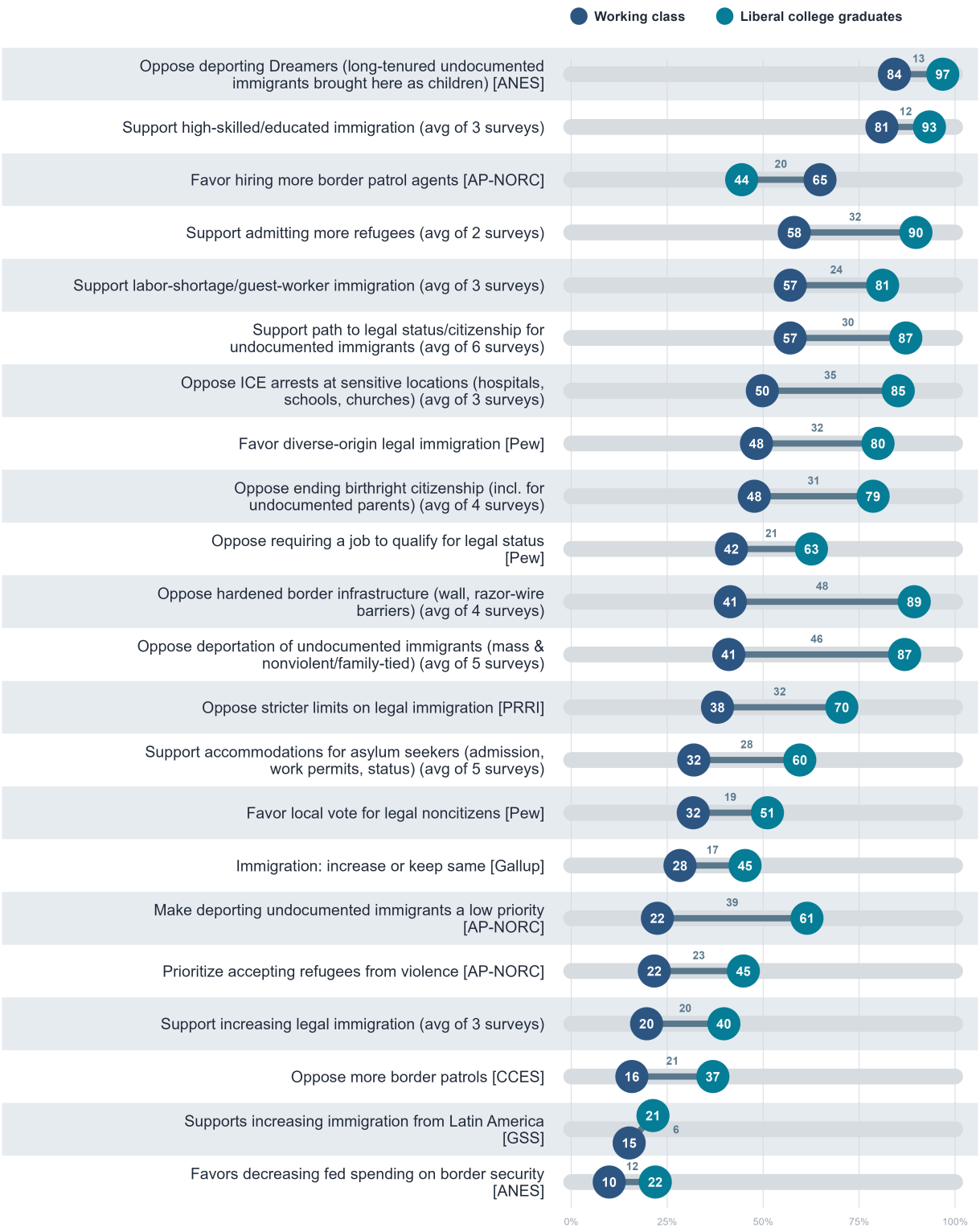
And yet there's a consensus hiding in plain sight. Prior polling found that working-class respondents and liberal college grads share similar views on several important immigration policies:

- **DACA/no deportation of long-tenured undocumented children:** 84% working class (WC) vs. 97% liberal college grads (LCG)
- **Deportation of immigrants who have committed violent crimes:** 83% WC vs. 86% LCG
- **Priority for immigrant workers during labor shortages:** 78% WC vs. 94% LCG
- **Priority for high-skilled immigrants:** 88% WC vs. 94% LCG

In addition, the Class Gaps Poll found 70% working-class support for a path to citizenship when that policy was framed to resonate with working-class values. The logic that links all four findings is that belonging is earned through contribution and forfeited through harm. That logic supports citizenship for hardworking immigrants, shields those brought here as children, and demands the removal of those who commit violent crimes. It also explains the support for high-skilled immigrants and those who fill labor shortages; those immigrants are welcomed precisely because they're doing work the country needs done. What looks like ambivalence on immigration is actually consistency: working-class respondents seek to reward hard work, penalize violence, and reward contributing members of their communities. Our reframing built upon this consensus. The chart below groups each policy's closely related poll questions into a single averaged bar; where a policy area also spans more contested framings, its combined bar can run below the specific high-agreement items listed above.

Cross-Class Support for Immigration Policies (Prior Polling)

Share of working-class vs. liberal-college-graduate Americans who support each policy, compiled from prior national surveys. The bar links the two groups and the number above it is the class gap (percentage points).



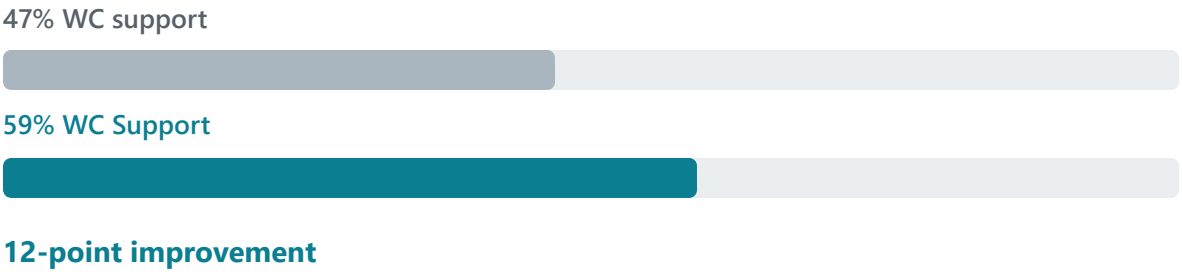
Source: AP VoteCast 2024 General, Pew ATP Waves 140/146/151, AP-NORC (Jan 2025 & Mar 2024), PRRI AVS (2023), Gallup GPSS (2025), ANES 2024, CCES 2024, GSS 2024. Identical or near-identical questions asked in multiple surveys were averaged into a single row (noted as *avg of N surveys* after the label). Distinct policy targets (specific groups, specific requirements, ballot-measure wordings) are kept separate. **Liberal college graduates** = Dem-leaning, BA+, top income quartile. **Working class** = middle 50% of income distribution and no four-year college degree.

What Working-Class Reframing Does

Progressives can build stronger support among working-class voters by reframing the way they talk about immigration to tap into values that will make their positions on immigration land more effectively with working-class voters—messaging that centers respect for hard work, personal responsibility and law-abidingness, and the importance of personal security. Reframing ICE violence as abuse by out-of-control government agents of hardworking immigrants who contribute to their communities increased working-class support by 12 points.

Addressing ICE Violence

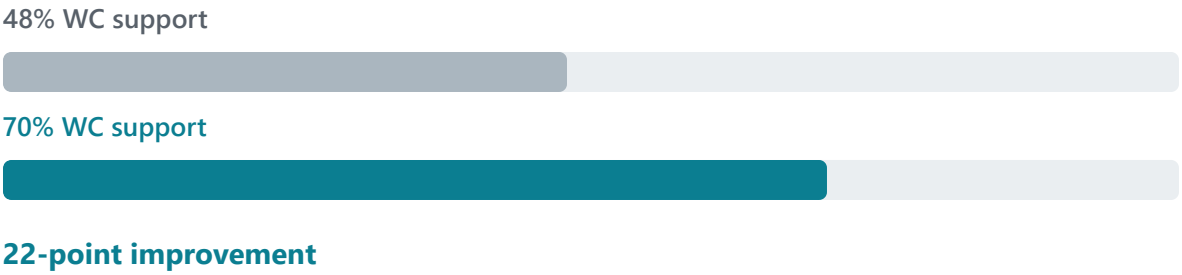
LIBERAL ELITE-RESONANT FRAMING	WC-RESONANT REFRAME
"We should abolish ICE because it's responsible for causing havoc in the streets, terrorizing American communities, and shooting and beating people with no remorse. ICE cannot be 'reformed,' only dismantled."	*"We should rein in and restructure federal immigration enforcement to put an end to masked government agents killing civilians and arresting hardworking immigrants who hold jobs, pay taxes, and contribute to their communities."*



Linking the same working-class reframe with a shift in focus away from deportation policy onto a path to citizenship yielded even greater gains: 70% working-class support.

Pathway to Citizenship

LIBERAL ELITE-RESONANT FRAMING	WC-RESONANT REFRAME
A just immigration system upholds the human rights of our neighbors and lets them stay in their communities.	*Immigrants who have held jobs, paid taxes, contributed to their communities, and stayed out of trouble for years should be allowed to stay.*



22-point improvement

Key Takeaway: Hard Choices Abound

Messaging that depicts immigrants as hardworking and law-abiding increases working-class support both for sane deportation policies and a path to citizenship. It's controversial within the immigrants' rights community to separate "deserving" from "undeserving" immigrants in any way—particularly among immigrants' rights lawyers who see clients mischaracterized as "undeserving" for slight (or no) infractions. This position comes with sharp trade-offs that will no doubt spark discussion within the immigrants' rights community.

PUBLIC SAFETY AT A GLANCE

Huge priority gap; small support gap	"Lowering the crime rate" is one of only two non-economic issues in working-class respondents' top 10 priorities (ranked 8th; liberal college grads rank it close to last—26th out of 30). The huge prioritization gap is matched by the smallest mean class gap in support we found on any issue: just 13 points (69% working-class vs. 82% liberal college-grad support for progressive public safety policies).
Surprising consensus	Both classes converge on a "more cops plus accountability" formulation: 82% of working-class respondents and 87% of liberal college grads. There's also broad cross-class support for the idea that racism in policing is a serious problem: two-thirds (66%) of working-class respondents and 89% of liberal college grads agree.
Reframing is extremely effective	Changing tactics from a focus on shifting police resources or responsibilities to coupling more cops in high-crime areas with greater accountability for bad behavior raises working-class support by between 15 and 29 points. Working-class reframing of the response to nonviolent mental-health calls raises working-class support from 53% to 67%.

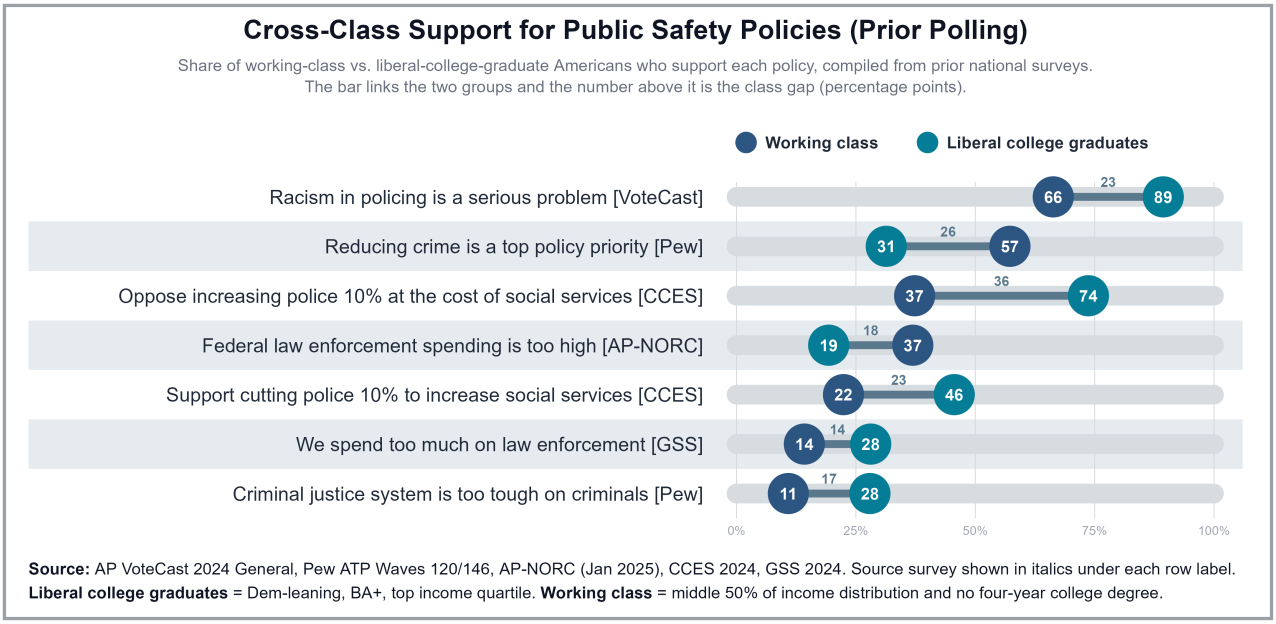
Liberal College Grads and the Working Class Prioritize Public Safety Very Differently

The prioritization gap on lowering the crime rate is huge: it's in the top 10 working-class priorities but liberal college grads place it close to dead last. Pew data also found working-class Americans nearly twice as likely as liberal college grads to believe that reducing crime should be a top policy priority. The key values are safety and security for working-class voters. For liberal college grads, the key values are ending police abuse and addressing structural racism in law enforcement.

The large prioritization gap is joined by the smallest mean class gap we observed in support on any given issue: 13 points, with support from liberal college grads at 82%, and working-class support at 69%.

The class gap is narrow for two reasons. First, the working class is not, on the whole, hostile to police reform; second, liberal college grads aren't as negative about police as one might assume. Previous polling indicates that over two-thirds (66%) of working-class Americans believe racism in policing is a serious problem, joined by 89% of liberal college grads. Other polling found that fewer than a fifth of respondents think we spend too much on law enforcement—roughly 14% of working-class respondents and 28% of liberal college grads, though the small subsample makes that gap imprecise. Only 11% of working-class Americans believe the criminal justice system is too tough on criminals, compared with 28% of liberal college grads.

What working-class voters reject is the zero-sum framing—the idea that ending police misconduct requires fewer police on the street. Prior polling also confirms that "defund the police" polls poorly. Only a quarter of working-class respondents endorse cutting the police by 10% to free up funding for other social services, compared with less than half of liberal college grads. Likewise, only 37% of working-class Americans (and 74% of liberal college grads) oppose the idea of increasing police funding by 10%, which would be paid for by decreasing other services.



What Working-Class Reframing Does

When reform is not seen as zero-sum trade-off with public safety, cross-class support is strong. Three items in our class gaps battery clear two-thirds support among working-class respondents and run even higher among liberal college grads:

- **"Putting more well-trained officers in high-crime areas while enforcing strict rules so bad cops face consequences"**: 82% working-class (WC) support and 87% liberal college grad (LCG) support—a 5-point class gap, the smallest on any item in our study.
- **"Sending trained specialists instead of police to respond to nonviolent calls like mental-health crises, so police can focus on serious crime"**: 67% WC support, compared with 90% LCG support.
- **"Focusing police on the small group causing most shootings and funding programs that keep local kids from getting pulled into trouble"**: 66% WC support, with even higher (77%) LCG support.

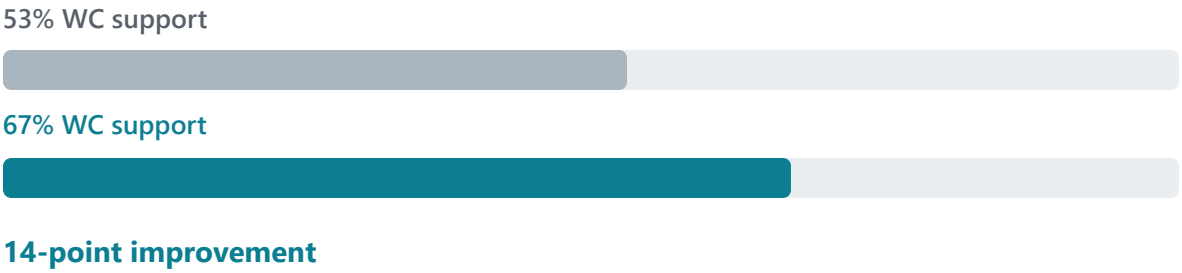
All three items share a structural feature: each pairs a reform component (accountability, specialist response, prevention) with an explicit affirmation that police will still handle serious crime. None of them frames reforms to address misconduct as a substitute for law enforcement; all treat the two as complementary. Working-class voters will sign up for

sweeping police reform as long as they don't have to trade away the police presence they want in their own neighborhoods.

We tested a series of working-class reframings. The clearest gain came on police responses to mental-health crises: decoupling specialist response from defunding raised working-class support by 14 points and liberal college-grad support remained steady at the top of the scale.

Mental Health Response

LIBERAL ELITE-RESONANT FRAMING	WC-RESONANT REFRAME
"Do you favor or oppose shifting funding from police to address mental health needs, rehabilitation, and the root causes of crime, like poverty and racism?"	*"Do you favor or oppose sending trained specialists instead of police to respond to nonviolent calls like mental-health crises, so police can focus on serious crime?"*



14-point improvement

Violence prevention also polls strongly when linked with safer neighborhoods: nearly two-thirds of working-class respondents supported it. Interestingly, adding "woke" language decreased support only a bit. Replacing "community programs to address poverty and structural racism that leads to crime" with "programs that keep local kids from getting pulled into trouble" raised working-class support by just 4 points (from 62% to 66%)—a smaller reframe gain than we saw on the abortion or climate batteries, but also a sign that an isolated phrase like "structural racism" costs only 4 points. The question that mentioned structural racism while also targeting police actions at the small group responsible for most crime received a surprisingly high level of support among working-class respondents (62%).

Violence Prevention

LIBERAL ELITE-RESONANT FRAMING	WC-RESONANT REFRAME
"Do you favor or oppose combining targeted police action to stop the small group causing most shootings with community programs to address poverty and structural racism that leads to crime?"	*"Do you favor or oppose focusing police on the small group causing most shootings and funding programs that keep local kids from getting pulled into trouble?"*

62% WC support



66% WC support



4-point improvement

A shift in tactics beats shifting resources away from police

Shift police resources/responsibilities

"Send trained specialists instead of police to respond to nonviolent calls"



67% WC support

"Shift funding from police to social services"



53% WC support

More police & accountability

"More well-trained officers in high-crime areas while enforcing strict rules so bad cops face consequences"



82% WC support

A 15- to 29-point gain, depending on the framing it replaces

The largest single reframing effect, however, came from a shift in tactics rather than messaging alone. Changing tactics from a focus on shifting police resources or responsibilities, to coupling more cops in high-crime areas with greater accountability for police who break the rules, raises working-class support by between 15 and 29 points. In particular, support for "putting more well-trained officers in high-crime areas while enforcing strict rules so bad cops face consequences," hit 82% support among working-class respondents, joined by 87% support from liberal college grads (with just a 5-point class gap).

Note that this is not a reframe of an existing reform tactic but a substantive change to the policy bundle: more cops paired with strict accountability. Advocates are best placed to make these kinds of trade-offs—but they should make them with good information about the costs and benefits of various alternatives.

Key Takeaway: Working-class People Want Both Safer Neighborhoods and Police Reform

Working-class people want safer streets, they believe racism in policing is a real problem, and they will support reform—sometimes overwhelmingly—as long as the case for reform respects their prioritization of safety rather than asking them to trade it away. Two-thirds of working-class respondents already think racism in policing is serious. There is no need to back off from efforts to curb police misconduct or insist on ending racism in policing.

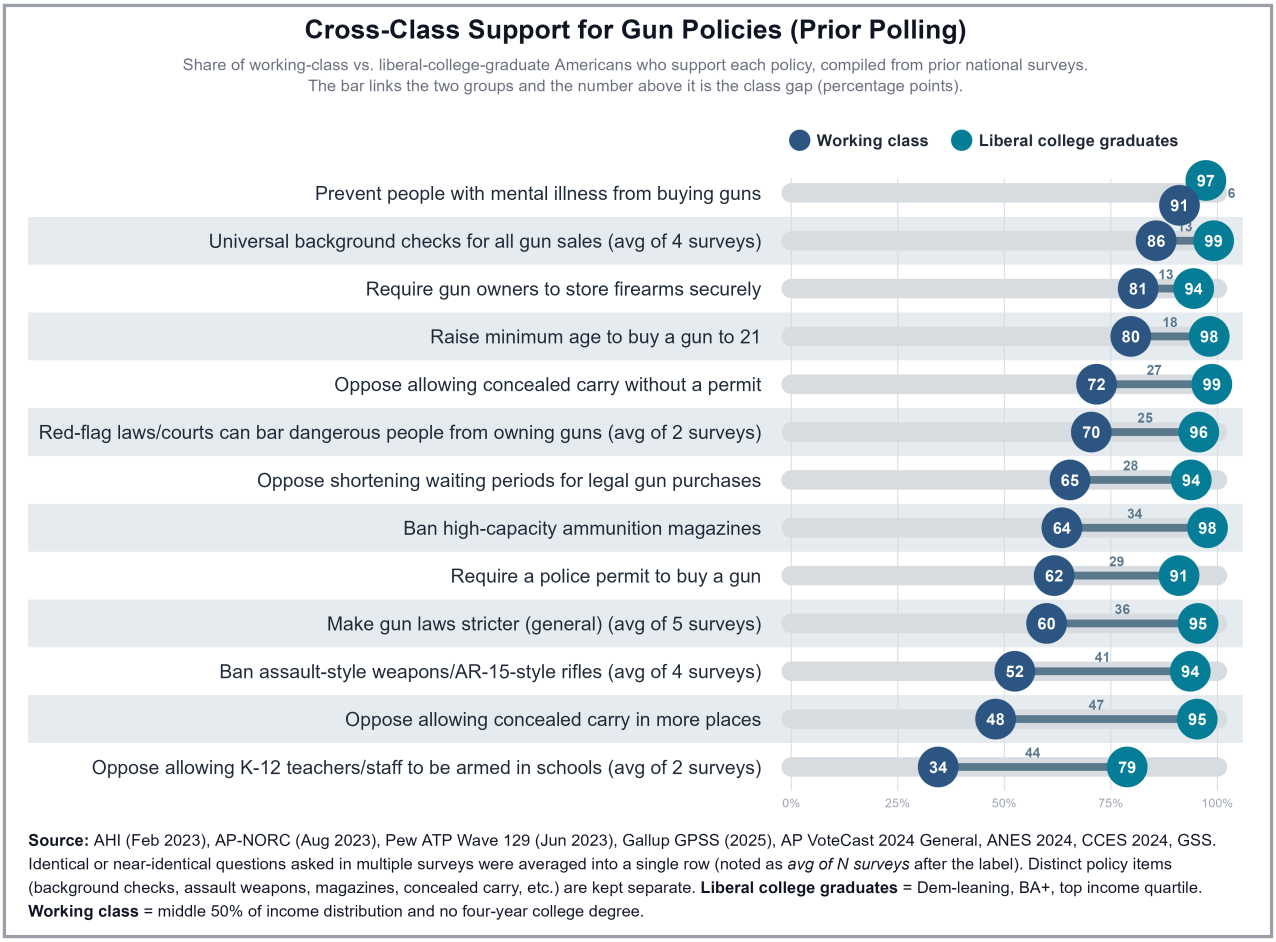
GUN POLICY AT A GLANCE

Comparatively modest class gap	On gun policy, liberal college grads run 23 points more supportive of progressive gun control than working-class respondents, though we see strong cross-class support.
Broad consensus	Both our data and prior polling show important areas of cross-class consensus around gun policy: on universal background checks, preventing mentally ill people from buying guns, red flag laws, secure gun storage, and raising the minimum age of gun ownership to 21. Class gaps widen sharply on weapon-specific bans, though even those generally show close to two-thirds working-class support on some polls.
Reframing typically (but not invariably) ineffective	Working-class reframing barely moved working-class support on guns overall (mean +0.7 points) and actually decreased average liberal college grads' support by 3.8 points—one of the few issue areas besides defense of democracy where the working-class reframing pushed elite support in the wrong direction. The one notable exception: reframing police-permit requirements around keeping guns from "criminals and abusers" while preserving them for "hunters and home safety" raised working-class support from 50% to 63%, a 13-point gain.

Liberal College Grads and the Working Class View Gun Policy Differently—But Less So Than Most Issues

The mean class gap on gun policy is 23 points (91% liberal college-grad support vs. 68% working-class support), one of the smallest issue-area gaps we observed on any policy. But most of that consensus comes from a handful of items where both groups already register strong support, creating a ceiling effect. On the items where there is room to move, class gaps run as wide as on any other issue we studied. Working-class respondents and liberal college grads largely agree on measures to ensure that guns don't get into the wrong hands—and diverge on measures to ban certain types of weapons or ammunition.

The cross-class chart below makes that pattern visible. Across major recent surveys, universal background checks draw 79–93% working-class support compared with 98–100% liberal college-grad support; preventing mentally ill people from buying guns draws 91% working-class support versus 97% liberal college-grad support; red flag laws draw 77% working-class support versus 98% liberal college-grad support; and secure gun storage draws 81% working-class support versus 94% liberal college-grad support. Prior polling also confirms the steep gaps on weapon-specific items: assault weapons bans received 45–60% working-class support across four surveys compared with 87–98% liberal college-grad support, and banning high-capacity magazines received 64% working-class support versus 98% liberal college-grad support. Adjacent questions show some of the largest gaps in any prior survey: working-class opposition to allowing armed teachers in schools runs at 34% compared with 79% liberal college-grad opposition (a +44-point gap), and opposition to expanding concealed carry received 48% working-class support versus 95% support from liberal college grads (+47 points). The prior-polling chart below assembles those items into a single view, merging near-identical questions across surveys where they exist. It shows the same vertical structure as our own data—single-digit to low-teens gaps on background checks, mental-illness restrictions, secure storage, and police permits, opening to 25- to 45-point gaps on weapon-specific bans, concealed carry, and armed teachers.



Source: AHI (Feb 2023), AP-NORC (Aug 2023), Pew ATP Wave 129 (Jun 2023), Gallup GPSS (2025), AP VoteCast 2024 General, ANES 2024, CCES 2024, GSS. Identical or near-identical questions asked in multiple surveys were averaged into a single row (noted as *avg of N surveys* after the label). Distinct policy items (background checks, assault weapons, magazines, concealed carry, etc.) are kept separate. **Liberal college graduates** = Dem-leaning, BA+, top income quartile. **Working class** = middle 50% of income distribution and no four-year college degree.

Strong Consensus Supports Measures to Ensure That People Don't Get Guns if They're Likely to Misuse Them

Despite the steep gaps on weapon-specific items, there is substantial room for cross-class coalition-building on guns. Across our data and prior polling, working-class respondents and liberal college grads show similar views on a surprisingly broad range of measures to help ensure that guns don't get into the wrong hands:

- **Universal background checks:** 89% working-class (WC) vs. 97% liberal college-grad (LCG)
- **Preventing mentally ill people from buying guns:** 91% WC vs. 97% LCG
- **Red flag laws:** 77% WC vs. 98% LCG
- **Secure gun storage requirements:** 81% WC vs. 94% LCG

A single logic runs through these items: ensure that people likely to misuse guns don't have access to them. Background checks screen for criminal records; red flag laws and the mentally

ill provision target people already identified as dangerous; secure storage prevents accidental and stolen-gun harms. None of these measures restrict what law-abiding gun owners can buy or do—they target the misuse of guns, not gun ownership itself. That is the part of the gun control agenda where a cross-class political coalition for action already exists and has resulted in federal legislation.[109]

What Working-Class Reframing Doesn't Do

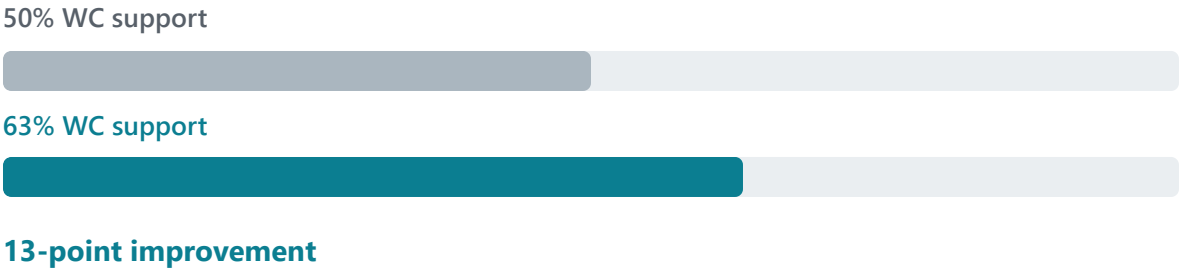
Across the gun battery, working-class reframing barely moved working-class support (mean +0.7 points) and actually decreased average liberal college-grad support by 3.8 points. Guns are one of the few issue areas besides defense of democracy where the working-class reframe pushed liberal college grads in the wrong direction. Part of this is a straightforward ceiling effect, as discussed above: the universal background checks item already draws 89% working-class support in its plainest form, and rewording it to emphasize keeping families and children safe leaves that 89% unchanged. For our other background-check questions, the working-class reframe slightly *decreases* working-class support. Likewise, the two red-flag-law questions we tested (one with class-competent framing and the other without) landed within two points of each other.

The clearest example where our working-class reframing backfired came on the assault weapons ban. The standard formulation ("banning the sale of assault weapons to confront toxic gun culture") drew 91% liberal college-grad support and 57% working-class support. The working-class reframe ("a law that prohibits the sale of military-style rifles but allows the types of weapons used for hunting and home safety") cost 10 points of liberal college-grad support and three points of working-class support. The hunting-and-home-safety carve-out may have been read by liberal college grads as an unacceptable concession, and by working-class respondents as a nonstarter.

There was one notable reframing success: the police-permit item. The standard formulation drew 50% working-class support and 75% liberal college-grad support in our survey. The working-class reframe raised working-class support to 63% and liberal college-grad support to 82%—a 13-point working-class gain and a 7-point gain among liberal college grads. This is the kind of working-class reframing that works elsewhere in our data: concrete, and framed around public safety rather than restricting gun owners. Note the reassurance that hunters and law-abiding gun owners will not be affected.

Police Permit Requirement

LIBERAL ELITE-RESONANT FRAMING	WC-RESONANT REFRAME
"Would you favor or oppose a law which would require a person to obtain a police permit before he or she could buy a gun?"	*"Would you favor or oppose a law which would require a person to obtain a police permit before he or she could buy a gun, so criminals and abusers don't get guns but guns remain available for hunters and home safety?"*



13-point improvement

Key Takeaway: Bans on Specific Types of Guns and Ammunition Trigger Class Divides—Other Policies Don't

Guns were the only issue other than defense of democracy where class-competent reframing yielded very modest results. Strong cross-class support exists on measures to ensure that people don't get guns if they're likely to misuse them—background checks, red flag laws, mental-illness restrictions, and secure storage. On those issues, advocates' chief challenge is to hold legislators accountable who are unresponsive to voters. On measures that limit specific types of weapons or ammunition, class dynamics do play an important role yet our attempts at reframing were ineffective, except on police permits. Advocates will decide whether to shift to tactics with greater cross-class appeal, or whether to keep searching for messaging capable of building cross-class coalitions.

Section 6

The experience of class differs by race

A focus on class does not preclude an appreciation of the reality of racism, nor of how the experience of class differs by race. The challenge is that doing race and class analysis simultaneously reveals complexities that can quickly become confusing. We have sought a compromise by integrating some discussion of racial differences throughout the report, along with a deeper dive into two topics here. A forthcoming white paper will provide more detailed analysis issue by issue.

All races show class gaps—but they're larger for whites than Latinos, and for Latinos than African Americans. The average class gap between the working class and upper-middle-class liberals goes in the same direction for all three racial groups we studied, but the mean gap for whites is 30 points, much larger than for Latinos (19 points). For African Americans, the mean gap is 12 points.

The smaller class gap among Latinos reflects that working-class—particularly foreign-born—Latinos are typically more progressive than working-class whites. As the forthcoming white paper will discuss, generation matters: third-generation working-class Latinos aren't much more likely (37%) than working-class whites (33%) to be Democrats.[111]

The class gap between African Americans and whites is more complicated. Prior research has found that, among Democrats, African Americans are the group most likely to self-identify as moderates and the least likely to self-identify as liberals.[112] We found the same thing: in the Class Gaps Poll, Black Democrats were about twice as likely as white Democrats to self-identify as "moderate" (34% vs. 17%) and were the least likely group to identify as "liberal" (51% vs. 70% Latino and 78% white). But that doesn't mean African Americans are centrist on policy: African-American liberal college grads are indeed somewhat more conservative than white or Latino elites, but working-class Black respondents are themselves fairly progressive—often more so than working-class whites.

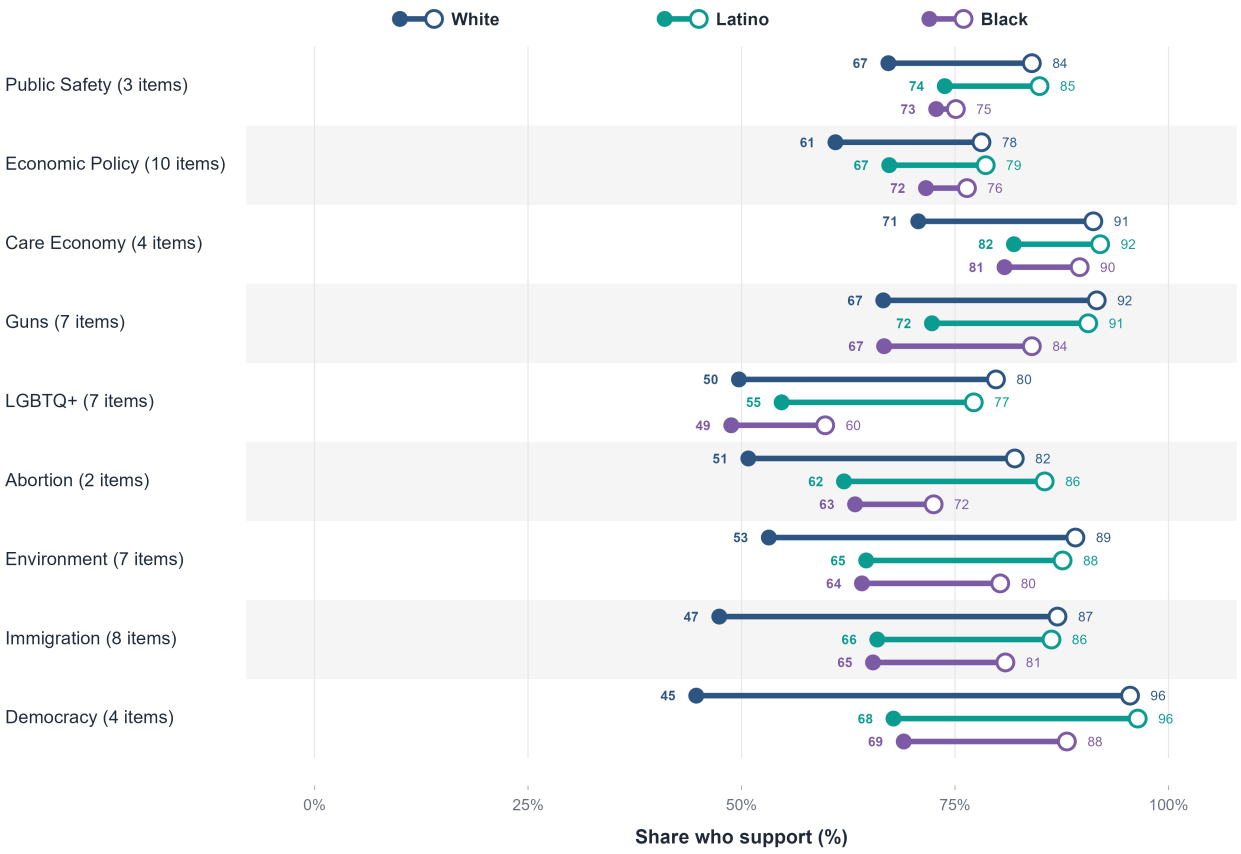
Liberal-elite support by race (%)

Issue	White	Latino	Black	Black-white gap
Gun control	92	91	84	−8
Climate change	91	89	82	−9
Defense of democracy	97	97	90	−7
Immigration	87	86	81	−6
Abortion rights	82	86	73	−9
LGBTQ+ rights	80	77	60	−20
Public safety	84	85	75	−9

Black elites are more progressive than working-class Black people in every area we analyzed, just as white elites are more progressive than working-class whites. But the Black class gap is relatively small—about 12 points on average, versus 30 points among whites. About half of that smaller gap reflects the fact that African-American liberal college grads are more conservative than other elites across many cultural issues, which pulls Black elites closer to the Black working class.

Class Gap by Issue Area and Race

Each line runs from working-class support (filled dot) to liberal-college-graduate support (open dot); its length is the class gap, shown separately for White, Latino, and Black Americans.



Source: Class Gaps Poll, fielded by Verasight, Jan. 29 – Feb. 17, 2026 (n = 5,770 U.S. adults). Weighted to Dec. 2025 CPS and Pew NPORS partisanship benchmarks. Support = % in the progressive direction for each question. **Working class** = middle 50% of income distribution and no four-year college degree (n = 1,704). **Liberal college graduates** = Dem-leaning, BA+, top income quartile (n = 617). Each issue is the mean across all questions asked on each topic.

In sharp contrast, working-class African Americans are often *more* progressive than working-class whites. This second factor accounts for around half of the smaller class gap among African Americans. Here are the four largest gaps, as measured by endorsement of progressive policies framed in class-competent terms, as shown below.

Working-class support by race (%)

Issue	White	Latino	Black	Black-white gap
Abortion	51	62	63	+12
Defense of democracy	47	69	71	+24
Climate	56	67	67	+11
Immigration	47	66	65	+18

Working-class African Americans are consistently more progressive than working-class whites across these issues, with the largest gaps on defending democracy and immigration (24 and 18 points, respectively). The democracy gap is especially wide because working-class white support is itself comparatively low, at 47%. The gap also narrows from the top down: Black liberal college grads are more conservative than white or Latino elites—most sharply on cultural issues like LGBTQ+ rights and abortion—which keeps them closer to the Black working class.

To summarize, building an interracial coalition will require progressives to persuade—and/or compromise—not just with working-class members of all races but also Black elites who tend to be not as liberal as same-class white and Latino elites.

Working-class priorities are chiefly economic regardless of race. Here are different groups' top dozen working-class priorities (with non-economic issues shaded yellow).

Working-class priorities by race (rank order; ▲/▼ = shift vs. White column)

White working class	Black working class	Latino working class
1. Affordable basics	1. Affordable basics	1. Affordable basics
2. Social Security/Medicare	2. Social Security/Medicare	2. Lower rents/housing costs **▲3**
3. Reduce corruption	3. Lower rents/housing costs **▲2**	3. Social Security/Medicare
4. Lower drug prices	4. Raise wages **▲4**	4. Reduce corruption
5. Lower rents/housing costs	5. End racism	5. Health insurance subsidies
6. Health insurance subsidies	6. Reduce corruption **▼3**	6. Raise wages **▲2**
7. Lower crime rate	7. Address police misconduct	7. Protect Medicaid **▲3**
8. Raise wages	8. Lower crime rate	8. Lower drug prices **▼4**
9. Create jobs	9. Health insurance subsidies **▼3**	9. Affordable childcare
10. Protect Medicaid	10. Lower drug prices **▼6**	10. Price gouging **▲2**
11. Economic growth	11. Protect Medicaid	11. Reduce gun violence
12. Price gouging	12. Economic growth	12. Workers' rights

The only non-economic priority shared across all three groups is reducing corruption; otherwise working-class priorities are predominantly economic. Among working-class respondents' top priorities, whites and Latinos have only two non-economic priorities and African Americans have four. Seven economic priorities were shared by all three groups: affordable basics, protect Social Security and Medicare, lower drug prices, increase health care subsidies, lower rents, raise wages, and protect Medicaid.

Each racial group has priorities that appear nowhere on the other groups' lists. For working-class whites, it is creating jobs (#9). For working-class Blacks, they are ending racism (#5) and addressing police misconduct (#7). For working-class Latinos, they are affordable childcare (#9), preventing gun violence (#11), and protecting workers from unfair treatment (#12). The race-specific priorities for Black working-class people are shared with Black elites, and map onto their lived experience with racism and police misconduct.

The priorities of elites of all races are less exclusively economic than those of working-class members of the same race (Again, non-economic issues shaded yellow).

Liberal college-grad priorities by race (rank order; ▲/▼ = shift vs. White column)

White liberal college grads	Black liberal college grads	Latino liberal college grads
1. Resist authoritarianism	1. Affordable basics	1. Affordable basics
2. Affordable basics	2. Lower drug prices	2. Protect Medicaid **▲10**
3. Social Security/Medicare	3. Health insurance subsidies	3. Social Security/Medicare
4. Health insurance subsidies	4. Lower rents/housing costs **▲7**	4. Resist authoritarianism **▼3**
5. Reduce gun violence	5. Lower crime rate	5. Health insurance subsidies
6. Climate change	6. End racism	6. College/job training
7. Reduce corruption	7. Economic growth	7. Reduce gun violence **▼2**
8. Abortion rights	8. Reduce corruption	8. Lower drug prices
9. Tax the rich	9. Raise wages	9. Lower rents/housing costs **▲2**
10. Affordable childcare	10. Create jobs	10. Affordable childcare
11. Lower rents/housing costs	11. Reduce gun violence **▼6**	11. End racism
12. Protect Medicaid	12. Resist authoritarianism **▼11**	12. Workers' rights

Liberal elites of each racial group place three to five non-economic issues among their top dozen priorities: cultural concerns like ending racism and gun violence, governance issues like reducing corruption, and democracy concerns like resisting authoritarianism. Every working-class group lists fewer non-economic issues than its liberal-elite counterpart, and the gap is widest among whites: white working-class respondents name just two such priorities, versus five for white liberal college grads, while among Black and Latino respondents the difference is only one (four versus five, and two versus three).

Five issues are high-priority for everyone: affordable basics, Social Security/Medicare, health insurance subsidies, lower rents/housing costs, and reducing corruption. Elites and non-elites diverge somewhat on which economic issues they consider top-priority. Raising wages is a high priority for every group of working-class people as well as for Black and Latino—but not white—elites. This reflects the influence of race discrimination, as well as class disadvantage. Taxing the rich is top-priority only for white elites.

If we compare elites to non-elites of their own race, white college grads are the outlier. They share only half of their priorities with working-class respondents of the same race; Black college grads share 9 out of 12, and Latino college grads, 9 out of 12. Why should we care? Too often, when white elites fail to connect with working-class whites, the resulting class anger fuels far-right populism that targets people of color.

Conclusion

The precondition of class competence is respect. Without genuine respect, working-class messaging will be seen as yet another attempt by elites to manipulate non-elites, which will serve only to further reinforce right populism's "looking down on you" narrative. The only way to build effective cross-class coalitions is for liberal college grads to offer working-class Americans the respectful give-and-take due to people you are inviting into a coalition.

College-educated liberals need to persuade as many working-class voters to agree with them as possible. When they can't, they need to offer compromises that will sometimes create tensions within the liberal coalition. But this is the only way to consistently win elections with margins large enough to enact cherished progressive goals—and the only way to make progress toward those goals even when elections go the other way. Failing to respect that working-class priorities and values often differ from elites' helps to fuel far-right populism in ways that are corrosive to democratic values.

This report has messages for social justice advocates, candidates, and funders:

Social justice advocates. Social justice advocates need to bridge the diploma divide for two reasons. One is ethical: a failure of cross-class respect is a failure of the progressive ideal of equality, regardless of race, gender, creed, or class. The other is practical: if advocates want to enact and sustain progressive policies, they need to be able to build and sustain multiracial cross-class coalitions. The only alternative—continuing the current knife-edge elections—is just too consequential for the health of our democracy.

Candidates. Cross-class coalitions are vital because nearly two-thirds of Americans lack college degrees.[113] Even if candidates can squeak by appealing only or largely to a constituency of college grads, once elected those candidates won't be able to move the ball forward because they will be stuck in a divided government or a Congress where they're outnumbered. This report highlights the importance for candidates of centering their campaigns on issues of economic and personal security; it also provides resources for candidates who won't back down on climate and culture-war issues—or who try to pivot away from those issues but find that circumstances preclude them from doing so.

Funders. Funders have made great strides in respecting that the organizations they fund are best placed to make strategic decisions on the issues they are involved with day-to-day. While funders shouldn't micromanage, they should require class competence. Otherwise, advocates may end up being ineffective, or even hurting the causes they seek to help. Funders should choose advocates who don't treat coalition-maintenance concerns as the be-all and end-all, but instead balance those concerns with the need to reach respectfully across class lines.

About the authors

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Described as "legendary" by the *New Yorker* and as having "something approaching rock star status" by the *New York Times Magazine*, Joan C. Williams is a prominent public intellectual whose 12 books have been translated into French, Japanese, Korean, Hungarian, and Danish.

She is well-known both in the United States and abroad for her work on diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). Her TED talk, *Why corporate diversity programs fail—and how small tweaks can have big impact*, has over 1.3 million views. In 2012, she launched "bias interrupters," a data-driven approach to interrupting bias in organizations, and the initiative's website has been accessed over 650,000 times. Her team has published eight studies documenting how racial and gender bias play out in today's workplaces, with two focused specifically on the experience of women of color.

Her work on class includes *Outclassed: How the Left Lost the Working Class and How to Win Them Back* (St. Martin's Press, 2025), which was nominated for the *Financial Times'* Best Business Book of the Year. Her *White Working Class* (Harvard Business Review Press, 2017) was one of the three books Joe Biden carried with him, dog-eared and annotated, during his 2020 presidential campaign. Her 2016 *Harvard Business Review* article, "What So Many People Don't Get About the U.S. Working Class," garnered 3.7 million views when it was published—then the most in *HBR*'s 90-year history.

She has been published, profiled, or quoted in *The New York Times, Financial Times, Washington Post, The Atlantic, The New Yorker, The New Republic, Politico, The Wall Street Journal*, and many other outlets. She is a Distinguished Professor of Law (Emerita) at University of California Law, San Francisco.

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A political scientist with nearly two decades of experience in progressive politics and the labor movement, Jared Abbott is the founder and director of the Center for Working-Class Politics—a research organization whose work on working-class voters and candidates has shaped national debates about the Democratic Party's relationship to the working class. Jared is an Assistant Professor of Political Science at California State University, Los Angeles. He holds a Ph.D. in Government from Harvard University.

Jared's writing and research have been featured in *The New York Times*, *The New Yorker*, *The Washington Post*, *The Atlantic*, *The New York Review of Books*, *The Guardian*, *Politico*, *Newsweek*, NPR, BBC Radio, *The New Republic*, *The American Prospect*, *The Nation*, *New Left Review*, *Jacobin*, *Boston Review*, and *Dissent*, among others. He has appeared on *The Ezra Klein Show* (*The New York Times*), *BBC Newshour*, and *Fast Politics with Molly Jong-Fast*.

He is the author, with Stephanie McNulty, of *The Promise and Peril of Participatory Democracy* (Oxford University Press, 2026), and, with Matt Karp, of *Blue-Collar Realignment: Working-Class Politics in the Age of Trump* (Verso, under contract). His scholarship on class politics, participatory democracy, and the left in the United States and Latin America has appeared in leading scholarly journals including the *American Journal of Political Science*, *Comparative Political Studies*, *Governance*, *Electoral Studies*, and *Comparative Politics*, among others.

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Endnotes

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