

# Trump's Kryptonite

How Progressives Can  
Win Back the Working Class

The Center for  
Working-Class Politics

YouGov® JACOBIN

# CONTENTS

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<b>EXECUTIVE SUMMARY</b>	Overall Conclusion	6
	Topline Findings	6

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<b>INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY</b>	Introduction	8
	Goal of the Study	12
	Study Limitations	13

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<b>OVERVIEW OF RESULTS</b>	Populism: <i>Key Takeaways</i>	14
	Economic and Social Policies: <i>Key Takeaways</i>	14
	Opposition Messaging: <i>Key Takeaways</i>	15
	Candidate Background: <i>Key Takeaways</i>	15
	Candidate Opinion of the Democratic Party: <i>Key Takeaways</i>	16
	Respondent Partisan Affiliation: <i>Key Takeaways</i>	16
	Swing Voters: <i>Key Takeaways</i>	17
	Respondent Class: <i>Key Takeaways</i>	17
	Rural, Suburban, and Urban Respondents: <i>Key Takeaways</i>	18
	Respondents by Geography and Partisan Affiliation: <i>Key Takeaways</i>	19
	Male and Female Respondents: <i>Key Takeaways</i>	19
	Respondent Race/Ethnicity: <i>Key Takeaways</i>	20
	Registered Voters: <i>Key Takeaways</i>	20
	Non-Voters: <i>Key Takeaways</i>	20

<b>WHAT WE DID</b>	Survey Sample	21
	Survey Design	22
	Methodological Note on Measurement of Key Demographic Variables	28
	How to Interpret the Results	30
<hr/>		
<b>ANALYSIS OF RESULTS BY CANDIDATE CHARACTERISTICS</b>	<b>Can Populism Help Democrats Win the Working Class?</b>	<b>32</b>
	<i>Key Takeaways</i>	32
	<b>How do Economic and Social Policies Priorities Affect Respondents' Views of Candidates?</b>	<b>45</b>
	<i>Key Takeaways</i>	45
	Unpacking the Results	45
	<b>How Does Opposition Messaging Affect Democratic Candidates' Appeal?</b>	<b>54</b>
	<i>Key Takeaways</i>	54
	Unpacking the Results	55
	<b>How Does Candidate Background Affect Respondents' Views of Candidates?</b>	<b>60</b>
	<i>Key Takeaways</i>	60
	Unpacking the Results	60
	<b>How Does Democratic Candidates' Opinion of the Democratic Party Affect Voter Preference?</b>	<b>63</b>
	<i>Key Takeaways</i>	63
Unpacking the Results	63	
<hr/>		
<b>SUBGROUP ANALYSIS BY RESPONDENT CHARACTERISTICS</b>	<b>Subgroup Analysis: Partisanship</b>	<b>65</b>
	Overall Partisan Results: <i>Key Takeaways</i>	65
	Democrats	66
	Independents	70
	Republicans	74
	<b>Subgroup Analysis: Swing Voters</b>	<b>78</b>
	<i>Key Takeaways</i>	79
	Unpacking the Results	79

<b>Subgroup Analysis: Working-Class Respondents</b>	<b>82</b>
<i>Key Takeaways</i>	82
Unpacking the Results	83
All Working-Class (Oesch) Respondents	83
Subsetting Within and Outside of the Working Class	88
Education	94
<hr/>	
<b>Subgroup Analysis: Rural, Suburban, and Urban</b>	<b>97</b>
<i>Key Takeaways</i>	97
Unpacking the Results	97
Urban	98
Rural	98
Suburban	98
Geography and Party: Key Takeaways	100
<hr/>	
<b>Subgroup Analysis: Men and Women</b>	<b>106</b>
<i>Key Takeaways</i>	106
Unpacking the Results	106
<hr/>	
<b>Subgroup Analysis: Race and Ethnicity</b>	<b>108</b>
<i>Key Takeaways</i>	108
Unpacking the Results	108
<hr/>	
<b>Subgroup Analysis: Likely (Registered) Voters</b>	<b>112</b>
<i>Key Takeaways</i>	112
Unpacking the Results	112
<hr/>	
<b>Subgroup Analysis: Non-Voters in 2020</b>	<b>115</b>
<i>Key Takeaways</i>	115
Unpacking the Results	115
<hr/>	
<b>AUTHORSHIP AND METHODOLOGY</b>	<b>117</b>
<hr/>	
<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY</b>	<b>118</b>

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# Executive Summary

The Democratic Party continues to lose working-class voters. Although Democrats avoided a wipeout in the 2022 midterms, their twenty-first century coalition struggles to win majorities outside its metropolitan fortresses. These struggles reflect the party's difficulty in winning back its historic constituency among the broad working class, a problem for which neither moderates nor progressives have demonstrated a consistently replicable solution. Since 2020, however, at least some progressives have begun to recognize the scale of the problem, dedicating more attention to bread-and-butter economic issues they hope will resonate with working-class voters and re-engaging the labor movement to win back working-class votes.

The Center for Working-Class Politics (CWCP) sees its work as part of this larger project. We aim to provide research that will help progressives expand their appeal among working-class voters, in the hope of achieving our shared political goals.

In November 2021, together with *Jacobin* magazine and **YouGov**, the **CWCP** published findings from our first original survey experiment, designed to help better understand which kinds of progressive candidates, messages, and policies are most effective in appealing to working-class voters. Among other things, the survey found that voters without college degrees are strongly attracted to candidates who focus on bread-and-butter issues, use economic populist language, and promote a bold progressive policy agenda. Our findings suggested that Democrats could win back some of the working-class voters lost to Donald Trump if they followed the model set by the populist campaigns of Bernie Sanders, John Fetterman, Matt Cartwright, Marie Gluesenkamp Pérez, and others.

Yet our initial study left many questions unanswered and posed many new ones. Which elements of economic populism are most critical for persuading working-class voters? Would economic populist candidates still prove effective in the face of opposition messaging and against Republican populist challengers? How do voter preferences vary across classes and within the working class? Can populist economic messaging rally support from working-class voters across the partisan divide?

The present study was designed to address these questions.

First, to better understand important differences across classes and *within* the working class, we paid closer attention to various ways to define the working class. While both CWCP studies have employed a range of definitions, the 2021 report largely used education as a proxy for class. Our primary measure in this survey, by contrast, is occupational group. Specifically, we draw on a widely used occupational coding schema (Oesch 2003) that allows us to explore both working-class preferences overall and the heterogeneity of preferences within the working class — making it a more robust alternative to more common education- and income-based definitions.<sup>1</sup>

Second, to assess whether and how working-class voters might be won back from conservatives, we then designed an experimental survey to test

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1 We bundle respondents who either work in a manual job or hold a service-sector job into a larger group of “working-class respondents.”

voter preferences in head-to-head contests. We presented seven pairs of hypothetical Democratic candidates to a representative group of 1,650 “available” voters — those who do not self-identify as “strong Democrats” or “strong Republicans.” We primed respondents with opposition messaging designed to disparage liberal political priorities or otherwise sow doubt in Democratic Party candidates. We then asked these respondents to choose their preferred candidate.

This study’s findings are not intended to provide direct insights into campaign strategy for specific Democratic candidates. Local political contexts, of course, vary dramatically across districts. Rather, our goal is to highlight a range of understudied issues related to candidate selection, messaging, and policy priorities that future studies and campaigns may draw on, elaborate further, and ultimately test across different campaign settings.

The key takeaways of our survey are listed briefly below and discussed in greater detail in the full report.

## Overall Conclusion

Democrats can make inroads with working-class voters if they run campaigns that convey a credible commitment to the interests of working people. This means running more non-elite, working-class candidates; running jobs-focused campaigns; and picking a fight with political and economic elites on behalf of working Americans.

## TOPLINE FINDINGS

- 1. Running on a jobs platform, including a federal jobs guarantee, can help Democratic candidates.** Virtually all voter groups prefer candidates who run on a jobs platform. Candidates who promoted a federal jobs guarantee were broadly popular with our respondents. Remarkably, respondents’ positive views toward candidates running on a jobs guarantee were consistent across Democrats, independents, and even Republicans. Candidates who ran on a jobs guarantee were also popular with black respondents, swing voters, low-propensity voters, respondents without a college degree, and rural respondents. Across the 36 different combinations of candidate rhetoric and policy positions we surveyed, the single most popular combination was economic populist rhetoric and a jobs guarantee.
- 2. Populist “us-versus-them” rhetoric appeals to working-class voters, regardless of partisan affiliation.** Working-class Democrats, independents, Republicans, women, and rural respondents all prefer candidates who use populist language: that is, soundbites that name economic or political elites as a major cause of the country’s problems and call on working or ordinary Americans to oppose them. These working-class respondents prefer strong populist rhetoric to a variety of alternative forms of non-populist messaging.
- 3. Running more non-elite, working-class candidates can help Democrats attract more working-class voters.** Blue- and pink-collar Democratic candidates are more popular than professional and/or upper-class candidates, particularly among working-class Democrats and Republicans. Non-elite, working-class candidates are also viewed favorably by women, Latinos, political independents, urban and rural respondents, low-propensity voters, non-college-educated respondents, and swing voters.

- 4. Candidates who use class-based populist messaging are particularly popular with the blue-collar workers Democrats need to win in many “purple” states.** Manual workers, a group that gave majority support to Trump in 2020, favor economic populist candidates more strongly than any other occupational group. Low-propensity voters also have a clear preference for these candidates. The only groups who had a negative reaction to economic populist candidates were urban independents and small-business owners.
- 5. Right-wing messages do not undermine the effectiveness of jobs-focused campaigns, economic populist language, or the appeal of non-elite, working-class candidates.** In fact, our study suggests that candidates running on a progressive jobs policy may actually grow more effective in the face of right-wing opposition messaging.
- 6. Rural voters across the political spectrum support key elements of left-wing populism.** While rural Democrats and independents support pink-collar candidates and rural Republicans support small-business-owner candidates, they all share a dislike for upper-class candidates, prefer candidates running on a progressive jobs guarantee, and respond favorably to populist messaging.
- 7. Class matters. Working-class voters respond differently to Democratic candidates, messages, and policies than other voters.** As defined by occupational group, working-class respondents across the political spectrum have a particularly strong preference for non-elite, working-class candidates; managers and professionals do not. Working-class respondents also find economic populist language and a federal jobs guarantee more appealing than other messages and policies; non-working-class respondents do not. These class-based preferences persist within racial and ethnic groups: black working-class respondents, for instance, enthusiastically favor economic populist rhetoric, while black managers and professionals are averse to it. Working-class white respondents strongly favor non-elite candidates; their middle- and upper-class counterparts do not.
- 8. Democratic candidates should consider distancing themselves from the Democratic Party establishment.** Regardless of class, gender, or race, we found that respondents tend to favor Democratic candidates who call out the Democratic Party for failing working- and middle-class Americans.
- 9. Social issues divide working-class voters along party lines, while economic issues unite working-class voters across party lines.** Democrats strongly prefer candidates with progressive social policies (such as legalizing abortion and banning assault rifles), while Republicans prefer more moderate policies (such as adopting red-flag laws for gun purchases and modernizing border security infrastructure). By contrast, working-class respondents, regardless of party, tend to support candidates who endorse bold jobs policies, candidates from working-class backgrounds, and candidates who use economic populist rhetoric. Working-class respondents are less polarized around social issues than non-working-class respondents.

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# Introduction to the Study

In the lead-up to the 2022 midterm elections, many political commentators were pessimistic about the Democratic Party's chances. In addition to the historical tendency for incumbent parties to struggle in midterms, Democrats appeared to face distinct political headwinds. Pundits predicted that rising inflation, the unpopularity of President Joe Biden, and the party's association with extreme positions on some divisive "culture war" issues would result in a historic defeat.

Yet Republicans did not manage to flip a single seat in the Senate, and the seemingly vulnerable Democratic Senate candidate from Pennsylvania, John Fetterman, even managed to win a Republican seat. Democrats lost the House, though they did so by a margin dramatically lower than most pundits anticipated. Most importantly, election deniers were shut out of every state-wide office in battleground states.

These are impressive results, especially given historical precedent and the near-ubiquitous predictions of defeat leading up to the election.<sup>2</sup> There is little doubt that Democrats benefited in many places by focusing on threats to abortion rights, and it also seems clear that many voters were turned off by the extreme rhetoric of many Republican candidates — though it remains unclear whether voters were motivated by a desire to save US democracy, or they simply don't like candidates too far outside of the mainstream.<sup>3</sup> In the end, despite fears that the Democrats' progressive wing would cause massive losses, it was the extremism of the Republican Party that seemed to scare off many swing voters.

Does this mean that the doom and gloom about Democrats' vulnerability, especially among working-class voters, was much ado about nothing? Hardly. Some liberal pundits have used the Democrats' solid showing in 2022 as a vindication for the party's national strategy. In this view, depicting Republicans as an existential threat to American democracy, while highlighting the right-wing assault on abortion rights, remains a winning approach in future elections. As Ezra Levin, the co-founder of Indivisible, put it, "The great thing about having your strategy being proven correct is that you don't have to rethink your strategy."<sup>4</sup>

This newfound sense of security, however, conceals persistent weaknesses in the Democratic approach that may have severe consequences in 2024 and beyond.

First, Democrats were crushed in states like New York and Florida, often in places carried handily by Biden, and where Democrats ran primarily on painting their Republican challengers as MAGA extremists (like NY-3 and NY-17). Clearly, anti-Trump, pro-democracy campaigning doesn't always work, particularly in places like New York, where many

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2 <https://projects.fivethirtyeight.com/2022-election-forecast/>

3 <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/11/16/opinion/midterms-republicans-democrats.html?smid=nytcore-ios-share&referringSource=articleShare>

4 <https://theliberalpatriot.substack.com/p/democrats-hispanic-problem-the-sequel>



commentators have argued Democrats offered very little else to motivate their base on election day. And as impactful as the Supreme Court’s ruling on abortion may have been in 2022, there’s no guarantee that abortion will continue to be as salient an issue in future elections.

Perhaps even more importantly, from Wisconsin to Washington and New Hampshire to Nevada, Democratic Senate candidates in 2022 shed substantial numbers of working-class (non-college) voters relative to 2020 (AP/NORC VoteCast). Nationally, the share of non-college-educated voters won by Democratic Senate candidates in 2022 was down 11 percentage points relative to Biden in 2020. In all but four cases (PA, OH, CO, and GA), Democrats’ gains were greater (or losses smaller) among college-educated than non-college-educated voters. And AP/NORC data display similar trends among voters who make less than \$50,000 per year.

In nearly every state, Democrats in 2022 trailed Biden among white voters without college degrees. But following a decade-long trend, the problem is particularly acute among non-white working-class voters. Political scientist Ruy Teixeira explains:

AP VoteCast estimates the decline in Democrats’ advantage among the non-white working class as 14 points between 2020 and 2022, 23 points between 2018 and 2022, and (splicing in some Catalist data, which overlap pretty well with VoteCast data where they overlap) an astonishing 33 point drop between 2012 and 2022.

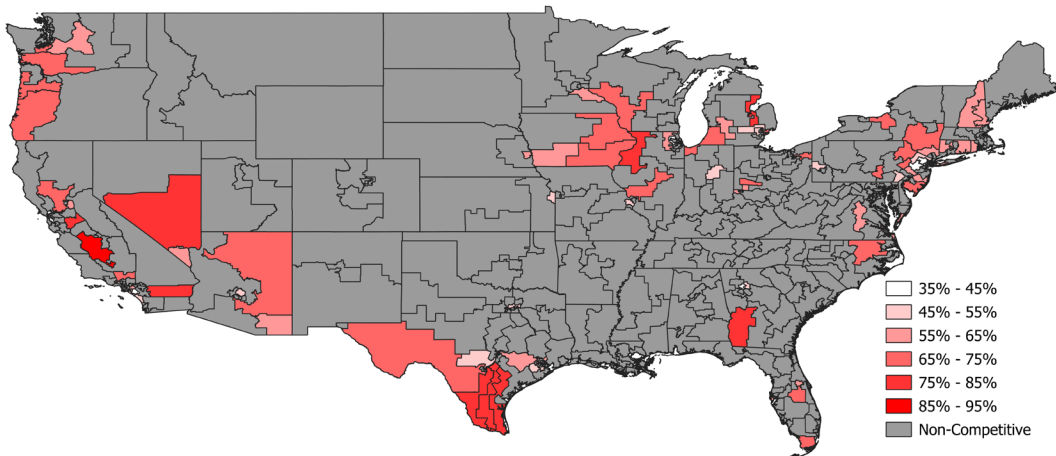
The 2022 midterms were an important reminder that political and economic “fundamentals” — incumbency, presidential popularity, and inflation — can be outweighed by idiosyncratic circumstances. But the solid Democratic showing, especially in a year with a favorable Senate map, does not change the basic structural disadvantage the party faces in American politics. This disadvantage can only be overcome by building a stronger working-class coalition across the nation — particularly in competitive states. For instance, in four of the five states Biden flipped in 2020 — Michigan, Pennsylvania, Wisconsin, and Arizona — the white non-college-educated electorate was larger than the white college-educated, black, and Hispanic electorates combined. Democrats have no chance of controlling the US Senate, outside of brief stints, without strong showings in these states — showings that cannot be achieved without expanding the Democratic base.

Certainly, there’s no way for progressive Democrats to advance their agenda in the Senate without winning a lot more white non-college-educated voters. They also must stop the bleeding among non-college-educated Latinos, whose support for Democrats dropped by as many as 8 percentage points in 2020 relative to 2016<sup>5</sup> and did not appear to return in 2022. Any strategist who denies these simple facts is living in a fantasy world.

Similarly, in the House, the vast majority (86.2%) of competitive districts are majority-non-college-educated, and a smaller but significant majority (58.6%) have a median household income below \$80,000 per year.

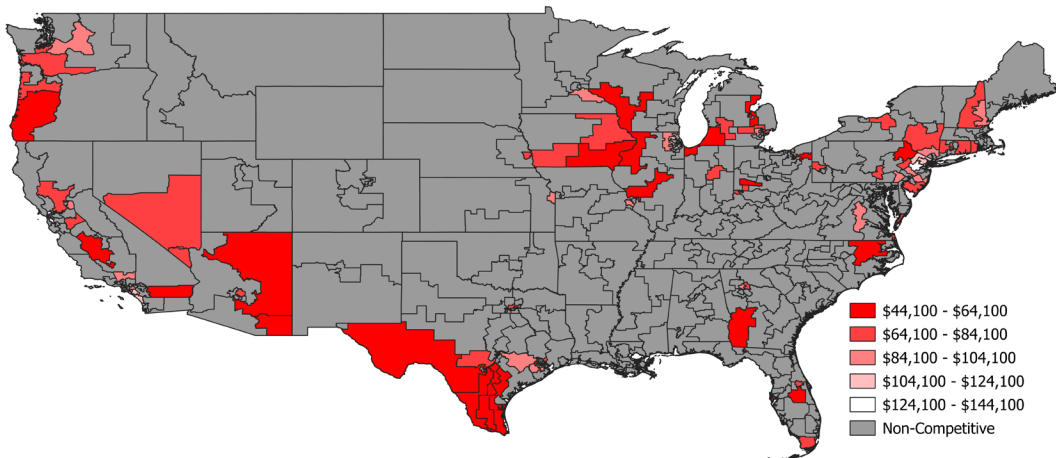
<sup>5</sup> <https://catalist.us/wh-national/>

**Competitive US House of Representatives Districts (Cook PVI  $\pm$  5)**  
by Percentage Non-College-Educated



Sources: ACS 2021 1-Year Estimates; 2021 Cook Political Report.

**Competitive US House of Representatives Districts (Cook PVI  $\pm$  5)**  
by Average Median Household Income



Sources: ACS 2021 1-Year Estimates; 2021 Cook Political Report.

Luckily, there were a handful of Democratic candidates in 2022 who managed to make gains relative to Biden among non-college voters — most notably John Fetterman in Pennsylvania. Fetterman ran a working-class-focused, populist campaign with a refreshingly no-frills rhetoric — a candidate and campaign that aligned with the findings of our 2021 survey. And Fetterman’s share of white non-college-educated voters was larger relative to Biden’s than any other Democratic Senate candidate’s in 2022 (AP/NORC).<sup>6</sup>

Along similar lines, in 2022 Marie Gluesenkamp Perez flipped a red, suburban/rural district in Washington state by emphasizing her working-class roots, while broadcasting her refusal to cater to big corporations, the wealthy,

<sup>6</sup> Also in Pennsylvania, Democrat Matt Cartwright managed to eke out re-election in an R +10 district on the strength of a similar economic populist campaign.

or political extremes. In a working-class district outside Chicago, *Politico* reported, Delia Ramirez’s 2022 campaign focused not on “threats to democracy” or “social justice issues,” but a “rigged” economic system. She crushed her Republican opponent, winning most of the swing precincts in her district and running over 10 points ahead of the Cook Partisan Voter Index.

Despite the successes of these economic populists, other candidates of a similar mold did not fare so well. For instance, Tim Ryan in Ohio and Jamie Mcleod-Skinner in Oregon’s fifth district both lost their races. But given the conservative nature of their electorates and the timing of their campaigns, these candidates likely fared much better than non-populist candidates would have. Even these losses suggest that some form of economic populism gives Democrats a fighting chance under politically difficult conditions.

A growing number of politicians and strategists within the Democratic Party have sought to build on and expand the successes of candidates like Fetterman, Cartwright, and Ramirez. Some strategists have called for more candidates to campaign in more explicitly populist us-versus-them terms, pitting ordinary Americans against economic and political elites. Progressive activist and strategist Jonathan Smucker, for instance, advocates a left-wing version of populism that he terms “inclusive populism.”

According to Smucker, populism “actually names and stays focused on the economic culprits: the billionaires, Wall Street, and the big corporations that have rigged the political system to dismantle the gains of working people.” For him, populism entails instigating a fight that goes beyond the GOP and includes targeting Democrats who “have been doing the bidding of those economic culprits.” The other side of this strategy, he contends, is articulating a “we the people” message that encapsulates everyone else.

Advocates of this approach came together at a recent conference in Washington, DC, to compare notes and work on a shared path forward. As one of the event’s organizers, former Democratic staffer Adam Jentleson, explained to the *New York Times*, “Democrats must find a more effective way to meet working-class voters where they are, and channel their very real anger — or else Republicans will.”

Armed with fresh data from a survey of working-class voters commissioned by the advocacy group Fight Corporate Monopolies — which found that voters across the political spectrum are concerned about the outsize influence of corporations in American politics and would be persuaded to vote for candidates who proposed solutions to curb corporate power — Jentleson claimed that “a populist economic message is highly effective, and it’s crazy that Dems aren’t already moving in this direction as fast as possible.”

Yet the Fight Corporate Monopolies survey, like our 2021 survey, left many questions unanswered. For instance, does the appeal of economic populism hold up against conservative opposition messaging? Would voters prefer populist progressives over right-wing populists, so-called “National Conservatives,” or mainstream Republicans? Further, we don’t yet know which elements of economic populist messaging are most effective and among which groups, particularly among working-class voters. One important weakness from our own 2021 survey is that by limiting our sample to non-college-educated respondents, we were unable to compare political preferences across class, nor could we examine any potential occupational differences within the working class.

## Goal of the Study

To address these questions, we designed a new survey experiment in which we presented seven pairs of hypothetical Democratic candidates to a representative group of 1,650 voters. We assessed a vast range of candidate types (23,100 distinct candidate profiles in total) to better understand which Democratic candidates perform best overall, and among different groups of voters. Our aim was to test which elements of economic populism are most effective in persuading working-class voters, how the effects of economic populist messaging change in the face of opposition messaging, and how these effects vary both across classes and within the working class. The key takeaways of our survey, listed above and discussed in greater detail in the full report, can inform future progressive campaigns.

Our hypothetical candidate profiles include candidates' race/ethnicity, gender, and class background. For class background, we include a range of occupations that allow us to capture blue-collar (e.g., construction worker, warehouse worker) and pink-collar (nurse, middle-school teacher) occupations, as well as upper-middle-/upper-class professionals (lawyer, doctor, corporate executive) and small-business owners.

We follow these demographic characteristics with one of a range of statements meant to capture the degree to which and the manner in which candidates employ populist rhetoric. The goal here was to disentangle two questions. The first: does populist rhetoric — which raises up ordinary people and counterposes their interests to those of the elite — affect the way voters view Democratic candidates, independent of the policy positions candidates take? And the flipside to this, our second question asks: independent of rhetoric, do progressive populist policy positions affect the way voters view Democratic candidates?

To answer the first question, we compare candidates who employ a range of populist messaging to those who employ non-populist messaging. (We describe these categories in detail below.) In particular, we explore whether the most salient elements of populist rhetoric involve: (1) celebrating or valorizing “the people” (and, if so, do voters respond more to appeals to the American people in general or to working-class Americans in particular?); (2) creating an us-versus-them narrative that pits ordinary people against elites (and, if so, is this approach more effective when pitched against economic elites or political elites?); and, finally, (3) making explicit appeals to cross-racial class unity.

To answer the second question, we showed respondents one of a series of primarily economic policy priorities, and one of a series of policy priorities that are commonly understood as “social.”<sup>7</sup>

On “economic issues,” candidates in our survey could prioritize a moderate or progressive policy related to taxes, jobs, or the minimum wage, while among “social issues,” they could prioritize a moderate or progressive policy related to guns, abortion, or immigration. This approach allowed us to draw more general conclusions than were possible in our 2021 study about the degree to which “moderate” versus “progressive” policies should be considered assets or liabilities for Democratic candidates across different constituencies.

While our 2021 study found that working-class respondents are no more attracted to independent candidates running as Democrats than they are

<sup>7</sup> For the purposes of this study, we label those policies that are centrally concerned with economic issues as “economic” and those that do not primarily concern economic issues as “social.” However, we acknowledge that the division of policies into “social” and “economic” does not reflect a bright line between the two. Many social issues have economic dimensions, just as economic policies certainly have social and cultural dimensions. The distinction we seek to draw out in this study, which many voters, pundits, and politicians have clearly recognized, is a crucial distinction between those policies that primarily concern issues like jobs, taxes, and wages, and those that do not.

to other Democratic candidates, we wondered if a more expansive description of candidates' relationships to the Democratic Party might yield different results — in particular, whether it would show that criticism of the Democratic Party can benefit candidates among voters who are dissatisfied with the Democratic Party. As a result, respondents were also told either that the candidate believes the Democratic Party has helped working- and middle-class Americans or that the Democratic Party is out of touch with working- and middle-class Americans; or they were given no information about the candidate's opinion of the Democratic Party.

Next, since we were interested in understanding the preferences of available voters — those whose vote choice or turnout status could plausibly change from one election cycle to the next — we excluded potential respondents who identify as strong Democrats or Republicans, leaving us with a sample of available voters: independents as well as respondents who self-identify as “weak” Democrats or Republicans.

## Study Limitations

In the survey, each respondent evaluated seven pairs of hypothetical Democratic candidates and was asked to evaluate which they would rather vote for in a head-to-head election. This means that we cannot conclude that our results generalize to voters' choices between Republican and Democratic candidates. Nonetheless, our research design does tell us which kind of Democratic candidates voters prefer and, therefore, the Democratic candidates who likely have the best chance of winning. Our research design also sacrifices the realism of showing voters information about actual candidates on the campaign trail, complete with their candidate effect and distinct rhetorical style. The advantage of our approach is that, unlike most electoral surveys, it allows us to strip candidate characteristics down to their essential components and precisely measure the impacts of different candidate characteristics and messaging styles, which are impossible to uncover with more common research designs. Our approach is uniquely suited to isolate the *relative* effects of many different candidate characteristics, holding all other characteristics constant. Finally, though this is a nationally representative survey, we are not able to explore in more depth how these effects vary in key swing states or congressional districts.

We made substantial efforts to increase the realism of our study and, therefore, our confidence that the results would be reflected in real-world settings. First, to simulate the partisan information environment of a real election, we primed respondents with one of several “Republican” or “media messaging” frames meant to predispose respondents against Democratic candidates. Before choosing their preferred candidate, respondents first read a detailed critique of Democratic Party policies or perceived liberal priorities. This allowed us to assess how voters might respond to different Democratic candidates in the polarized context of an election campaign.

Finally, since many respondents are partisans who will always or never vote for Democratic candidates, we also asked respondents to report how likely they would be to vote for each candidate on a scale of 1 to 7. This allowed us to assess the overall effect of each candidate attribute on respondents' actual vote choice, not just on how respondents perceive a candidate relative to other candidates.

It should be noted that the findings in this study represent average effects that do not necessarily hold everywhere. In making strategic decisions, campaigns should of course combine our results with local, context-specific knowledge of their voters.

# Overview of Results

## Populism

### *Key Takeaways*

- 1. Economic populism wins strong support from working-class respondents.** Working-class respondents, especially manual workers, favor candidates who pit “Americans who work for a living” against “corrupt millionaires” and “super-rich elites,” while other occupational groups exhibit no discernible distaste for them. On the whole, this suggests that populist rhetoric may help attract key working-class voters who Democrats currently struggle to win — manual workers — without serving as a liability or turnoff for the majority of the middle class.
- 2. Working-class support for populist candidates depends on partisanship.** Working-class Democrats prefer racially inclusive economic populists, while working-class Republicans prefer political populists. Independent working-class respondents do not show a significant preference for any populist candidates.
- 3. Economic populist rhetoric is not undermined by right-wing opposition messages.** With few exceptions, we find that right-wing messages fail to drive respondents away from candidates who embrace economic populism.
- 4. Rural respondents favor populist over non-populist messaging, and they are particularly positive toward candidates who use political populist messaging.**
- 5. Class-based political preferences extend across racial and ethnic lines.** Although black respondents as a whole display no discernible preference or dispreference for populism in general terms, black working-class respondents are strongly drawn to candidates who deliver an economic populist message.

## Economic and Social Policies

### *Key Takeaways*

- 1. Overall, respondents prefer candidates who campaign on moderate economic policies over progressive economic policies.** These preferences, however, vary significantly by issue: jobs policies, both moderate and progressive, are the most popular economic policies.
- 2. The only economic policy that is not viewed unfavorably by either Democrats, independents, or Republicans is the progressive jobs guarantee.** Support for a progressive jobs guarantee is driven by working-class respondents across partisanship. This finding suggests that running on a bold progressive jobs plan may be most effective among working-class voters and is unlikely to generate a negative backlash against Democrats.
- 3. Non-credentialed service workers are particularly amenable to progressive economic and social appeals, while other occupational groups generally prefer candidates who campaign on moderate economic and social policies.**

4. **Progressive economic policies largely withstand opposition attacks, whereas progressive social policies may pose a significant liability.**
5. **Voters' opinions on social policies can be more variable — and can have a significant effect on respondents' preferences — but those effects are highly dependent on the issue area.** Immigration policy is the most polarizing, and respondents much prefer the moderate position on immigration (securing borders through modernized border infrastructure) to the progressive one (decriminalizing immigration). On abortion, however, progressive policies are just as popular as moderate policies.

## Opposition Messaging

### *Key Takeaways*

1. **Democrats' attempts to counter Republican anti-elite, populist messaging with populist appeals of their own are largely successful.** Both economic populist and people-centered candidates perform at least as well in the face of opposition messaging compared to the control group. For economic populists, this was particularly true among respondents exposed to Republican messaging portraying Democrats as cultural elitists.
2. **Opposition attacks did not damage the appeal of progressive economic policies.** Candidates who ran on progressive economic policies were only viewed unfavorably by respondents who did not receive opposition messaging, while respondents who received opposition messaging did not express a significant opinion with respect to these candidates.
3. **Candidates who ran on a federal jobs guarantee were highly effective against opposition messaging portraying Democrats as cultural elitists.** Respondents exposed to media messaging describing Democrats as cultural elites favored jobs guarantee candidates in 57.6% of contests, compared to just 50.3% of races among respondents who did not receive any opposition messaging.
4. **Opposition attacks weakened the appeal of progressive social policies, though not by a large degree.** Candidates who ran on progressive social policies were only viewed unfavorably in the face of opposition messaging, not among the control group who received no opposition priming.
5. **The right to abortion in all or most cases and a ban on assault rifles were especially vulnerable to opposition messaging portraying Democrats as social policy extremists.**
6. **Opposition messaging largely does not affect respondents' views of candidates based on candidates' race or gender.**

## Candidate Background

### *Key Takeaways*

1. **Overall, candidates from non-elite backgrounds, particularly pink-collar candidates, were viewed more favorably than upper-class and upper-middle-class candidates.**
2. **Working-class respondents prefer non-elite, working-class candidates regardless of their partisan affiliation.** By contrast, non-working-class respondents had substantially less positive views of non-elite, working-class respondents and significantly more positive views of elite and upper-class candidates.

- 3. Independents are particularly favorable toward blue- and pink-collar candidates.** Independent respondents favored middle-school teachers and construction-worker candidates in 55% of contests — suggesting that this crucial constituency for Democratic candidates is open to Democrats from non-elite backgrounds.
- 4. Candidates' race and gender have no observable impact on how they are evaluated by respondents.**

## Candidate Opinion of the Democratic Party

### *Key Takeaways*

- 1. Candidates who distance themselves from the Democratic Party are much more likely to be chosen than candidates who lean into their association with the party.**
- 2. Respondents across all class backgrounds favor candidates critical of the Democratic Party over “proud Democrats” and candidates who took no position on the Democratic Party.**

## Respondent Partisan Affiliation

### *Key Takeaways*

- 1. Democrats and independents prefer candidates from working-class backgrounds, while Republicans had no significant preferences with respect to candidate class.** But the results by class show strong class divisions: working-class respondents from each party showed a preference for pink- or blue-collar candidates.
- 2. While respondents do not have strong preferences between populist and non-populist messages *in general*, there are important class differences within parties.** Working-class Democrats prefer populist messaging to non-populist messaging, while non-working-class respondents do not. This is particularly true for the racially inclusive economic populist message, which working-class Democrats support and non-working-class Democrats dislike. For their part, working-class Republicans were drawn to political populists, while other Republicans were not.
- 3. Overall, Democrats prefer progressive economic policies, independents were neither favorable nor unfavorable toward them, and Republicans prefer moderate economic policies.** The only policy that respondents from all three parties have a similar, positive opinion on is the progressive jobs guarantee. This is driven by class differences: working-class Democrats and Republicans are both substantially more favorable toward jobs guarantee than are non-working-class Democrats and Republicans.
- 4. More than anything else, voters across parties are divided by social policies:** Democrats prefer candidates with progressive policies such as legalizing abortion and banning assault rifles, while Republicans prefer moderate positions on immigration and abortion. As opposed to the working-class support that cuts across party identity for the key elements of left-wing populism — candidates with working-class backgrounds, populist rhetoric, and progressive economic and social policies polarize voters by party, not class.



**5. Respondents across all parties and classes agree on one thing: they prefer Democratic candidates who criticize the Democratic party for not serving the interests of middle- and working-class Americans.**

This suggests that Democratic candidates are best positioned to appeal to the widest range of voters across the political spectrum if they distance themselves from the Democratic Party.

## Swing Voters

### *Key Takeaways*

- 1. Swing voters prefer non-elite, working-class candidates.** Volatile voters prefer candidates from pink-collar backgrounds, while undecided voters prefer candidates from blue- or pink-collar backgrounds.
- 2. Swing voters have weak preferences with respect to populism.** Candidates who employ populist messaging are not likely to benefit from doing so among swing voters, but nor is populist messaging a liability among swing voters.
- 3. Undecided voters prefer candidates running on jobs-related policies.** The only policies preferred by undecided voters are the moderate tax credit to spur small-business job-training programs and the progressive jobs guarantee.
- 4. Both types of swing voters prefer candidates with moderate positions on immigration and guns, and they dislike the progressive position on immigration.**

## Respondent Class

### *Key Takeaways*

- 1. Candidates who focus on a progressive jobs guarantee are viewed positively by working-class respondents, across all parties.** This result is driven by non-credentialed service workers (cashiers, custodians, warehouse workers, etc.).
- 2. Working-class respondents prefer populist candidates.** Candidates who employed any populist messaging — and particularly those who employed economic populist rhetoric — were viewed favorably by working-class respondents. Working-class support for economic populist candidates is driven by manual workers. No occupational group had a statistically significant negative response to economic populist candidates.
- 3. Working-class respondents in general view non-elite, working-class candidates favorably and upper-class candidates negatively.** Manual workers supported blue-collar candidates, and non-credentialed service workers supported pink-collar candidates. Though frontline professionals had weaker preferences around candidates' class background, they did have a negative view of blue-collar candidates. This suggests Democrats face a tradeoff with respect to which elements of their coalition they wish to appeal to.
- 4. Using educational attainment as a measure of class obscures important insights into working-class political preferences.** Working-class respondents measured by occupational status prefer populist candidates; within that group they especially prefer economic populist candidates. In contrast, working-class respondents measured by educational attainment prefer neither. Further, when we measure the working class by educational

attainment rather than occupational status, it appears that the working class is more conservative with respect to both economic and social policies than it is when measured by occupation.

- 5. Working-class preferences in social policies depend on the particular issue at play.** In general, working-class respondents are more favorable toward moderate social policies, but the difference in their support varied substantially by issue: immigration policies were highly polarizing, while gun policies were much less so; and working-class respondents barely registered a difference between candidates promoting progressive or moderate abortion policies.
- 6. Working-class respondents are less polarized around social issues than are non-working-class respondents.** This suggests that any potential traction Republican appeals on social issues have among the electorate may be substantially weaker among working-class respondents.
- 7. Democratic working-class respondents strongly favor candidates promoting progressive social policies, while independents and especially Republicans oppose them.** By contrast, moderate social policies appear to be less polarizing across partisanship among working-class respondents, with all three groups having at least a slightly positive reaction to candidates employing them. Once again, this implies a significant tradeoff between appealing to the Democratic base and appealing to working-class independent and Republican voters.

## Rural, Suburban, and Urban Respondents

### *Key Takeaways*

- 1. While Americans living in cities are known for voting reliably blue, they support only one aspect of left-wing populism: candidates from working-class backgrounds, particularly from pink-collar occupations.**
- 2. Rural Americans, on the other hand, are attracted to several key components of left-wing populism: candidates from non-elite backgrounds, populist messaging in general (especially political populism), and the progressive jobs guarantee proposal.** However, they are also supportive of the moderate position on jobs, strongly dislike the progressive minimum wage policies, and are very opposed to decriminalizing immigration.
- 3. Suburban respondents do not support key components of left-wing populism: they show no preference for non-elite candidates and prefer moderate economic policies over progressive economic policies.** Yet suburban respondents do respond favorably to one type of populist messaging: Bernie-style economic populist messaging that pits working Americans against an economic elite.
- 4. Candidates who do not mention any social policies are more popular among rural respondents than candidates who promote any progressive social policies, while city residents punish candidates more for staying silent on cultural issues than for campaigning on progressive social issues.** This suggests our overall finding that candidates who report no social policy are less popular than most candidates who report any social policy — progressive or moderate. This is driven more by liberal

voters in cities who punish Democrats for not addressing important social issues they care about than by more conservative rural voters who assume Democrats who stay silent on social issues are progressive policy extremists.

- 5. Respondents across the geographical spectrum — from the cities to the suburbs to rural America — prefer Democratic candidates who criticize the Democratic party for not caring enough about middle- and working-class Americans.**

## Respondents by Geography and Partisan Affiliation

### *Key Takeaways*

- 1. Rural Democrats are the strongest supporters of left-wing populism.** They prefer pink-collar candidates over candidates from all other class backgrounds, populist messaging over non-populist messaging, and candidates running on progressive economic policies — particularly a jobs guarantee — over candidates promoting all other economic policies. Yet rural Democrats are not as supportive of progressive social policies as are urban or suburban Democrats.
- 2. Rural Republicans and independents favored aspects of left-wing populism, but the others did not.** Rural Republicans preferred candidates who used political populist messaging, while we detected no significant preferences among rural independents with respect to populist appeals. Among rural independents the only economic policy that was viewed favorably was a jobs guarantee. Both rural Republicans and rural independents had a negative view of elite and upper-class candidates.
- 3. Suburban Democrats, like their suburban Republican and independent counterparts, prefer candidates who use populist rhetoric.** But that's where their support for left-wing populism ends: they do not prefer pink- and blue-collar candidates, and they do not favorably view candidates who campaign on the progressive jobs guarantee.
- 4. Urban Democrats are the only group that prefers candidates running on a \$20/hour minimum wage.** Even urban Republicans aren't as opposed to a \$20/hour minimum wage as their suburban and rural counterparts.

## Male and Female Respondents

### *Key Takeaways*

- 1. In general, we find little evidence of systematic differences in candidate preferences across respondents' gender.**
- 2. Unsurprisingly, one of the few discernible gender gaps we observed with respect to social policies is abortion.** While women were favorable to candidates who ran on a progressive Roe-like abortion policy, men showed no significant preference for these candidates.
- 3. Women disfavor candidates with upper-class professions significantly more than men.** This could potentially be due to these professions being more male dominated.

## Respondent Race/Ethnicity

### *Key Takeaways*

1. **Black respondents prefer non-white candidates (particularly Latinos) over white candidates by a substantial margin.** We do not detect any significant differences in preferences for candidates based on race/ethnicity among white or Latino respondents.
2. **Candidates campaigning on moderate social policies are viewed positively by both white and black respondents.** Among Latinos, we see a sharp class divide: working-class Latinos strongly favor progressive social policies, while non-working-class respondents do not.
3. **The only economic policy that is viewed favorably by both white and black respondents is a federal jobs guarantee.** The largest point estimate of any policy among black respondents was for a jobs guarantee (58% support).
4. **White respondents prefer pink-collar candidates over upper-class candidates.** However, we observe a large class divide among white (as well as Latino) respondents, particularly with respect to upper-class candidates.

## Registered Voters

### *Key Takeaways*

1. **Candidates who run on jobs policies — either moderate or progressive — are viewed more favorably than other candidates.**
2. **Moderate social policies are appealing to registered voters, while progressive social policies were not — though this effect varied substantially across issue area.**
3. **Immigration is highly salient for registered voters.** Registered voters were 19 percentage points more favorable toward candidates who campaigned on “modernizing border infrastructure” compared to those who prioritized decriminalizing immigration. The moderate immigration policy had twice the persuasive effect as the most popular economic policy — tax credits for small businesses to create jobs.
4. **Registered voters are more likely to prefer Democrats who are willing to be critical of their own party, as opposed to a proud Democrat or a Democrat who voices no opinion on the subject.**
5. **Registered voters view pink-collar candidates favorably and upper-class and technical/professional candidates unfavorably.**

## Non-Voters

### *Key Takeaways*

1. **Non-voters find blue-collar candidates appealing — especially construction workers.**
2. **Non-voters view economic populist candidates favorably.**
3. **Non-voters find candidates running on a jobs guarantee appealing; they viewed negatively candidates who ran on a modest tax hike for the wealthy.**
4. **Non-voters prefer candidates with moderate social policies over progressive social policies, though social policies in general are much less polarizing for non-voters than for most other groups.** This suggests that non-voters may be relatively less susceptible to culture-war rhetoric than registered voters as a whole.

# What We Did

## Survey Sample

Our survey was fielded by YouGov between August 23 and August 29, 2022. YouGov interviewed 1,817 US adults who were then matched down to a sample of 1,650 to produce the final dataset. The respondents were matched to a sampling frame on gender, age, race, and education. The frame was constructed by stratified sampling from the 2020 Cooperative Congressional Election Study, with selection within strata by weighted sampling with replacement.

The matched cases were weighted to the sampling frame using propensity scores. The matched cases and the frame were combined, and a logistic regression was estimated for inclusion in the frame. The propensity score function included age, gender, race/ethnicity, years of education, and region. The propensity scores were grouped into deciles of the estimated propensity score for inclusion and post-stratified according to these deciles. The weights were then post-stratified on 2016 and 2020 presidential vote choice, and a four-way stratification of gender, age (four categories), race (four categories), and education (four categories), to produce the final weight.

The voters that we are interested in, and who make up our sample in this study, are the 60% of Americans who do not strongly identify with a party. Instead, these voters are either “weak” partisans, and describe themselves as a “not very strong” Democrat or Republican, or, more commonly, identify as an “independent.” By no means, however, are their votes all up for grabs. Weak partisans tend to vote for their respective party, and independents are not even all that “independent”: when pushed, the vast majority of independents say they lean toward Democrats or Republicans, and they tend to vote reliably for one party, just like their weak partisan counterparts. This leaves only 10% of American voters as truly independent, leaning toward neither party.

Nonetheless, these 60% of non-strong-partisan Americans are key, because they share one thing in common: many are inconsistent voters. A significant share, roughly 25% according to our survey results, did not vote for the same party in the 2016 and 2020 elections. This is not necessarily because they switched parties but mostly because they didn’t turn out to vote consistently. If their voting behavior depends on what kinds of candidates are running for office, then understanding how is key to Democrats’ success.

Our final sample included 343 weak Democrats, 279 independents who lean Democrat, 473 “pure” independents who lean toward neither the Democrats nor the Republicans, 260 Republican-leaning independents, and 295 weak Republicans.<sup>8</sup> Each of our 1,650 respondents was asked to evaluate seven pairs of candidates, giving us an effective sample size of 23,100 (1650 x 7 x 2)<sup>9</sup>:

- **Democrats (weak partisans and independents who lean Democrat):** 23% of the public, 37% of our sample;

<sup>8</sup> Further sample details are provided in the Appendix.

<sup>9</sup> We choose seven comparisons, because, while we wish to avoid overburdening respondents, previous work has demonstrated that conjoint response quality remains high until a large number of conjoint tasks have been completed. (Bansak et al. 2019).

- **Independents (independents who do not lean either way):** 12% of the public, 28% of our sample;
- **Republicans (weak partisans and independents who lean Republican):** 21% of the public, 35% of our sample.

## Survey Design

Respondents in our survey were first asked to answer a battery of background questions (described in the Appendix).

Next, respondents were randomly assigned one of several Republican or critical media messaging frames, in order to prime them with opposition messaging of some form. Each prime was randomly assigned to 1/6 of respondents, except the control, which was assigned to 2/6 of respondents.<sup>10</sup> Here is an example of one of the primes:

**YouGov**

Please read the following excerpt from a Republican Television Advertisement:

The Democrats have turned their backs on working Americans — the truth is, they've become the Party of Hollywood, the Ivy League, and Washington insiders. All these coastal elites have the same solution to every problem: give more power to big government. But this election isn't about them, it's about us. It's about law enforcement that needs our support to keep our communities safe, parents who want a better education for our kids, and hardworking Americans who deserve lower taxes.

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Respondents then read the following:

**YouGov**

Now we are going to show you descriptions of two Democratic candidates, call them A and B. We want you to choose the one you prefer. We realize that neither candidate may be the perfect choice for you. If this happens, pick the one who comes closest to your ideal Democrat even if the candidate isn't perfect. Assume the candidates are similar in all other ways except for those listed below.

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<sup>10</sup> See Appendix for full text of primes.

Respondents were then asked to evaluate pairs of candidates who varied randomly across seven characteristics. Here is an example of a randomly assigned pair of candidates:

Candidate Characteristics	Democratic Candidate A	Democratic Candidate B
<b>Gender</b>	Male	Male
<b>Prior Occupation</b>	Not listed	Corporate Executive
<b>Race/Ethnicity</b>	Latino	White
<b>Opinion of The Democratic Party</b>	While I'm running as a Democrat, I believe both major parties have been out of touch with working and middle-class Americans.	While I'm running as a Democrat, I believe both major parties have been out of touch with working and middle-class Americans.
<b>If elected, I will fight to...</b>	Ensure the right to abortion in all or most cases.	Secure our border with commonsense solutions such as modernizing our border security infrastructure.
<b>If elected, I will also fight to...</b>	Slightly raise taxes on the super wealthy and large corporations.	Slightly raise taxes on the super wealthy and large corporations.
<b>Candidate Soundbite</b>	The American people are being betrayed. Politicians need to listen more to Americans who work for a living. Working Americans need to come together and elect leaders who will fight for us all.	The American people are being betrayed. Politicians need to listen more to the people. Americans need to come together and elect leaders who will fight for us all.

After each pair of candidates, respondents were asked the following questions:<sup>11</sup>

If you had to choose, which of the two candidates would you vote for?

Candidate A

Candidate B

How likely would you be to vote for each candidate on a scale of 1 to 7, where 1 = not at all likely and 7= very likely?

Candidate A

Not at all likely 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Very likely

Candidate B

Not at all likely 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Very likely

<sup>11</sup> In order to identify undecided voters, we also include a follow-up question asking if respondents would vote for the Democrat they chose in the head-to-head matchup if the candidate were running against a Republican challenger. We discuss this in more detail in the swing-voter analysis section below.

## CANDIDATE ATTRIBUTES

Each candidate description included one possible value for each of the seven characteristics. The seven characteristics were chosen to capture as wide a range as possible of relevant considerations voters might make when evaluating candidates.

The first set of characteristics we included are candidates' race/ethnicity and gender. Since our research design requires that we keep the number of alternatives for each characteristic as small as possible, we limited candidate gender to male and female, and candidate race/ethnicity to white, black, Latino, and Asian, since, according to our systematic examination of candidate websites, these collectively capture the vast majority of candidates in US elections today.

We next included a candidate's occupation, drawn from a range of possible occupations, in order to explore the impact of candidate class on vote choice. We included multiple occupations from each of blue-collar, pink-collar, and upper-class/professional categories, to ensure the results wouldn't be swung by one particularly popular or unpopular occupation. To provide a comparative baseline for assessing the impact of a candidate's class background, one group of candidates was assigned no information about their occupational background.

We crafted a range of candidate soundbites in order to assess the relative impact of different elements of populist rhetoric. Previous scholarship has made considerable progress in disaggregating the diverse elements associated with populist messaging, which is typically divided into the two broad categories of "thin" and "thick" populism (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2013; Neuner and Wratil 2022). Thin versions of populism are limited to discursive appeals related to one of two primary themes: people-centrism and anti-elitism, which, when brought together, generate a Manichean us-versus-them perspective (Erisen et al. 2021; Hawkins and Kaltwasser 2017; Mudde 2004; Silva et al. 2022; Stanley 2008). By contrast, thick conceptions of populism are attached to a particular "host" ideology (Neuner and Wratil 2022) or set of policies. These policies can range from the far left — often, but not exclusively, centering on economic redistribution or anti-globalization policies (Marcos-Marne 2021; Rodrik 2017) — to the far right, focusing in most cases on anti-immigrant or isolationist policies (Marx and Schumacher 2018; Norris and Inglehart 2019; Pierson 2017).

Thin populisms are, at least in principle, not connected to any particular ideological or programmatic commitments, which is why variants of populism can be observed in right-wing, left-wing, and even moderate forms (Rooduijn et al. 2014, 567–68). This is why we separate candidate soundbites from their economic and social policy platforms (discussed below).

To explore the relative effects of people-centered versus anti-elite populist appeals, we offered one candidate appeal focused exclusively on challenges facing "the people" without mentioning elites — this is our "people-centered" soundbite; and another appeal that differed only by the addition of an explicit mention of the political elites responsible for those challenges — this is our "political populist" soundbite. This approach also allows us to test for differences in the effects of people-centered and anti-elite appeals. We do not include a candidate appeal emphasizing anti-elitism but not people-centrism, as in practice the former is rarely offered in the absence of the latter.

To see how adding explicitly class-based appeals to people-centered and anti-elite messaging would impact respondents' views of candidates, we first included a candidate soundbite identical to the people-centrism soundbite



but including an explicit appeal to working-class Americans — this is our “working-people-centered” soundbite. This allows us to examine the effects of class-based and non-class-based appeals that do not include anti-elite rhetoric. To assess the impact of class-based appeals combined with anti-elite rhetoric, we included a soundbite nearly identical to the political populist soundbite, except that this soundbite describes a candidate calling out economic, rather than political, elites as the cause of America’s problems — this is our “economic populist” soundbite. Since anti-elite appeals directed against economic elites are typically class-based, our economic populist soundbite also includes a direct appeal to working-class Americans, whereas our political populist soundbite refers to the American people in general. We also test a soundbite identical to the economic populist soundbite but which includes a direct appeal to racial solidarity to combat the influence of economic elites.<sup>12</sup>

Finally, in order to compare our different versions and degrees of populist messaging to a baseline message that is neither people-centered nor anti-elite, we crafted an “anti-populist” soundbite emphasizing the danger of political extremists and the value of expertise in political decision-making. Our general goal in crafting all the soundbites was to pare down each of the broad messaging styles we wanted to test to their bare essentials, so that we could speak generally about the impacts of different types of messaging.

In addition to the soundbites, candidates are also randomly assigned one of several economic and social policies. This allows us to estimate the independent impacts that populist messaging, economic policies, and social policies have on respondent opinions. This also allows us to estimate the impact of left-wing thick populism—that is, the combination of thin populist soundbites with progressive policies of economic redistribution.

The three policy areas we selected to capture primarily economic issues were jobs, taxes on the wealthy, and wages. We chose these three policy areas in order to drill further into the finding of our 2021 study that working-class voters respond most positively to candidates whose day-one priority is the economy. Because we were interested in understanding what exactly voters might have in mind when they think of “the economy,” we chose three issues that are indisputably issues voters would associate with the health of the economy. In future studies we hope to expand this set of issues to include other important economic priorities, such as healthcare. Note that not all of the economic policies we tested (especially the progressive policies) are commonly employed by Democratic candidates today. Our goal was not to reflect the exact economic policies promoted by candidates in 2022; instead, it was to generate clear contrasts for respondents between progressive and moderate Democratic economic policies.

To investigate the relative impacts of different kinds of populist rhetoric and economic appeals vis-a-vis other salient political issues, we also assigned candidates one of a range of social policy positions, again either progressive or moderate — on guns, abortion, and immigration. In order to compare the effect

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12 This soundbite was crafted to capture the spirit of the “race–class narrative” (RCN) framework ([https://www.demos.org/sites/default/files/publications/Race\\_Class\\_Narrative\\_Handout\\_C3\\_June%206.pdf](https://www.demos.org/sites/default/files/publications/Race_Class_Narrative_Handout_C3_June%206.pdf)), which emphasizes the importance of (1) discussing race overtly, (2) naming racial scapegoating that is used to harm all working people, (3) joining together across racial and ethnic lines to solve our collective problems, (4) invoking previous successful instances of cross-racial solidarity, and (5) highlighting the capacity of cross-racial solidarity to produce elected officials capable of governing for the many rather than the few. Although the constraints of our survey design limited our ability to capture all five elements in the expansive manner suggested by the RCN framework, we attempted to capture the key elements of the framework and our results should be interpreted as an assessment of a more limited version of the RCN framework.

of highlighting policy priorities to simply saying nothing at all, a final group of candidates provided no information about their social policy positions.

We intentionally chose social policy areas that vary significantly in salience and degree of partisan polarization, and steered clear of policy items that have been most commonly used by Republicans to paint Democrats as extremist, such as “critical race theory,” “defund the police,” and “open borders.” We do not mean to suggest that other critical issues that have been the focus of Republican attacks are any less important than the issues we selected for this study, but for the purposes of our research design we needed to keep the number of issue areas to a minimum, and we opted for three issues that we believe vary substantially with respect to their polarizing potential.<sup>13</sup>

Finally, to test whether a Democrat’s relationship to the Democratic Party affects how they are evaluated, we make some candidates in our experiment explicitly critical of the Democratic Party, we have some defend the party, and others state no information about their view of the party. In our 2021 study, we examined this question by showing respondents candidates who were either Democrats or independents running as Democrats, and we found little evidence that non-college-educated voters preferred candidates who distanced themselves from the Democratic Party. But the possibility remains that a more expansive description of a candidate’s relationship to the Democratic Party — including a justification of their stance toward the party — may elicit stronger opinions from respondents. Further, most candidates who seek to dissociate themselves from the Democratic Party still run as Democrats, and, therefore, in order to signal their distance from the party, they may choose to explicitly state their opinion of the party. Alternatively, candidates may choose to remain silent on their opinion of the Democratic Party.

We also bundle various groups of candidate characteristics together to assess the holistic impacts of populism, social and economic policy platforms, and candidate backgrounds. A description of how we construct these bundles is included below. For most analyses, we show both the full results for all the candidate characteristics tested as well as the bundled results described below.

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13 In the case of immigration, to ensure respondents could clearly differentiate between progressive and moderate policy positions, we picked a progressive position that lies to the left of what many (though by no means all) progressives actually campaigned on. We recognize that the policy space is more nuanced with respect to immigration than the other two social policy areas we tested, and, therefore, if we had chosen a more moderate progressive policy such as “create a path to citizenship for undocumented immigrants” immigration may have been less polarizing to our respondents. So, we should consider the results for immigration as the upper bound of polarization potential and recognize that a more moderate progressive stance on immigration may very well yield less polarized reactions. Thus, it is by no means inevitable that immigration policies will be the dominant issue in voters’ electoral calculus, but our results clearly suggest that Democrats need to be careful about how they message around the issue.

The table below presents the seven characteristics and options for each characteristic that we included in the candidate profiles.

Candidate Characteristics	Values	Description		
<b>Race/Ethnicity</b>	White			
	Black			
	Latino			
	Asian			
<b>Gender</b>	Male			
	Female			
<b>Prior Occupation</b>	Nurse/Middle-School Teacher	Pink Collar		
	Construction Worker/Warehouse Worker	Blue Collar		
	Small-Business Owner			
	Lawyer/Doctor	Elite Professional		
	Corporate Executive			
	Not Reported			
<b>Economic Issues: If Elected, I Will Fight to...</b>		<b>Progressive</b>	<b>Moderate</b>	
	<b>Minimum Wage</b>	Raise the minimum wage to \$20/hour and increase it with the cost of living.	Raise the minimum wage to \$15/hour.	No Control
	<b>Taxes on the Wealthy</b>	Significantly raise taxes on the super wealthy and large corporations.	Slightly raise taxes on the super wealthy and large corporations.	No Control
	<b>Jobs</b>	Help American workers by enacting a federal jobs program to ensure that everyone is guaranteed the option of a stable job at a living wage.	Help American workers by providing tax credits for small- and medium-sized businesses that offer training to low-skilled employees.	No Control
<b>Social Issues: If Elected, I Will Fight to...</b>		<b>Progressive</b>	<b>Moderate</b>	
	<b>Guns</b>	Ban the sale of all automatic and assault-style weapons.	Strengthen red-flag laws that keep automatic and assault-style weapons out of the hands of dangerous individuals.	Not Reported
	<b>Immigration</b>	Decriminalize immigration and end the detention of those seeking asylum and relief at our border.	Secure our border with “commonsense” solutions such as modernizing our border security infrastructure.	Not Reported
	<b>Abortion</b>	Ensure the right to abortion in all or most cases.	Ensure the right to abortion before 15 weeks, and later only in cases where the health of the mother is in danger.	Not Reported
<b>Opinion of Democratic Party</b>	While I’m running as a Democrat, I believe both major parties have been out of touch with working- and middle-class Americans.	<b>Critical Democrat</b>		
	I’m running as a proud Democrat because the Democratic Party delivers for working- and middle-class Americans.	<b>Proud Democrat</b>		

## Populist and Non-Populist Messaging Styles Tested in the Survey

Number	Soundbite	Populism	Description and Elements
1	“The American people are being betrayed by unqualified political outsiders. Politicians need to listen more to the experts. Americans need to come together and elect leaders who will fight for us all against political extremists.”	Not Populist	<b>Anti-Populist</b> Appeal to expertise and against extremism
2	“The American people are being betrayed. Politicians need to listen more to the people. Americans need to come together and elect leaders who will fight for us all.”	Not Populist	<b>People-Centered</b> People-centrism
3	“Americans who work for a living are being betrayed. Politicians need to listen more to Americans who work for a living. Working-class Americans need to come together and elect leaders who will fight for us all.”	Not Populist	<b>Working-People-Centered</b> People-centrism with working-class appeal
4	“The American people are being betrayed by out-of-touch political insiders. Politicians need to listen more to the people. Americans need to come together and elect leaders who will fight for us all against corrupt politicians.”	Populist	<b>Political Populist</b> People-centrism and anti-elitism with political focus
5	“Americans who work for a living are being betrayed by super-rich elites. Politicians need to listen more to working-class people. Working-class Americans need to come together and elect leaders who will fight for us all against corrupt millionaires.”	Populist	<b>Economic populist</b> People-centrism and anti-elitism with working-class and economic focus
6	“White, brown, and black Americans who work for a living are being betrayed by super-rich elites. Politicians need to listen more to working-class people. Working-class Americans of all races and backgrounds need to come together and elect leaders who will fight for us all against corrupt millionaires.”	Populist	<b>Racially inclusive economic populist</b> People-centrism and anti-elitism with working-class economic focus and appeal to racial solidarity

## Methodological Note on Measurement of Key Demographic Variables

### MEASURING CLASS

Given that one of our principal objectives is to better understand how Democrats can appeal effectively to working-class voters, throughout the study we refer to differences in our results across class. Unlike our 2021 study, where we focused primarily on educational status as a proxy for the working class, in this study we take an occupation-based approach that allows us to more precisely capture working-class attitudes (Lindh and McCall 2020; Oesch 2003).<sup>14</sup> Sociologists and other scholars who study occupations and social class argue that workplace conditions vary across these occupational classes in ways that are likely to affect individuals’ positions on political, economic, and social issues.

<sup>14</sup> However, we also analyze differences across educational attainment later in the report.

We analyze respondents' occupational class by drawing on the framework of Oesch (2003), which has become something of a gold standard for work on the political economy of class (Oesch and Rennwald 2018; Rennwald and Pontusson 2020, 2022). In addition to facilitating a more nuanced analysis of intra- and inter-class patterns in respondents' views of candidates than would be possible with more common measures of class (education, income), this approach also makes possible a cross-national comparison of trends in working-class dealignment that to date has focused primarily on European countries (Rennwald 2020; Rennwald and Pontusson 2020).<sup>15</sup>

In the report, we examine seven distinct occupational categories which we further group into two broad classes: working-class respondents (credentialed and non-credentialed service workers, manual workers) and middle-class/upper-class or non-working-class respondents (managers, technical/organizational professionals, frontline professionals, small-business owners).

### Occupational Classes Examined in the Report

Group	Description
Working Class	Credentialed and non-credentialed service workers, manual workers
Middle-Upper-Class	Managers, technical/organizational professionals, frontline professionals, small-business owners

### Measuring Urban, Rural, and Suburban Respondents

Group	Description
Rural	Respondents who say they live in a small town or rural area
Suburban	Respondents who say they live in a suburban area
Urban	Respondents who say they live in a small or big city

### Measuring Democrats, Independents, and Republicans

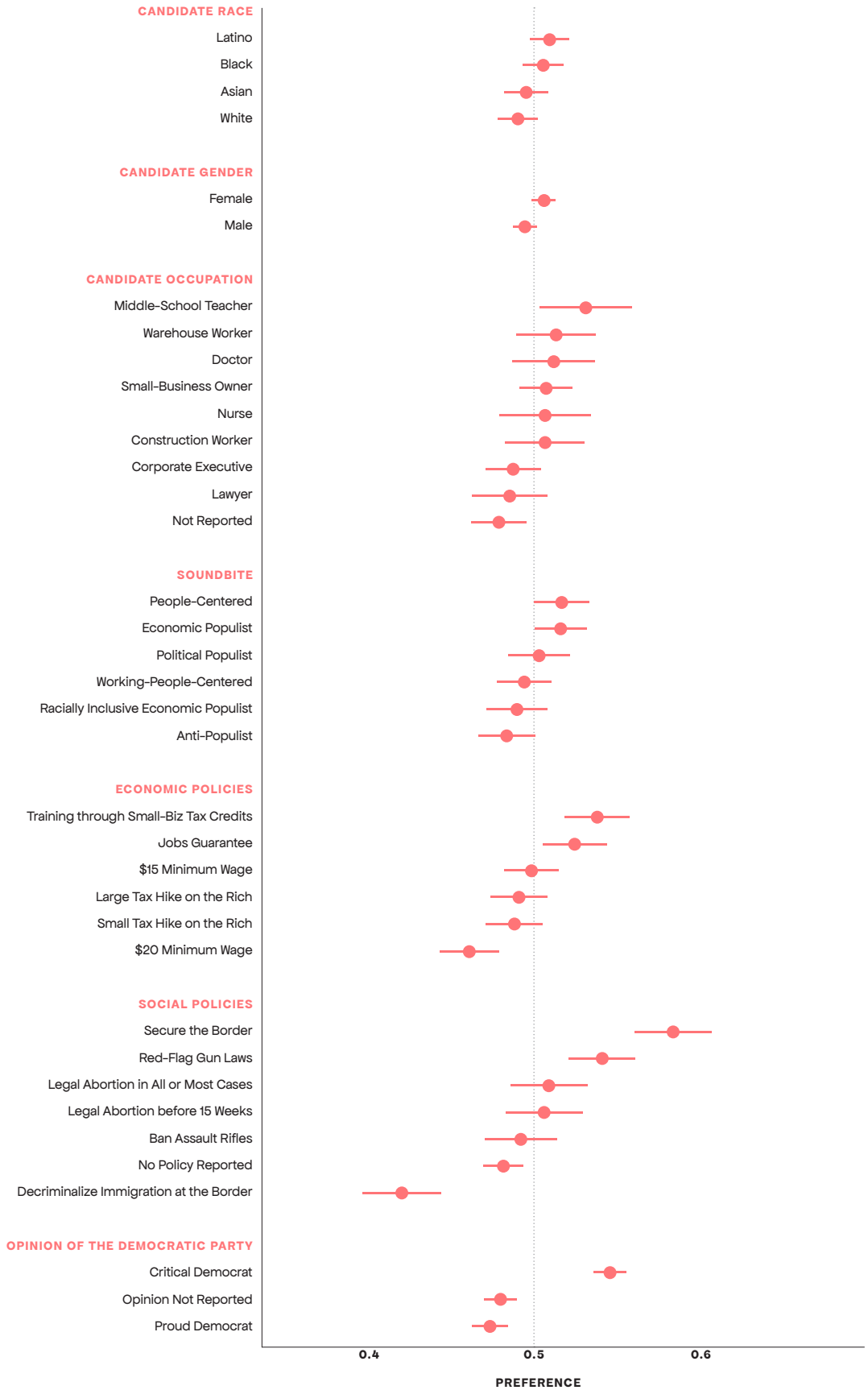
Group	Description
Democrats	Respondents who identify as weak Democrats or independents who lean toward the Democrats
Independents	Respondents who identify as independents and do not lean toward either major party
Republicans	Respondents who identify as weak Republicans or independents who lean toward the Republicans

<sup>15</sup> See Appendix for further details of the Oesch framework.

## How to Interpret the Results

Below, we report how likely respondents were to choose candidates with each characteristic when forced to choose between candidates in a heads-up match between two candidates. Each row of **Figure 1** (and others like it) presents respondents' overall likelihood of choosing candidates with each characteristic, all else equal, along with a 95% confidence interval. A value of 0.5 thus indicates that, all else equal, a candidate with the given characteristic had a coin-flip chance of being chosen by respondents. Values to the right of 0.5 indicate that survey respondents had an overall net positive opinion of a given characteristic, and values to the left indicate a net negative opinion. So, for example, the dot corresponding to "White" (the first dot) indicates that survey respondents had a net negative opinion of white candidates (respondents chose white candidates rather than candidates of other races/ethnicities around 49% of the time), but the error bars imply that this was statistically indistinguishable from a coin flip. By contrast, the dot corresponding to "Middle-School Teacher" indicates that survey respondents had a net positive opinion of candidates with a background as middle-school teachers (respondents chose middle-school teacher candidates rather than candidates with different class backgrounds around 53% of the time). We use respondents' preferences for candidates relative to other candidates in forced-choice heads-up matches as our primary analyses throughout the report.

**Figure 1: Full-Sample Results**



# Analysis of Results by Candidate Characteristics

## Can Populism Help Democrats Win the Working Class?

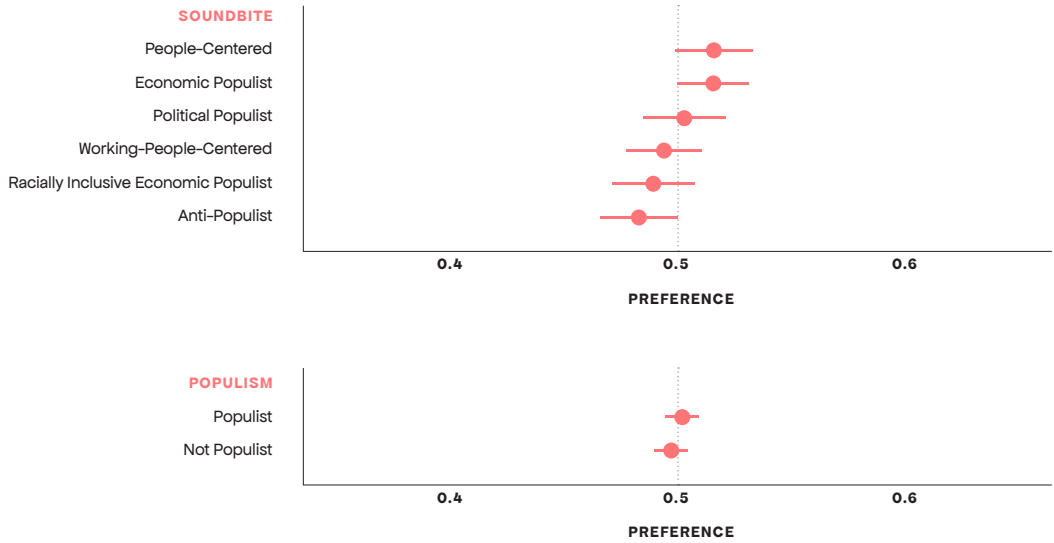
### Key Takeaways

- 1 Economic populism wins strong support from working-class respondents.** Working-class respondents, especially manual workers, favor candidates who pit “Americans who work for a living” against “corrupt millionaires” and “super-rich elites,” while other occupational groups exhibit no discernible distaste for them. On the whole, this suggests that populist rhetoric may help attract key working-class voters who Democrats currently struggle to win — manual workers — without serving as a liability or turnoff for the majority of the middle class.
- 2 Working-class support for populist candidates depends on partisanship.** Working-class Democrats prefer racially inclusive economic populists, while working-class Republicans prefer political populists. Independent working-class respondents do not show a significant preference for any populist candidates.
- 3 Economic populist rhetoric is not undermined by right-wing opposition messages.** With few exceptions, we find that right-wing messages fail to drive respondents away from candidates who embrace economic populism.
- 4 Rural respondents favor populist over non-populist messaging, and they are particularly positive toward candidates who use political populist messaging.**
- 5 Class-based political preferences extend across racial and ethnic lines.** Although black respondents as a whole display no discernible preference or dispreference for populism in general terms, black working-class respondents are strongly drawn to candidates who deliver an economic populist message.

Across the full sample of respondents, the simple people-centered soundbite and the economic populist message were viewed positively, while the anti-populist soundbite was viewed negatively (*Figure 2*). The difference between the people-centered and economic populist messages, on the one hand, and the racially inclusive economic populist message, on the other, falls just short of statistical significance at the 0.1 level). Given the relatively small magnitude of these effects across the full sample, however, when we collapse our soundbites around the basic binary of “populist” (that is, political populist, economic populist, and racially inclusive economic populist) and “non-populist” (that is, people-centered, working-people-centered, and anti-populist), we find little difference between the two very broad styles.



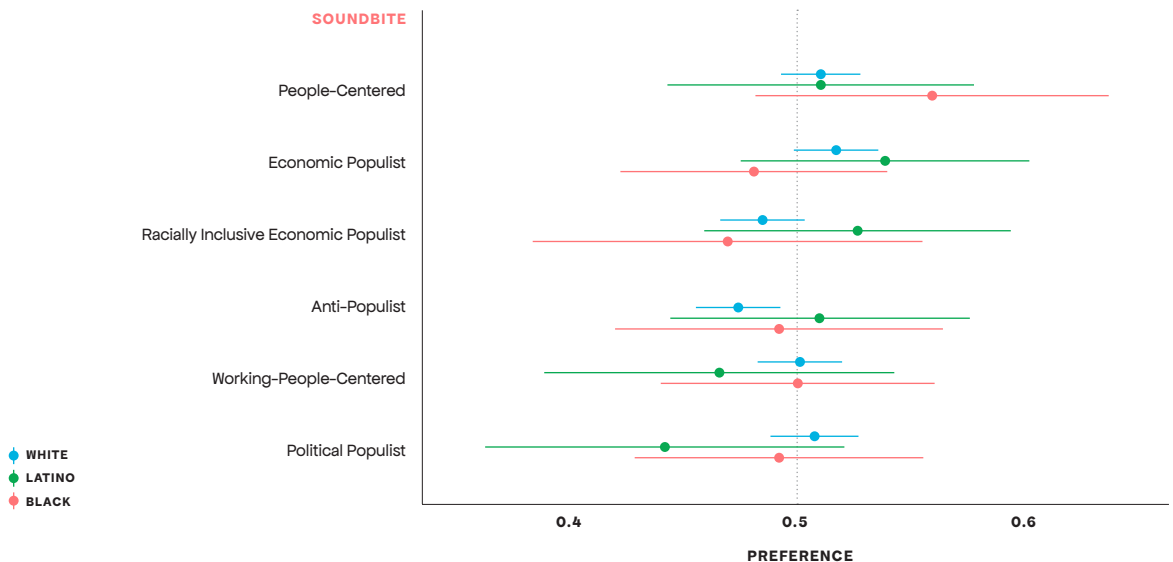
**Figure 2: Full Results for Populist Messaging**



Among racial/ethnic groups, our sample sizes for black and Latino respondents were too small to yield statistically significant estimates, but several suggestive patterns emerged that might be explored further in future research (**Figure 3**). Economic populist candidates proved strongest with Latino respondents, who also appreciated the racially inclusive economic populist message. White respondents, too, favored economic populists more than any alternative, and they were unfavorable to both the anti-populist and racially inclusive economic populist soundbites.

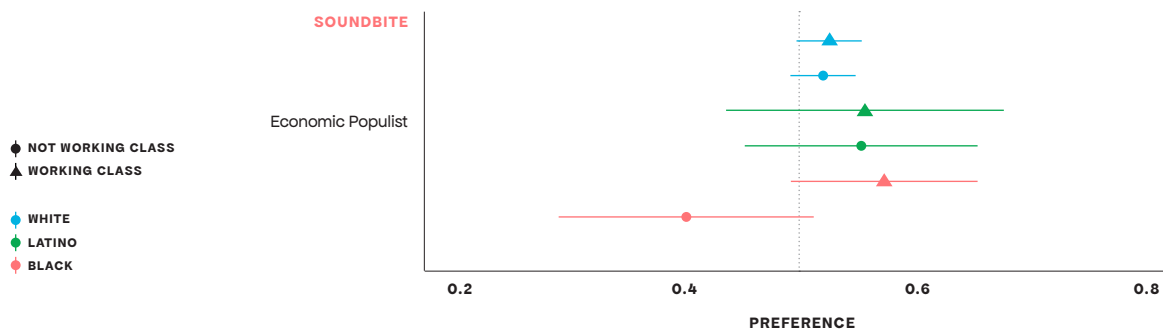
Black voters, though largely supportive of progressive economic policies (see the next section on policies), were somewhat cooler toward economic populist rhetoric: they preferred the straightforward people-centered message over all other choices.

**Figure 3: Full Sample for Populism by Race/Ethnicity**



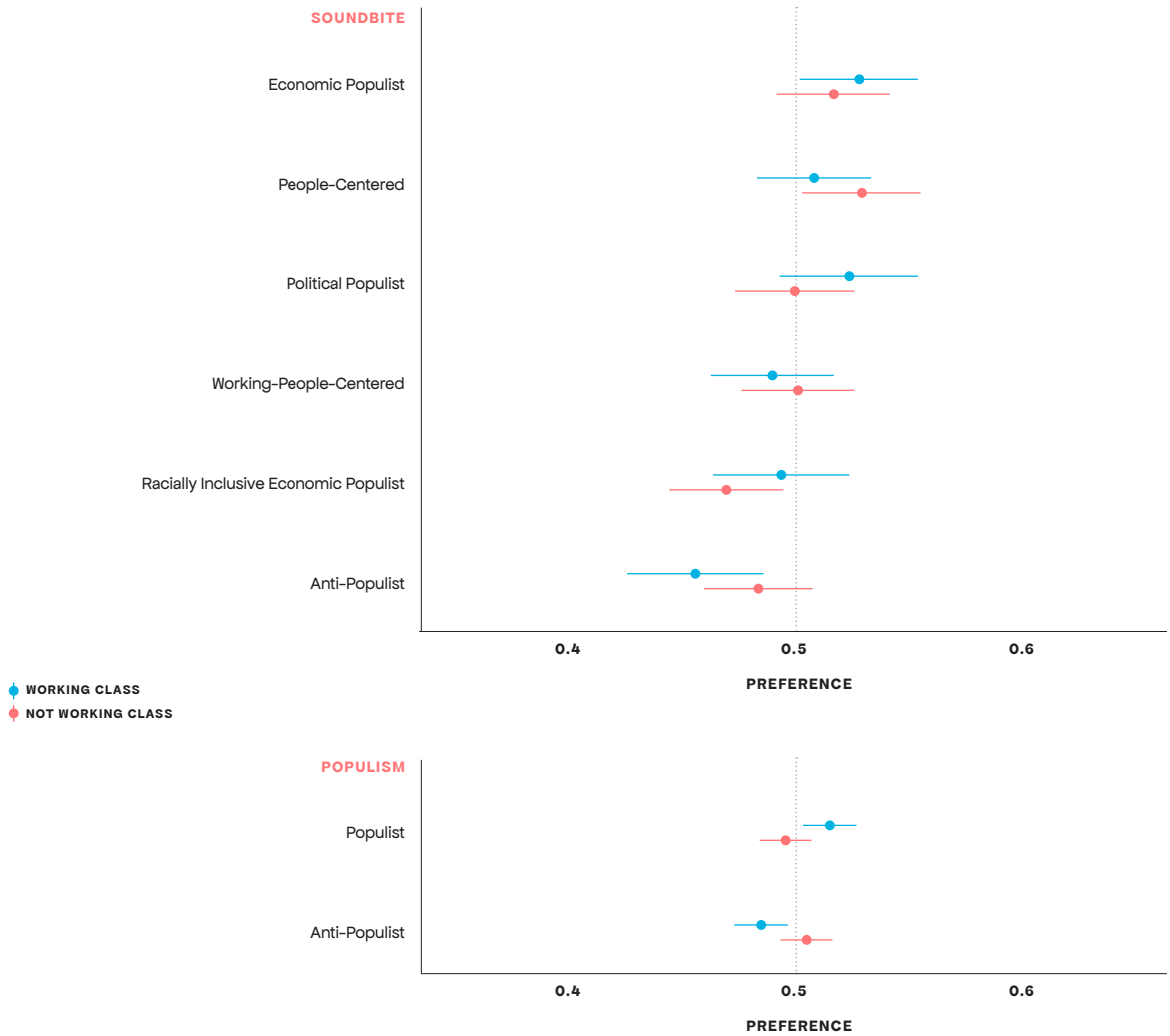
Reviewing the results by race/ethnicity *and* occupational class, we found a striking disparity among black respondents. While working-class black respondents favored economic populist candidates, black respondents outside the working class (that is, managers and professionals, along with small-business owners) were conspicuously averse to them (**Figure 4**). The gap in support for economic populist candidates between working and non-working-class black respondents was over 17 percentage points (and statistically significant at the 0.1 level). This finding — perhaps something of a surprise, given the conventional wisdom about black voters’ skeptical attitude toward populism — suggests a class cleavage among black voters that deserves further investigation. Neither white nor Latino respondents were polarized by class in the same way as African Americans.

**Figure 4: Full Sample for Economic Populism by Race and Class**



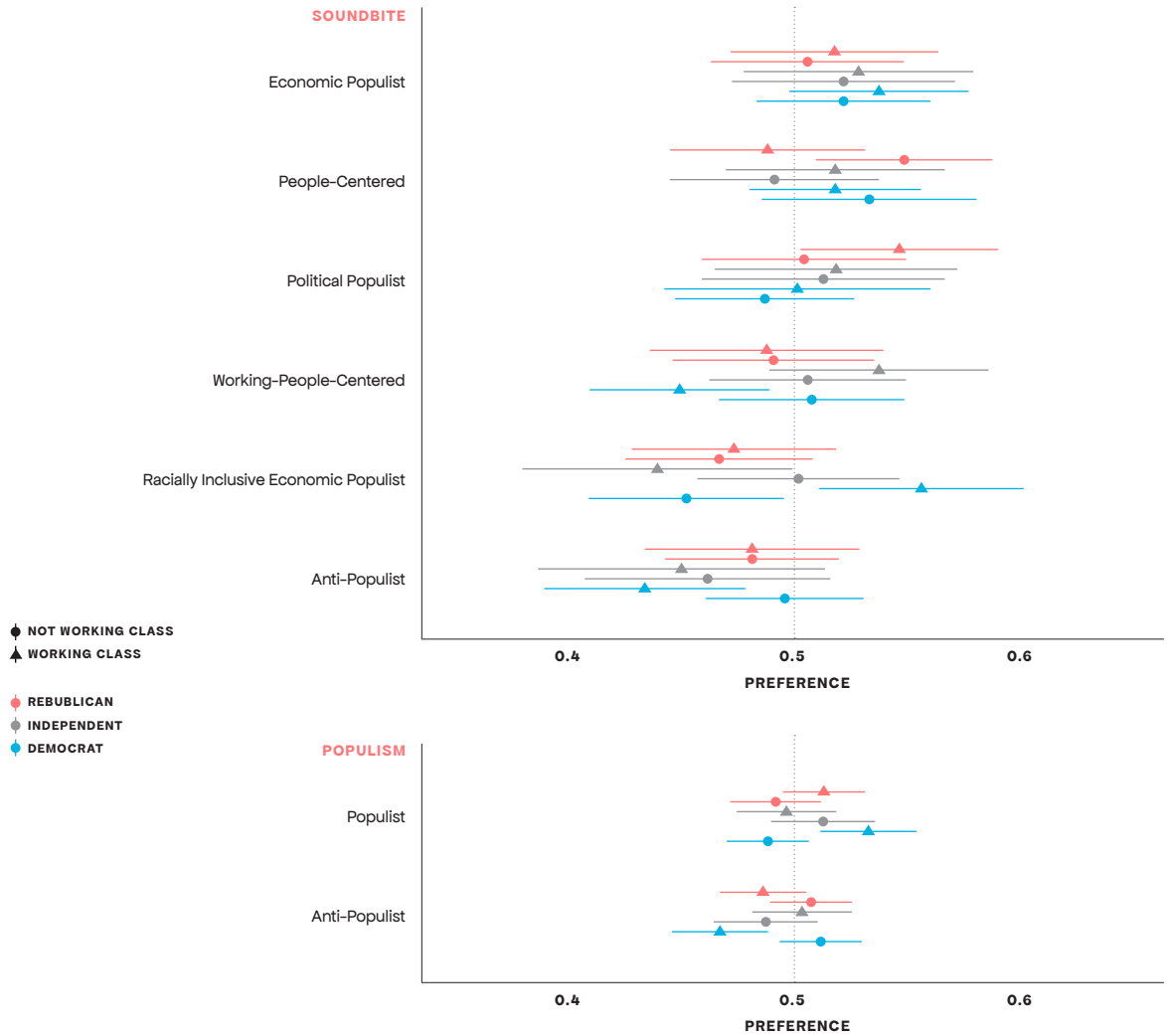
Turning to differences between working-class and other respondents, we see that working-class respondents have a clear preference for populist over non-populist candidates, while we do not observe a statistically significant difference between populist and non-populist candidates among non-working-class respondents (**Figure 5**). In terms of specific populist soundbites, the only messaging style for which working-class respondents showed a positive and statistically significant preference was economic populism.

**Figure 5: Full Sample for Populism by Class**



When we break down our populism results by both class and party, we find first that the positive effect of populist relative to non-populist rhetoric among working-class respondents is only significant among working-class Democrats ( $p = .06$ ), though we observe the same pattern among Republicans as well (*Figure 6*). In terms of specific soundbites, while we report positive coefficients for economic populist rhetoric among working-class respondents of all partisan affiliations, we only observe a significant preference among working-class Democrats. We find very small cross-class differences within each partisan category. By contrast, working-class Republicans showed a preference for political populist rhetoric. Finally, the only messaging style for which we found clear evidence of class-based polarization was racially inclusive economic populism, which was viewed favorably by working-class Democrats and negatively by non-working-class Democrats (the difference between the two was around 10 percentage points).

**Figure 6: Full Sample for Populism by Class and Party**



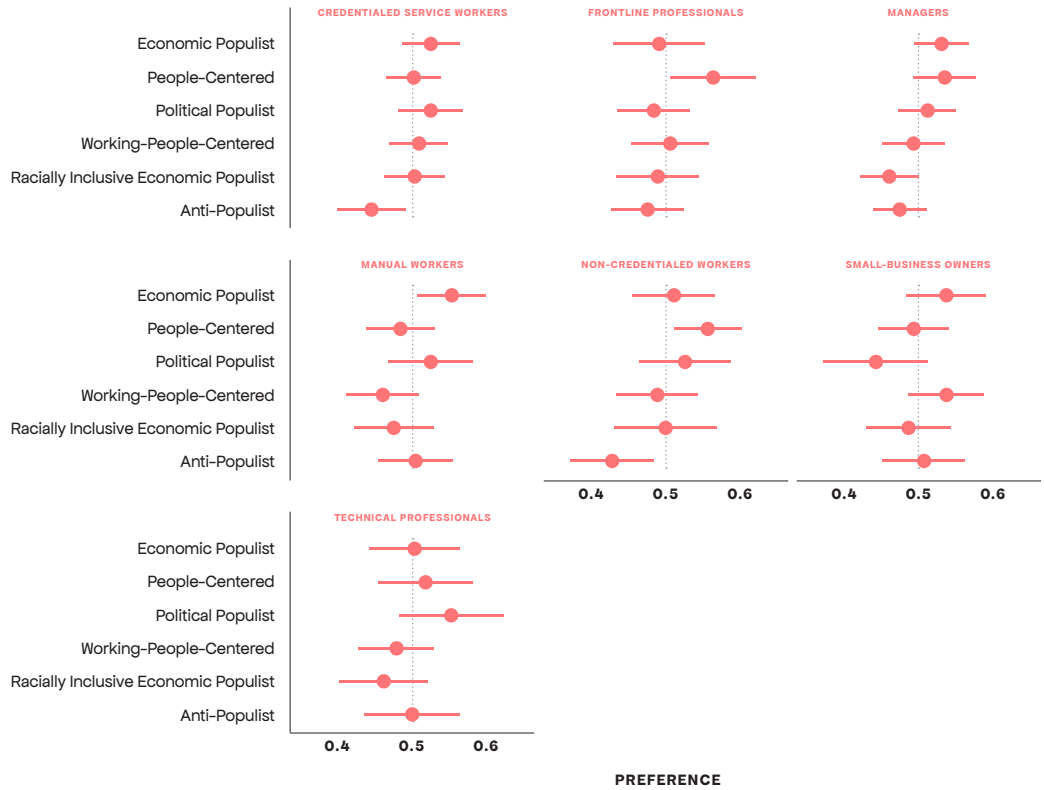
Further differences emerged along occupational lines within the working class. In particular, manual workers — a constituency that broke for Trump by a margin of over 20 percentage points in 2020 — were the only group with a statistically significant preference for economic populism, supporting candidates who ran on this messaging in 55.2% of races. Manual workers showed no significant preferences for any other messaging style (Figure 7).

These results are consistent with the work of other scholars who have argued that blue-collar workers may be particularly open to such populist appeals: they occupy an objectively precarious position in the labor market, and may be more likely than other workers to have suffered from job offshoring and automation.<sup>16</sup>

At the same time, we find no evidence that any occupational groups viewed economic populists negatively. On the whole, this suggests that populist rhetoric may help attract key working-class voters who Democrats currently struggle to win—manual workers—without serving as a liability or turnoff for the majority of the middle class.

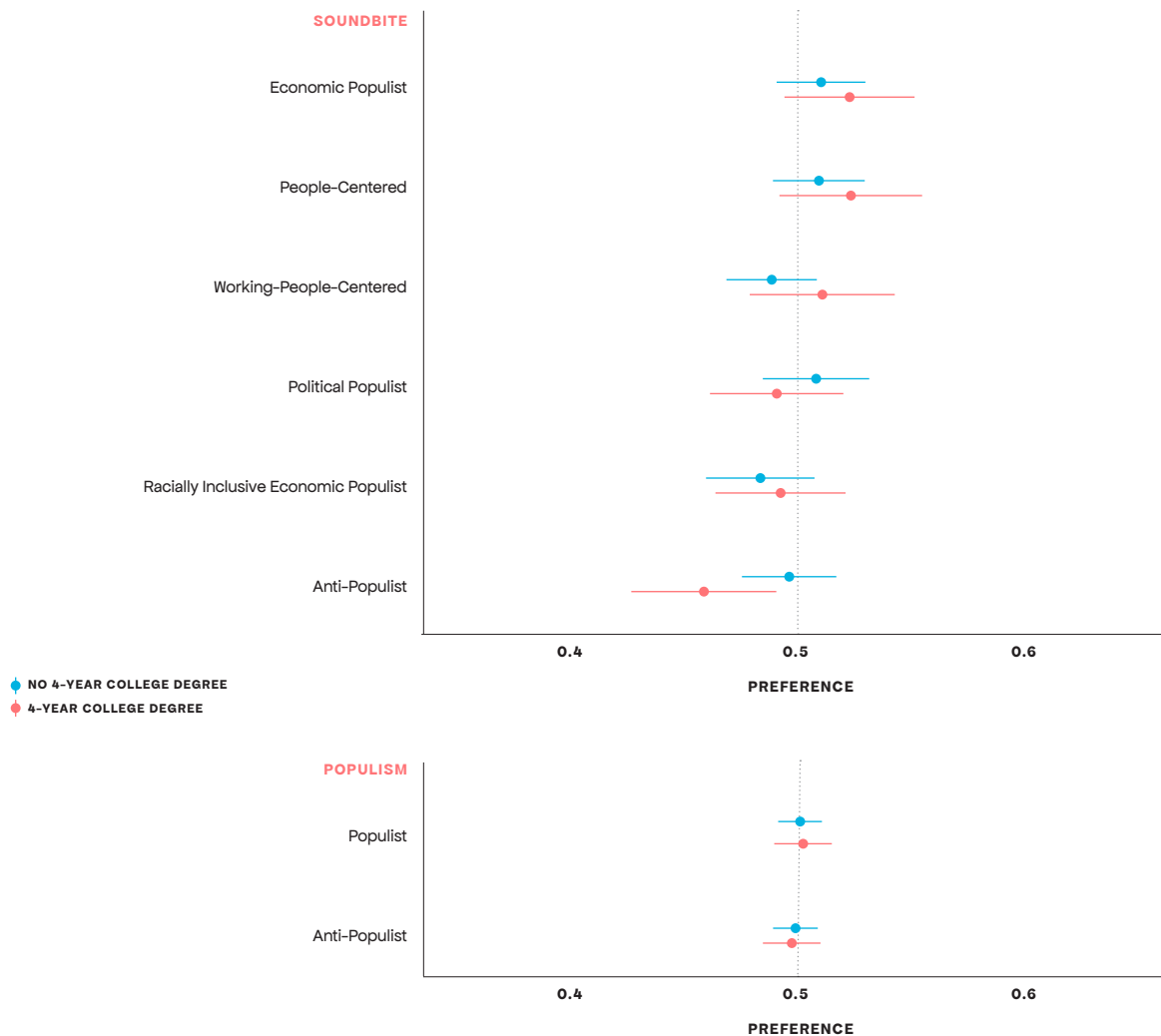
16 Hall and Evans 2019; Kurer 2020; Oesch and Rennwald 2018.

**Figure 7: Full Sample for Populism by Subclass**



The distinct appeal of populist messaging to working-class respondents, however, does not appear to translate to all respondents with lower levels of education. We see virtually no difference in preferences for populist versus non-populist candidates between respondents with and without a college degree, nor do we observe any statistically significant difference in support for specific messaging styles across education levels (*Figure 8*).

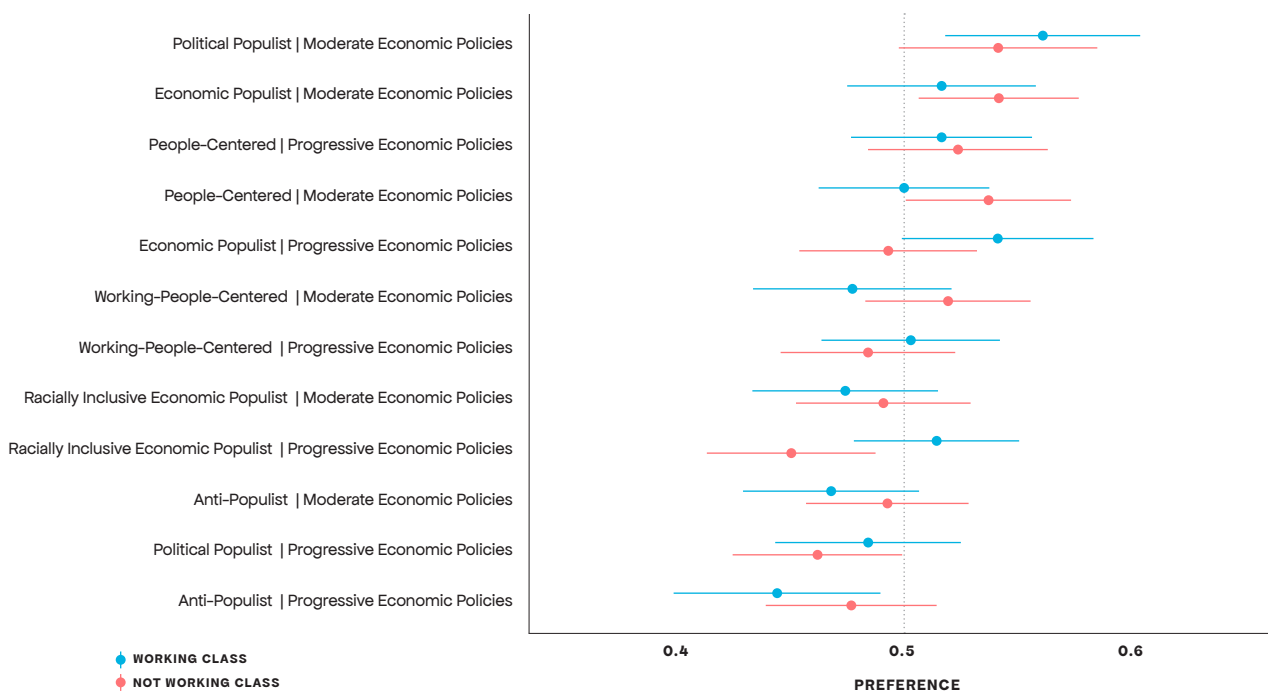
**Figure 8: Full Sample for Populism by Educational Attainment**



When we look at the combination of messaging styles and economic policies, we find that a progressive economic populism that combines bold, redistributive economic policies with anti-economic elite messaging is one of only two combinations that received positive and statistically significant support from working-class respondents. Our working-class respondents selected this combination 54% of races, second in popularity only to the combination of political populism and moderate economic messaging (the difference between the two is not statistically significant).

Interestingly, the strongest class disparity we observe with respect to the combination of messaging styles and economic policies is the combination of racially inclusive economic populist messaging and progressive economic policies (*Figure 9*), toward which working-class respondents were 6.4 percentage points more favorable than non-working-class respondents ( $p = .09$ ).

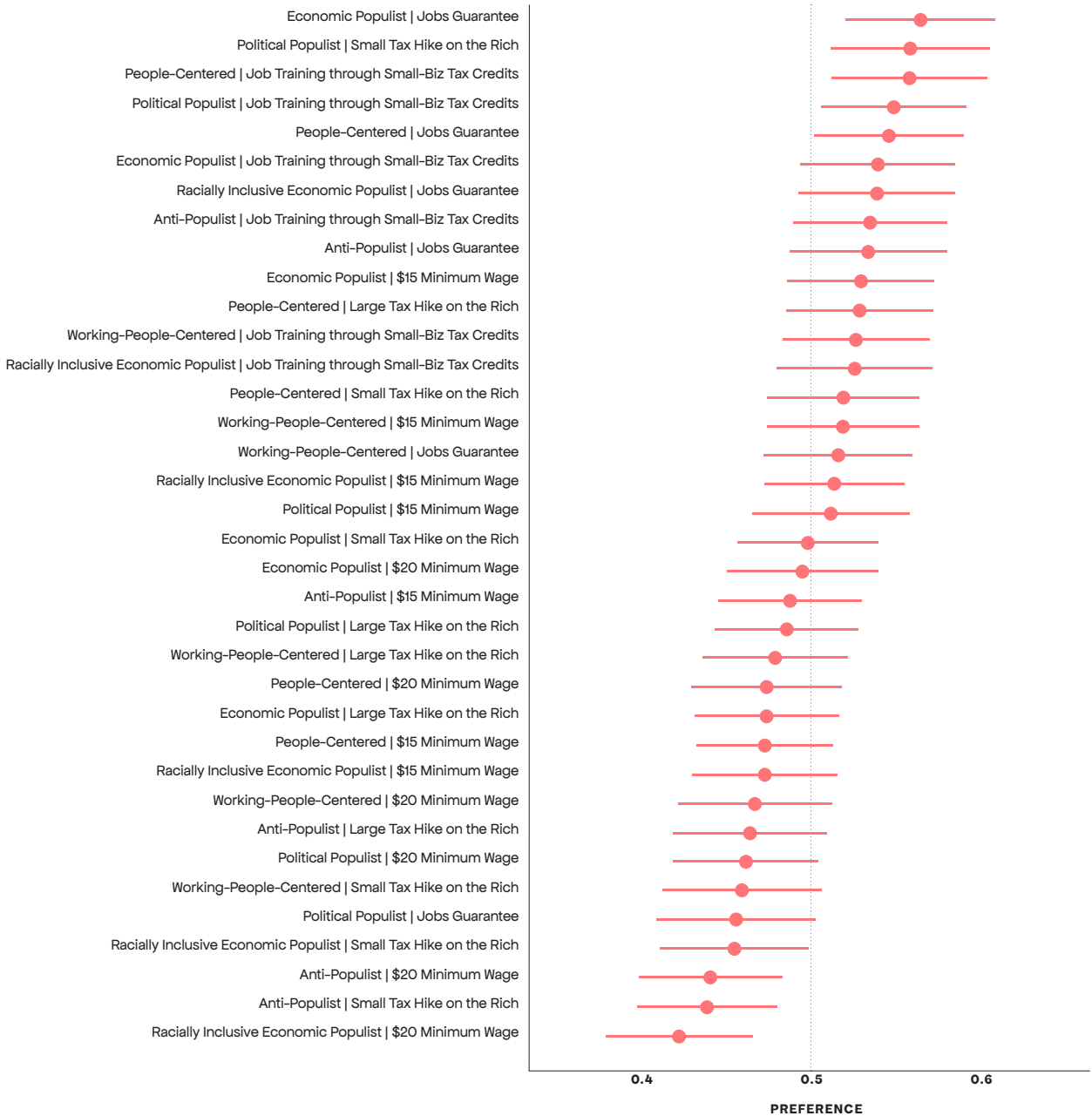
**Figure 9: Full Sample for Combination of Populism and Economic Policy by Educational Attainment**



When we disaggregate particular economic policies, we see that progressive economic populism *can* be as or more popular than any other combination among voters as a whole, but this depends on the specific policy area candidates choose to prioritize.

The single most popular combination of rhetoric and policy — out of 36 possible groupings — was economic populism paired with a federal jobs guarantee (**Figure 10**). Candidates touting this combination were chosen in over 56% of contests, indicating that a left-wing campaign that unites strong us-versus-them economic rhetoric with a boldly progressive jobs plan may be particularly effective. That said, given the small sample sizes we have for each combination of populist messaging and economic policies, these results should be assessed with caution and taken as an invitation for future survey research into this question.

**Figure 10: Full Sample for Combination of Populism and Economic Policies**



Overall, economic populist candidates saw their popularity diminish when they adopted strongly progressive social policies — decriminalizing immigration, ensuring an unfettered right to abortion, and banning automatic weapons. While economic populists who took up moderate social policies — modernizing our border infrastructure, access to legal abortion up to 14 weeks, and strengthening red-flag laws — were chosen in 56% of races, those who employed progressive social messaging were chosen 49% of the time. Simply staying quiet on social issues did little to help economic populists,

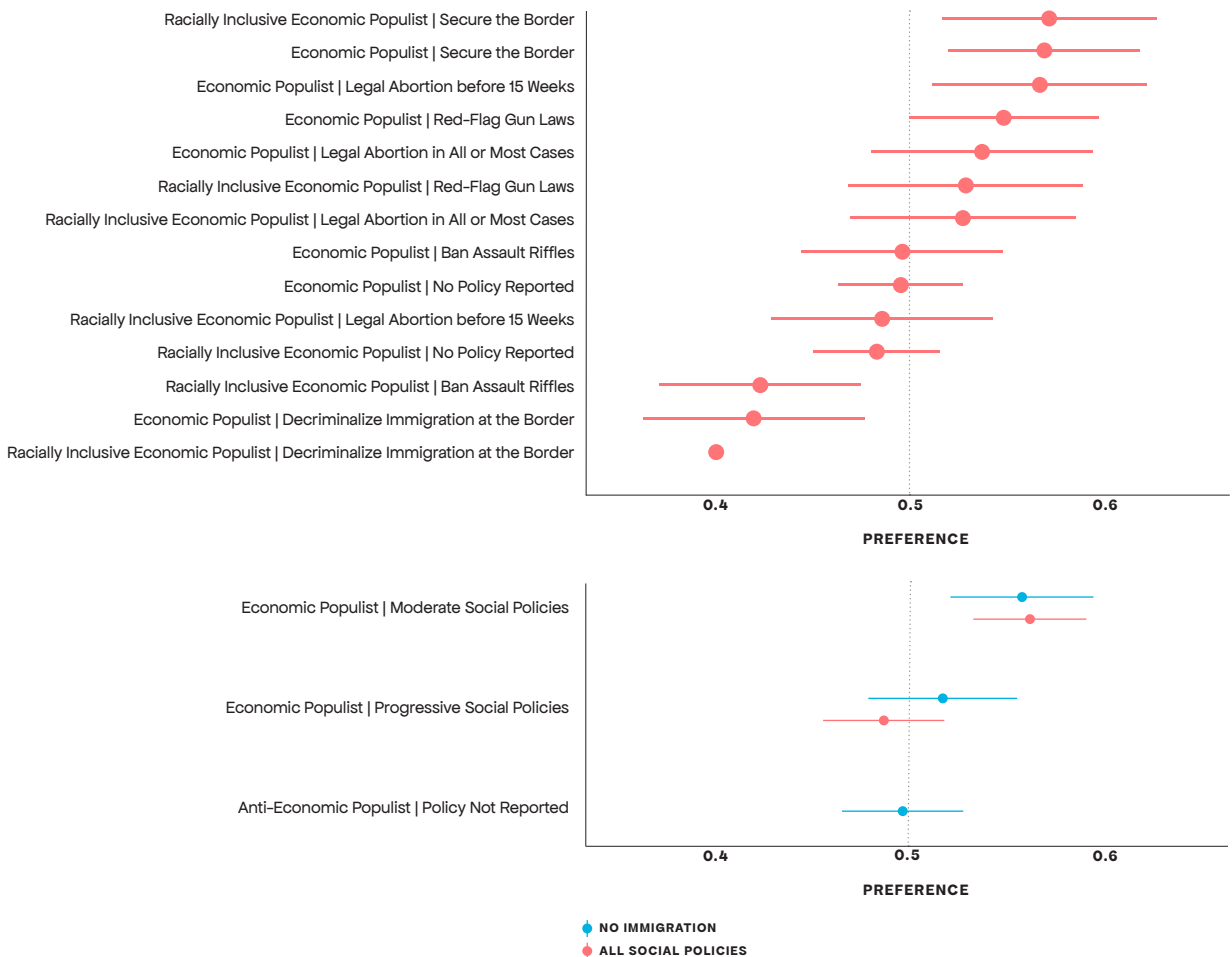


who were also viewed negatively when they did not mention any of their preferred social policies.

It is important to note that the impact of a social policy stance on the appeal of economic populism appears to vary substantially by issue. A strongly progressive position on immigration clearly hurt economic populists: endorsing decriminalized immigration, rather than “modernizing our border infrastructure,” dropped their support from 57% to 42%. On the other hand, strongly progressive gun policies had a smaller, but still sizable, negative impact on the economic populist appeal (dropping from 55% to 50% support; this difference was not statistically significant), and progressive abortion policy had a negligible effect.

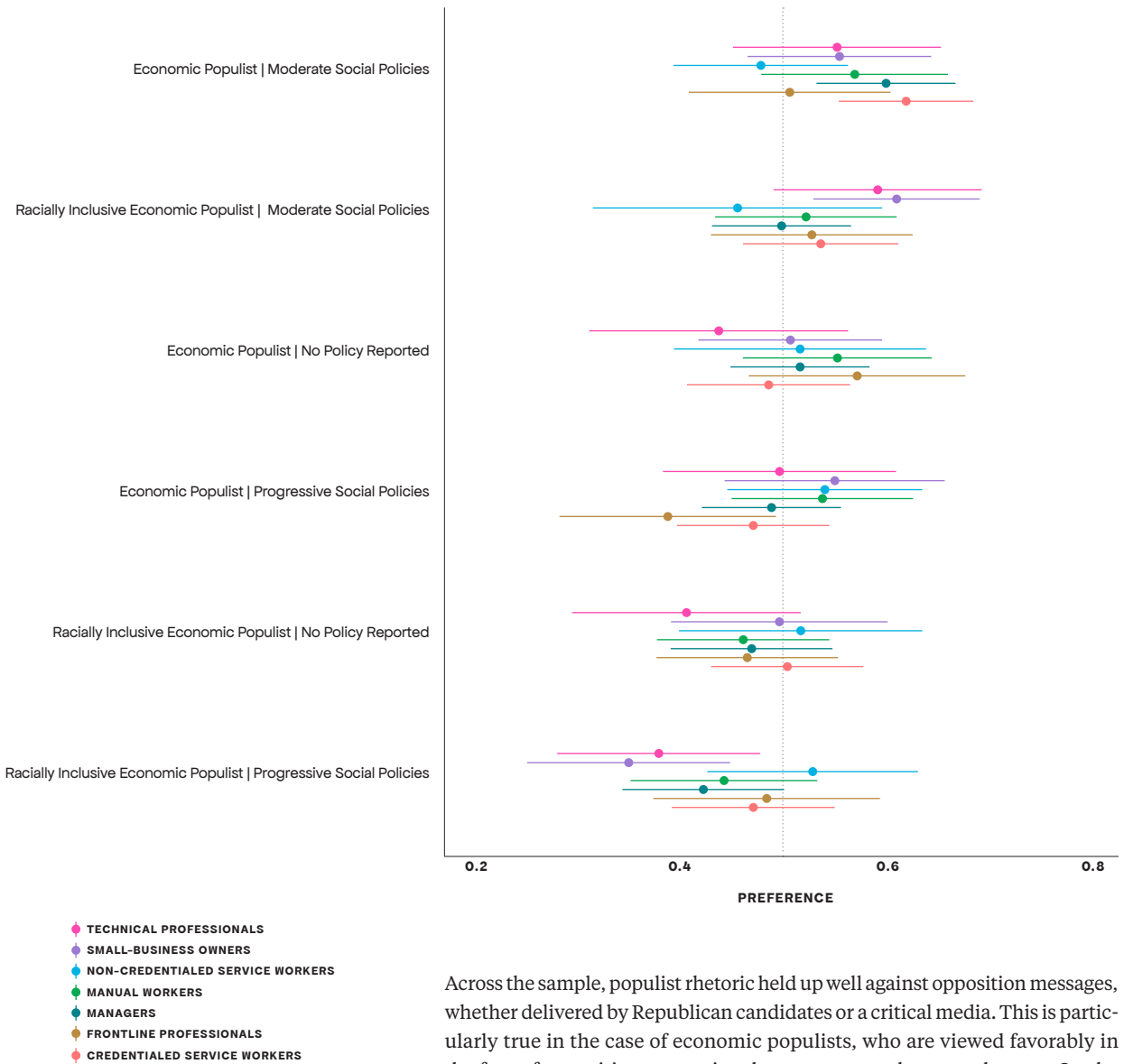
Because immigration policy is so clearly polarizing, we also compare the overall impact of social policies on the appeal of economic populism when excluding immigration from the bundle of social policies (*Figure 11*). The result is that candidates running on centrist social policies are still viewed favorably, while we detect no preference for those running on progressive social policies, though the difference between the two is significantly smaller and not statistically significant.

**Figure 11: Full Sample for Combination of Populism and Social Policy**



We also found important class differences in the impact of social policies on economic populists (*Figure 12*). On the one hand, managers and credentialed service workers all viewed economic populists favorably when they employed moderate social policies, while showing no significant preference for economic populists who employed progressive social policies.

**Figure 12: Full Sample for Combination of Populism and Social Policy by Subclass**

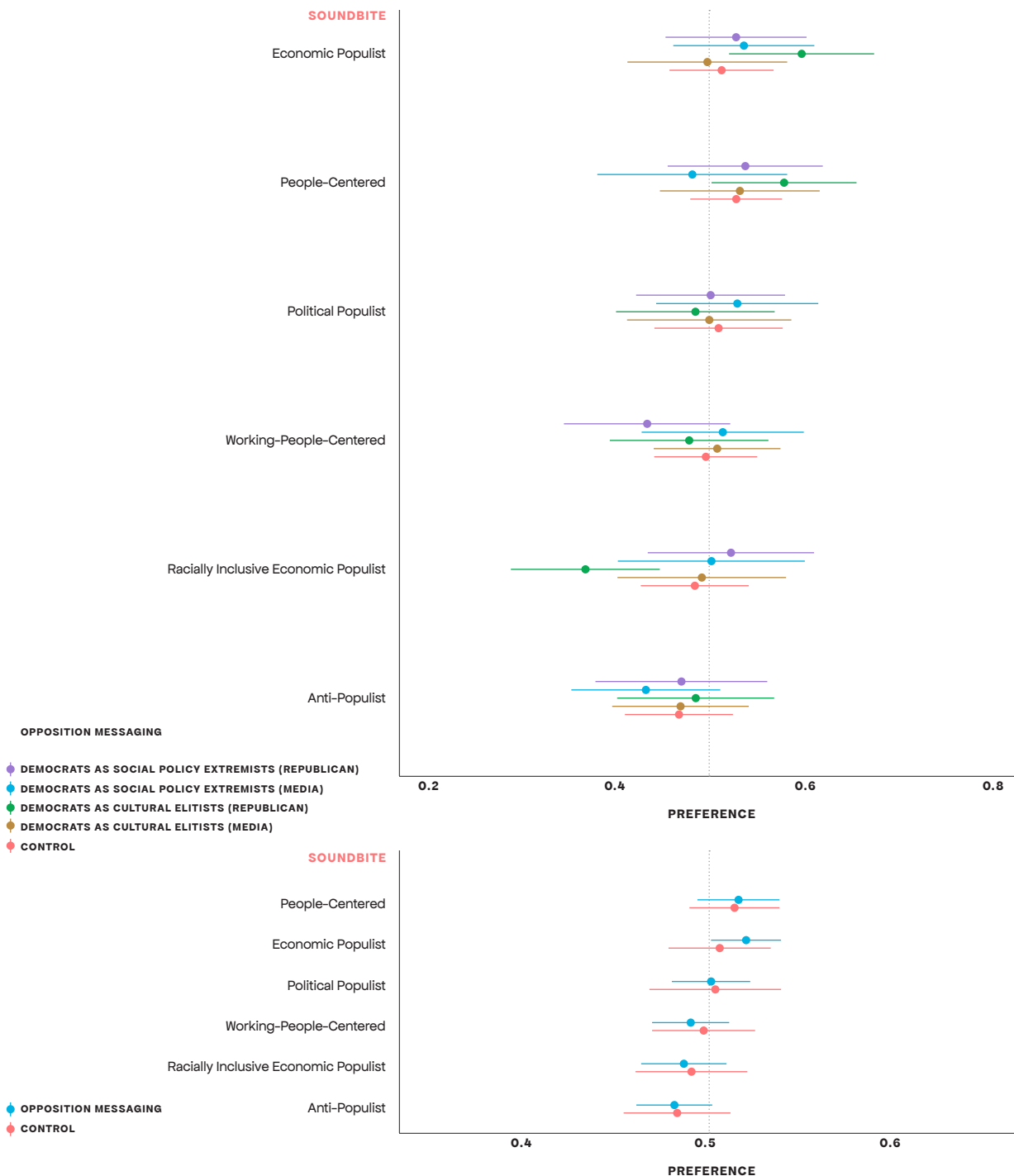


Across the sample, populist rhetoric held up well against opposition messages, whether delivered by Republican candidates or a critical media. This is particularly true in the case of economic populists, who are viewed favorably in the face of opposition messaging, but not among the control group. On the whole, opposition messages had little impact on populist rhetoric, one way or the other (*Figure 13*).

An exception to this general rule was the racially inclusive economic populist soundbite, which held up well against opposition messaging overall, but won significantly less support among respondents who viewed

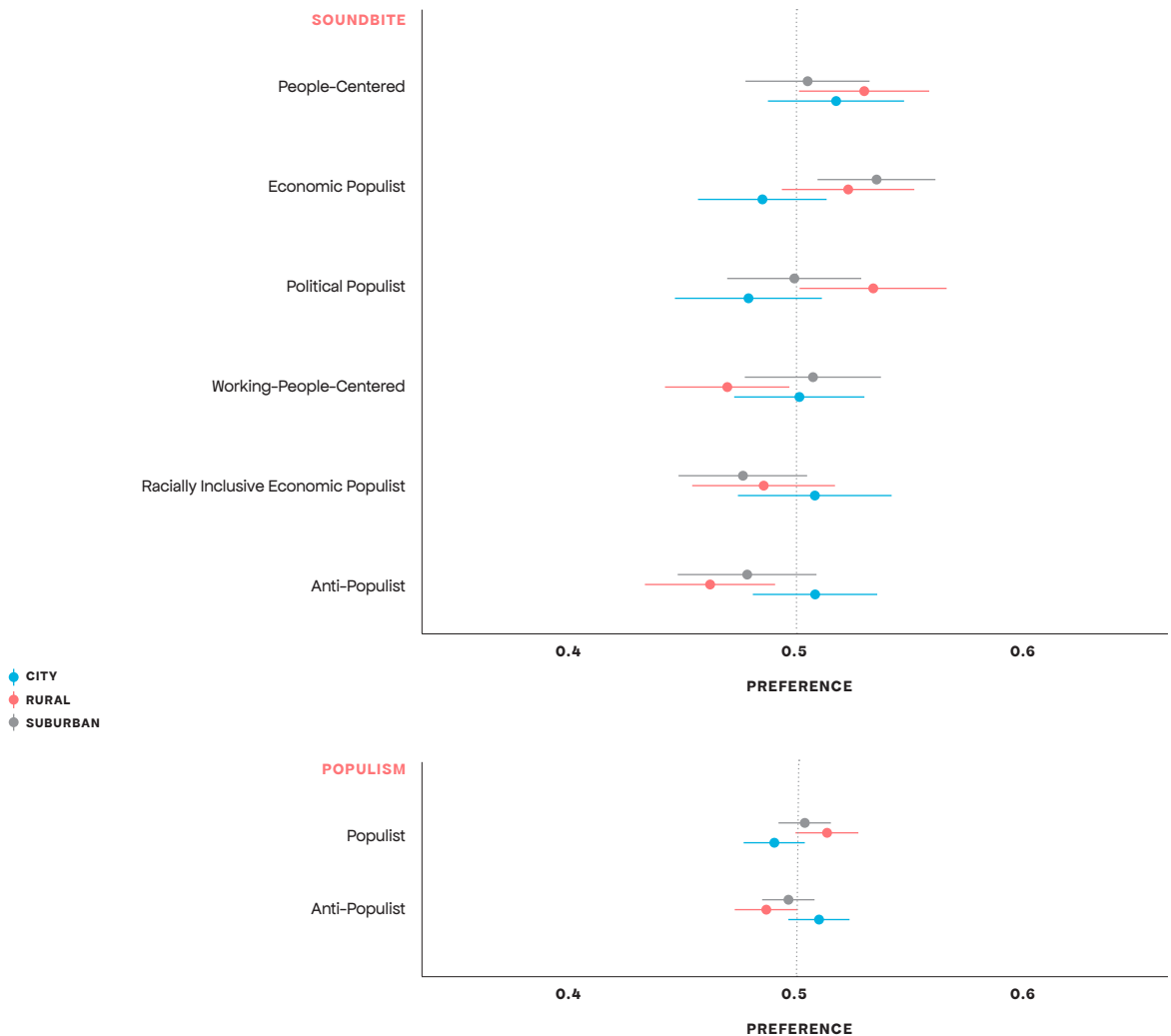
a right-wing message accusing Democrats of having “turned their backs on working Americans,” and become “the party of Hollywood, the Ivy League, and Washington insiders” compared to respondents who viewed a critical-media message describing Democrats as extreme on issues like critical race theory. This suggests racially inclusive economic populism may be well-suited to deflect race-related Republican attacks.

**Figure 13: Full Sample for Populism by Type of Opposition Messaging**



Finally, respondents living in rural areas had a slightly positive view of populist rhetoric in general ( $p = .1$ ), while we detected no significant differences in attitudes toward populism among suburban and city dwellers (**Figure 14**). A close examination of the individual types of populist rhetoric reveals some crucial differences: rural respondents have a negative opinion of candidates running on anti-populist messaging and were attracted to a political populist message. However, they also respond favorably to a generic people-centered message. For suburban respondents, preferences between populist and non-populist messages in general were not that strong. Interestingly, however, they do show a strong preference for one type of message: the economic populist message. Lastly, respondents living in cities showed no significant preferences for any message.

**Figure 14: Full Sample for Populism by Geography**



# How do Economic and Social Policies Priorities Affect Respondents' Views of Candidates?

## Key Takeaways

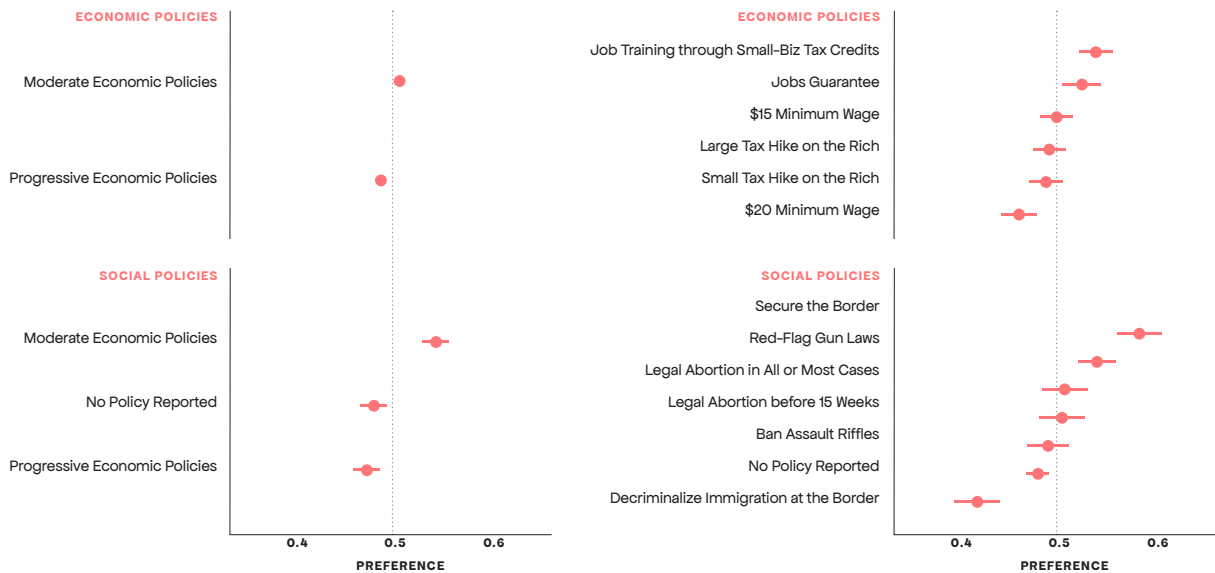
- 1. Overall, respondents prefer candidates who campaign on moderate economic policies over progressive economic policies.** These preferences, however, vary significantly by issue: jobs policies, both moderate and progressive, are the most popular economic policies.
- 2. The only economic policy that is not viewed unfavorably by either Democrats, independents, or Republicans is the progressive jobs guarantee.** Support for a progressive jobs guarantee is driven by working-class respondents across partisanship. This finding suggests that running on a bold progressive jobs plan may be most effective among working-class voters and is unlikely to generate a negative backlash against Democrats.
- 3. Non-credentialed service workers are particularly amenable to progressive economic and social appeals, while other occupational groups generally prefer candidates who campaign on moderate economic and social policies.**
- 4. Progressive economic policies largely withstand opposition attacks, whereas progressive social policies may pose a significant liability.**
- 5. Voters' opinions on social policies can be more variable — and can have a significant effect on respondents' preferences — but those effects are highly dependent on the issue area.** Immigration policy is the most polarizing, and respondents much prefer the moderate position on immigration (securing borders through modernized border infrastructure) to the progressive one (decriminalizing immigration). On abortion, however, progressive policies are just as popular as moderate policies.

## UNPACKING THE RESULTS

Overall, progressive economic policies garnered slightly less support than moderate economic policies, but preferences were highly dependent on specific issues (*Figure 15*). The most popular candidates campaigned on jobs: both the moderate (tax credits for small businesses to incentivize job-training programs) and progressive (a federal jobs guarantee) policies were the only jobs policies with net positive appeal. Candidates who campaigned on a \$20/hour minimum wage were viewed unfavorably.

Candidates who campaigned on moderate social policies were more popular than those who focused on progressive social policies overall — though, as in the case of economic policies, this varied significantly across specific policies (*Figure 15*). The starkest results were between the progressive proposal to decriminalize immigration and the moderate position, which emphasized modernizing border security. Candidates with the moderate immigration position were over 16 percentage points more likely to be preferred than candidates running on the decriminalization of immigration. This is entirely driven by independents and especially by Republicans. By contrast, the difference in support for the moderate and progressive social policies around abortion was statistically insignificant.

**Figure 15: Full Sample for Economic and Social Policies**

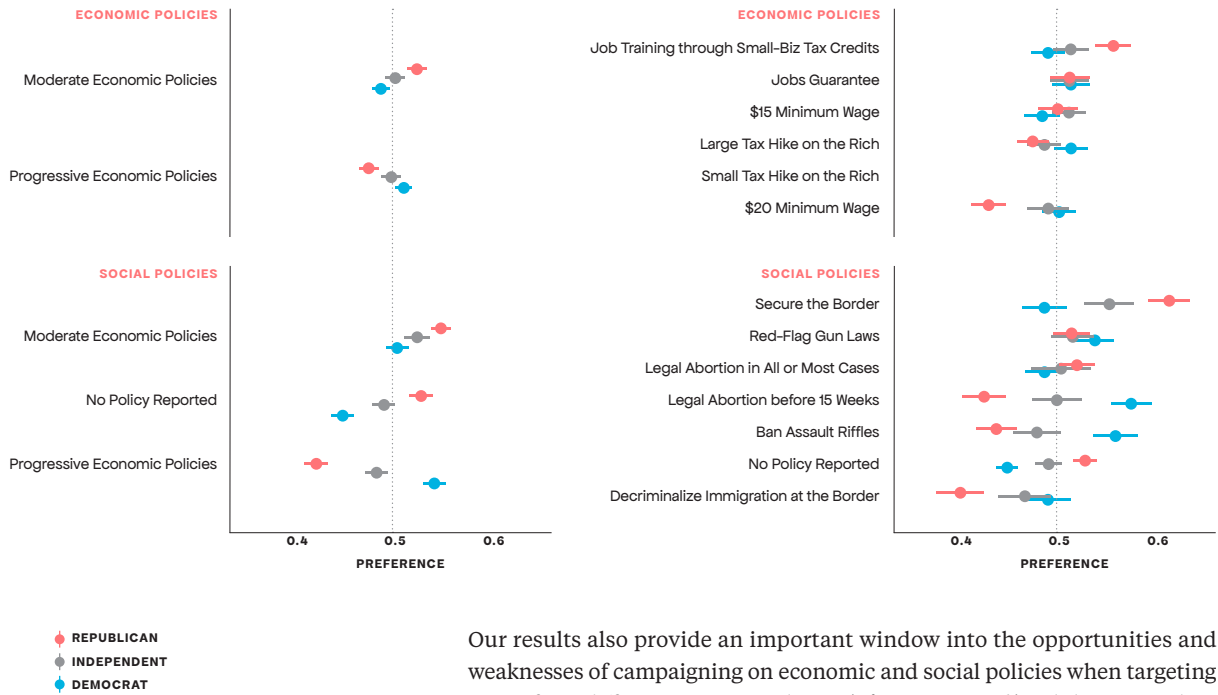


We also find important differences in respondents’ views of candidates across partisanship, suggesting several possible tradeoffs Democrats face when determining whether to prioritize turnout or persuasion efforts on the campaign trail (*Figure 16*).

In terms of economic policies, while large tax hikes on the rich played reasonably well with Democrats, they were unpopular among Republicans. Similarly, while Democrats and independents had no significant preferences with respect to the \$20/hour minimum wage, Republicans had a strongly negative view. The only economic policy for which we see no evidence of polarization across parties was the jobs guarantee, suggesting that running on this policy may not generate a negative backlash against Democrats among voters of any political affiliation.

The largest differences we find across partisanship, however, were with respect to social policies: the progressive abortion and gun positions were very popular among Democrats and equally unpopular among Republicans. In terms of immigration policies, Democrats displayed no significant preferences, while both Republicans and independents had sharply negative views of progressive immigration policies and correspondingly positive views of candidates who highlighted moderate immigration policies.

**Figure 16: Full Sample for Economic and Social Policies by Party**



Our results also provide an important window into the opportunities and weaknesses of campaigning on economic and social policies when targeting voters from different economic classes (*Figures 17a, 17b*). While non-credentialed service workers had a slightly positive view of candidates who ran on progressive economic policies and a negative view of candidates who ran on moderate economic policies, we find no evidence of a similar reaction among other occupational groups. In terms of specific economic policies, candidates who focused on a federal jobs guarantee were viewed favorably by non-credentialed service workers but not by any other occupational group. By contrast, non-credentialed service workers had a significantly less positive reaction to candidates who ran on the centrist jobs policy as compared to managers or frontline professionals, by around 10 percentage points.

Respondents from all classes, except for non-credentialed service workers, were favorable toward candidates who campaigned on moderate social policies and negative toward those who campaigned on progressive social policies. Interestingly, the gap between support for candidates running on progressive versus moderate social policies among non-credentialed service workers was less than 2 percentage points, while the same gap between frontline service workers, for instance, was more than four times as large.

This suggests that while candidates may have more flexibility with respect to social policy messaging among certain segments of working-class voters, they may face significant constraints among others.

Figure 17a: Full Sample for Economic and Social Policies by Subclass

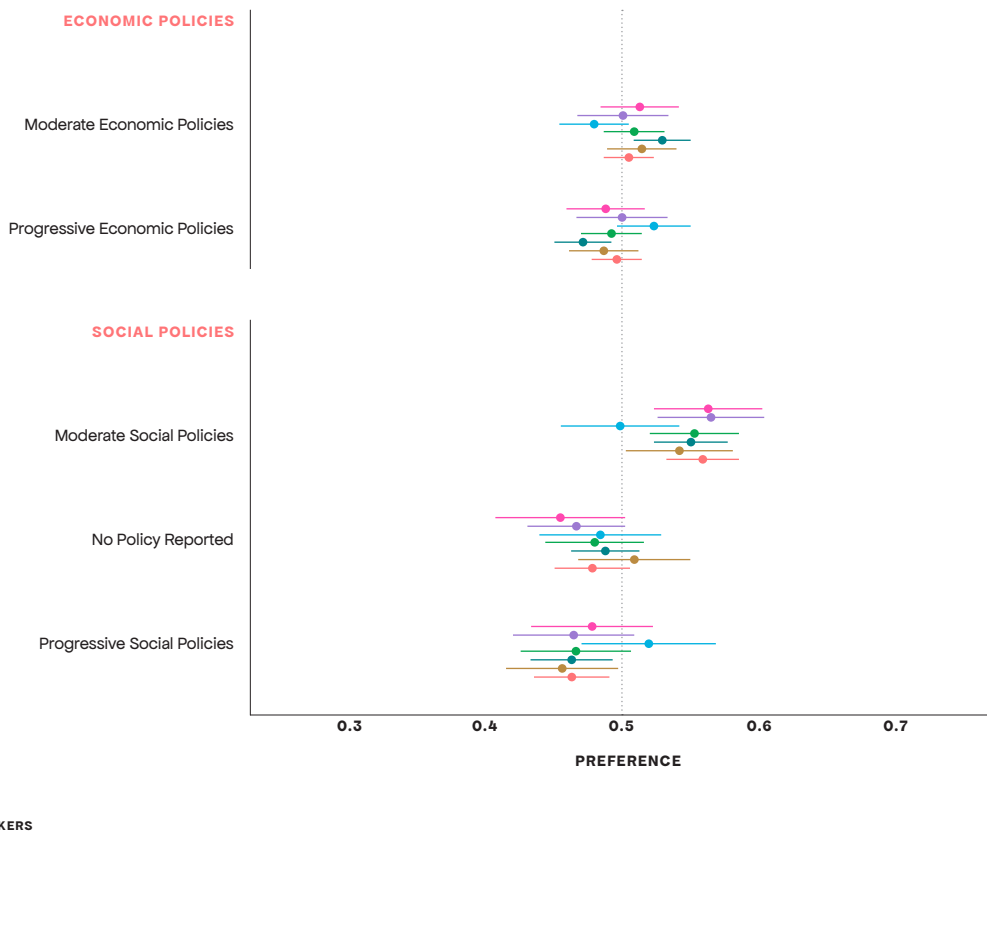
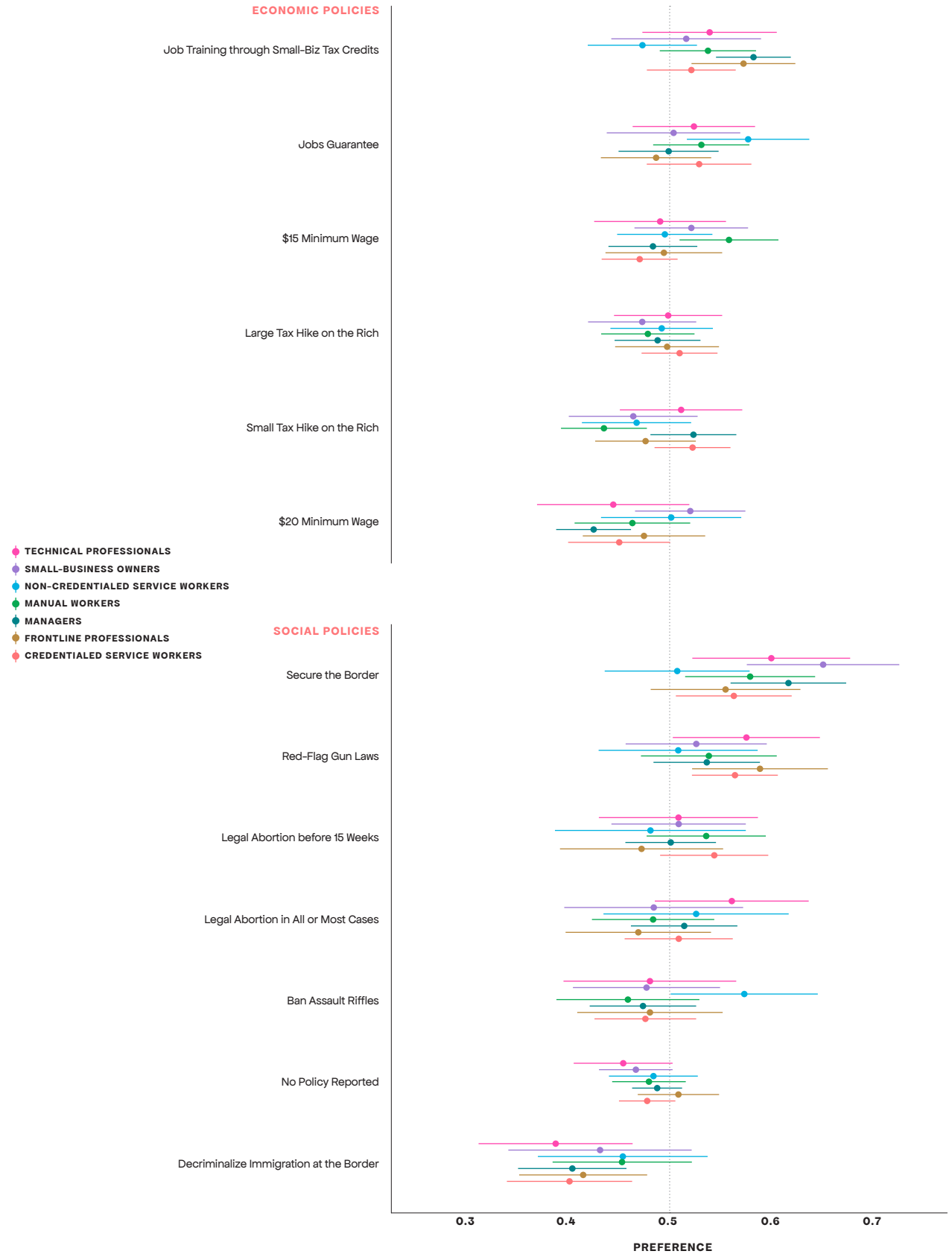




Figure 17b: Full Sample for Economic and Social Policies by Subclass

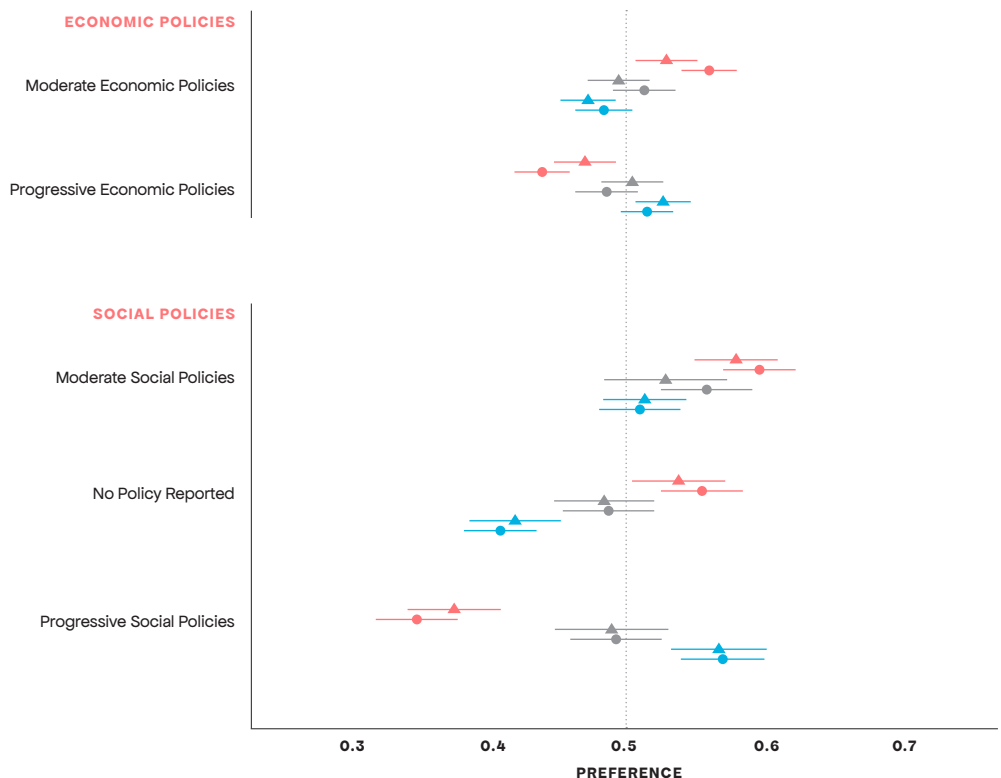


When we throw partisanship into the class picture, we see that candidates with progressive economic policies are viewed more positively by Democratic respondents than by independents, and least by Republican respondents (**Figure 18**). However, within each partisan group, working-class respondents are slightly more likely to prefer progressive economic policies than their middle-/upper-class counterparts.

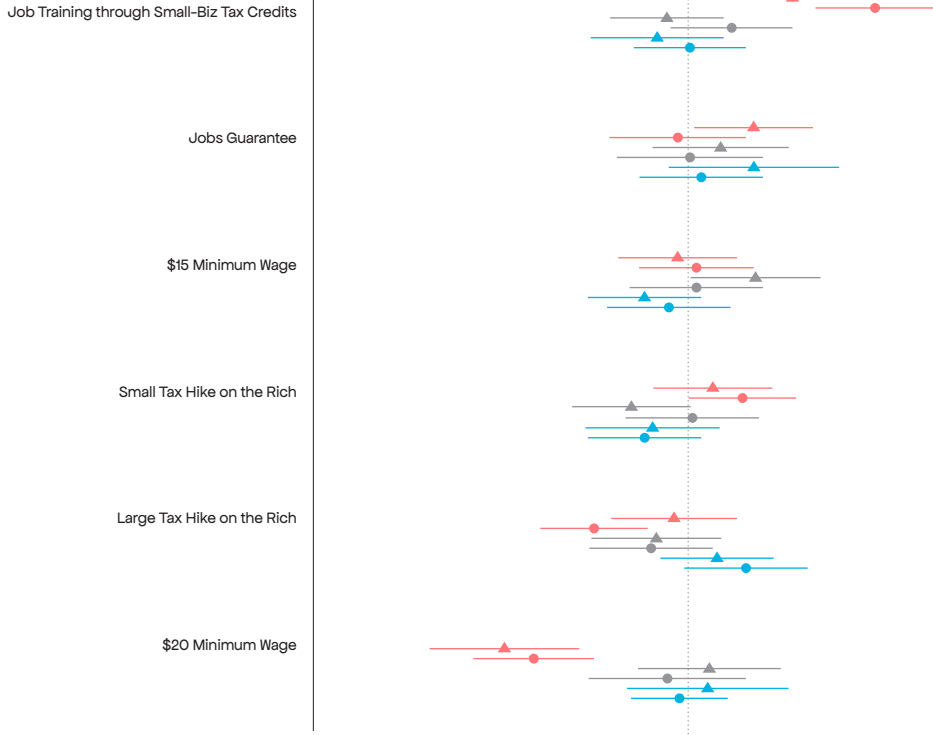
Zooming in on specific issues, we can better understand which types of voters are attracted to specific economic policies. For example, among Republicans, both working-class and non-working-class, respondents favor the moderate tax credit for job-training programs and disliked the \$20/hour minimum wage. And when it comes to the large tax hike on corporations, the only group that disliked this policy were non-working-class Republicans. The only economic policy with net positive point estimates among working-class respondents regardless of party is a progressive jobs guarantee.

When it comes to social policies, respondents are divided based on their party identity, not their class: Republicans strongly disliked progressive social policies, while all Democrats generally preferred progressive social policies. Independents were largely caught in between, with non-working-class independents in favor of moderate policies and working-class independents expressing no significant preference between moderate and progressive policies. In fact, working-class independents didn't seem to have a strong view on any social policies, except for immigration, where they favored candidates who proposed to "secure the border."

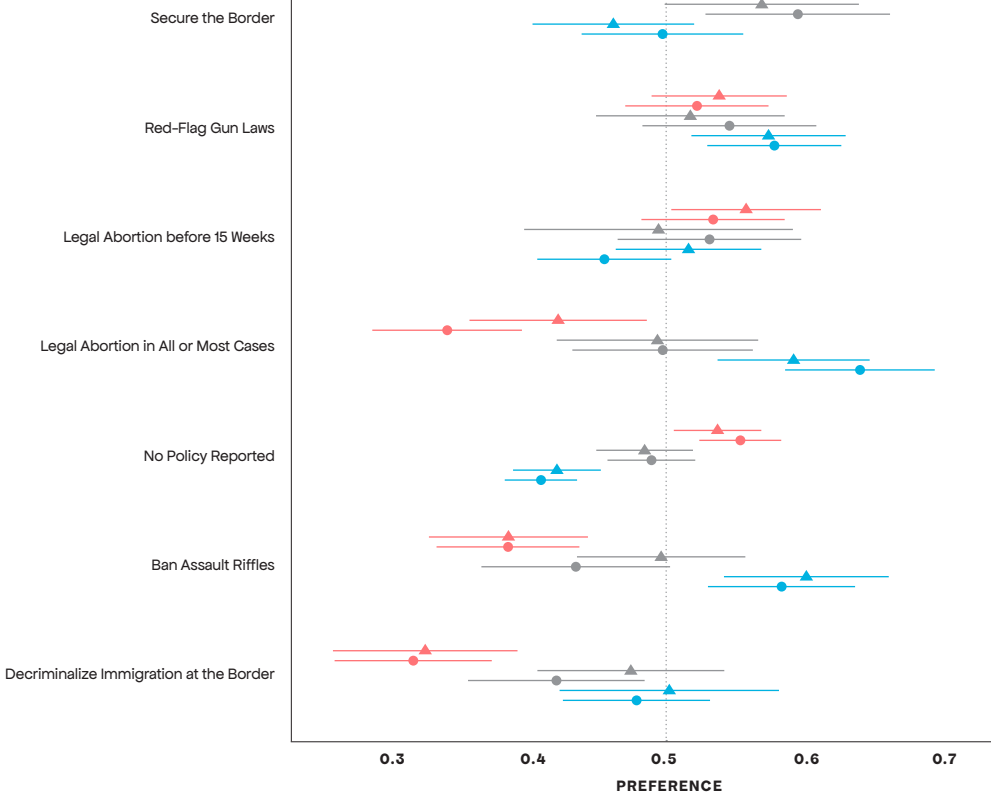
**Figure 18: Full Sample for Economic and Social Policies by Party and Class**



**ECONOMIC POLICIES**



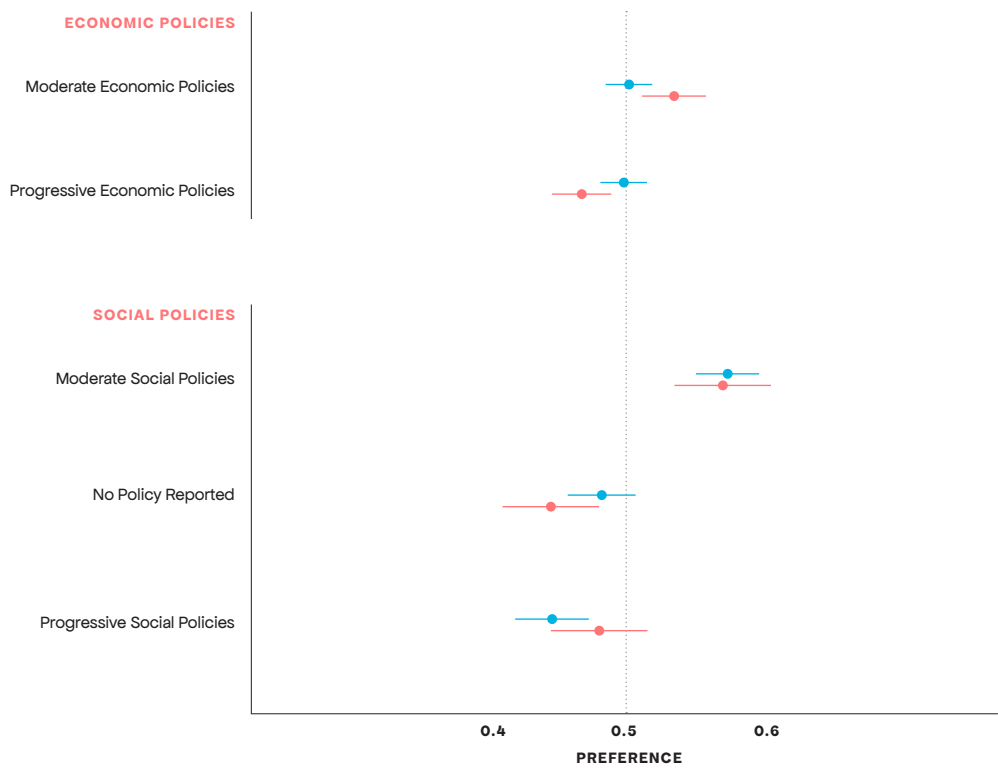
**SOCIAL POLICIES**



- NOT WORKING CLASS
- ▲ WORKING CLASS
- REPUBLICAN
- INDEPENDENT
- DEMOCRAT

Finally, the relative popularity of centrist economic policy vis-a-vis progressive economic policy appears to dissipate in the face of realistic opposition messaging, suggesting that generic polling may understate the popularity of progressive economic policy (**Figure 19**). Most notably, candidates who employed progressive economic policies were more popular among respondents who were exposed to opposition policies messaging compared to those who were not (though this difference barely misses the .1 level of statistical significance at  $p = .12$ ), while the opposite is true of candidates who employed moderate economic policies (though this difference barely misses the .1 level of statistical significance at  $p = .11$ ). The strong resilience of candidates who employed progressive economic messaging was driven primarily by candidates who employed a jobs guarantee or tax hikes on the rich.

**Figure 19: Full Sample for Economic and Social Policies by Type of Opposition Messaging**



**ECONOMIC POLICIES**

Job Training through Small-Biz Tax Credits

Jobs Guarantee

\$15 Minimum Wage

Small Tax Hike on the Rich

Large Tax Hike on the Rich

\$20 Minimum Wage

**SOCIAL POLICIES**

Secure the Border

Red-Flag Gun Laws

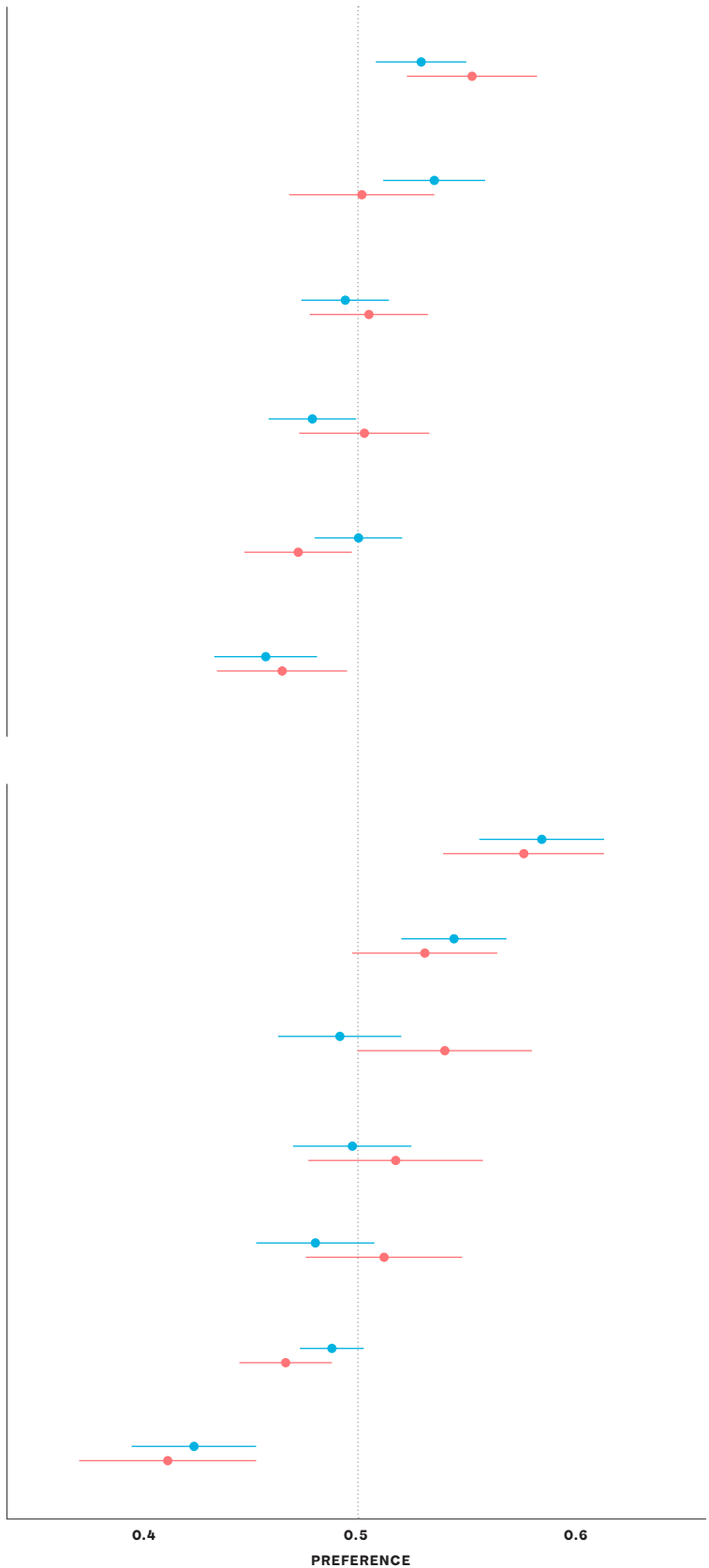
Legal Abortion in All or Most Cases

Legal Abortion before 15 Weeks

Ban Assault Rifles

No Policy Reported

Decriminalize Immigration at the Border



● CONTROL  
● OPPOSITION MESSAGING

All in all, progressive economic policies do not appear to hurt Democrats, and even seem to drive support for them among key demographic groups. By contrast, while Democratic respondents viewed candidates who promoted progressive social issues favorably, independents and Republicans did not. This is a real conundrum for progressives, if they seek to become a governing majority and win outside deep blue districts.

Critically, our results also include an important caution for progressive candidates who might be tempted to keep quiet on social policies issues and pivot to other more popular economic issues. Our results indicate that when Democrats avoid stating their stances on social policies issues, respondents — particularly Democrats — punish them for not addressing important social issues they care about.

## How Does Opposition Messaging Affect Democratic Candidates' Appeal?

### *Key Takeaways*

- 1. Democrats' attempts to counter Republican anti-elite, populist messaging with populist appeals of their own are largely successful.** Both economic populist and people-centered candidates perform at least as well in the face of opposition messaging compared to the control group. For economic populists, this was particularly true among respondents exposed to Republican messaging portraying Democrats as cultural elitists.
- 2. Opposition attacks did not damage the appeal of progressive economic policies.** Candidates who ran on progressive economic policies were only viewed unfavorably by respondents who did not receive opposition messaging, while respondents who received opposition messaging did not express a significant opinion with respect to these candidates.
- 3. Candidates who ran on a federal jobs guarantee were highly effective against opposition messaging portraying Democrats as cultural elitists.** Respondents exposed to media messaging describing Democrats as cultural elites favored jobs guarantee candidates in 57.6% of contests, compared to just 50.3% of races among respondents who did not receive any opposition messaging.
- 4. Opposition attacks weakened the appeal of progressive social policies, though not by a large degree.** Candidates who ran on progressive social policies were only viewed unfavorably in the face of opposition messaging, not among the control group who received no opposition priming.
- 5. The right to abortion in all or most cases and a ban on assault rifles were especially vulnerable to opposition messaging portraying Democrats as social policy extremists.**
- 6. Opposition messaging largely does not affect respondents' views of candidates based on candidates' race or gender.**

## UNPACKING THE RESULTS

We tested the impact that different types of opposition messaging would have on respondents' choices (**Figure 20**). Respondents were exposed to critical media or opposition messaging with four different frames.<sup>17</sup> The first was a critical news (media) article that portrayed Democrats as social policy extremists ("Democrats as Social Policy Extremists"), emphasizing a Democrat-sponsored plan to develop new educational curricula to address structural racism inherent in mathematics education. The second was a critical news (media) article that painted Democrats instead as cultural elitists ("Democrats as Cultural Elitists"), highlighting how far the Democratic Party has veered toward a party of college-educated elites and away from the working class. The third opposition message was from a Republican candidate who paints a picture of Democrats as cultural elitists who care more about Hollywood and the Ivy League than about working Americans ("Democrats as Cultural Elitists"). The last opposition message we tested was of a Republican candidate accusing Democrats of being social policy extremists who want to force schools to teach critical race theory ("Democrats as Social Policy Extremists"). A final group received no opposition messaging ("Control").

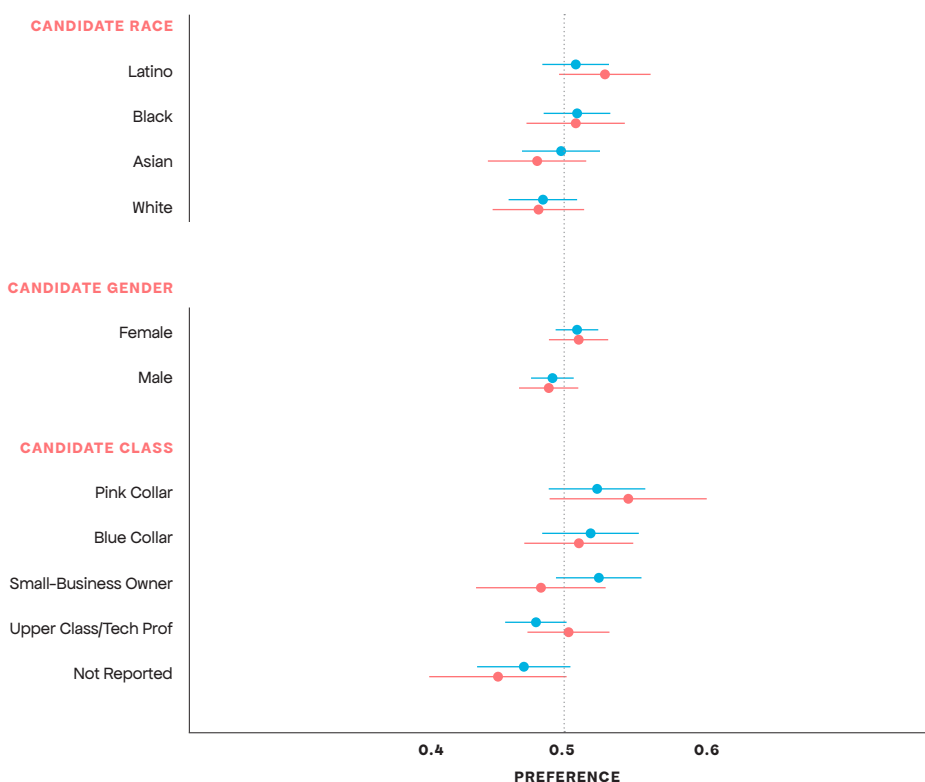
For our primary analyses we present pooled results across opposition messaging to assess the overall impact that opposition messaging had on respondents' views of candidates. Where we observe interesting differences between respondents who received opposition messaging and those who did not, we also discuss which specific type of opposition messaging was driving our results.

In general, we found that opposition messaging did not have a substantial impact on the way respondents' evaluated candidates based on candidates' demographic information. Indeed, there were negligible differences in the effects of candidate race or gender on the evaluations of candidates across respondents who did and did not receive opposition messaging. Somewhat surprisingly, the effect of candidate occupation also changed little when respondents were exposed to opposition messaging, despite the class critiques embedded in much of the opposition messaging we tested. The only exception was in the case of upper-class candidates, who were viewed negatively in the presence of opposition messaging, but not among respondents who received no opposition messaging.

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<sup>17</sup> See Appendix for full text of primes.

**Figure 20: Full Sample for Candidate Demographics by Type of Opposition Messaging**

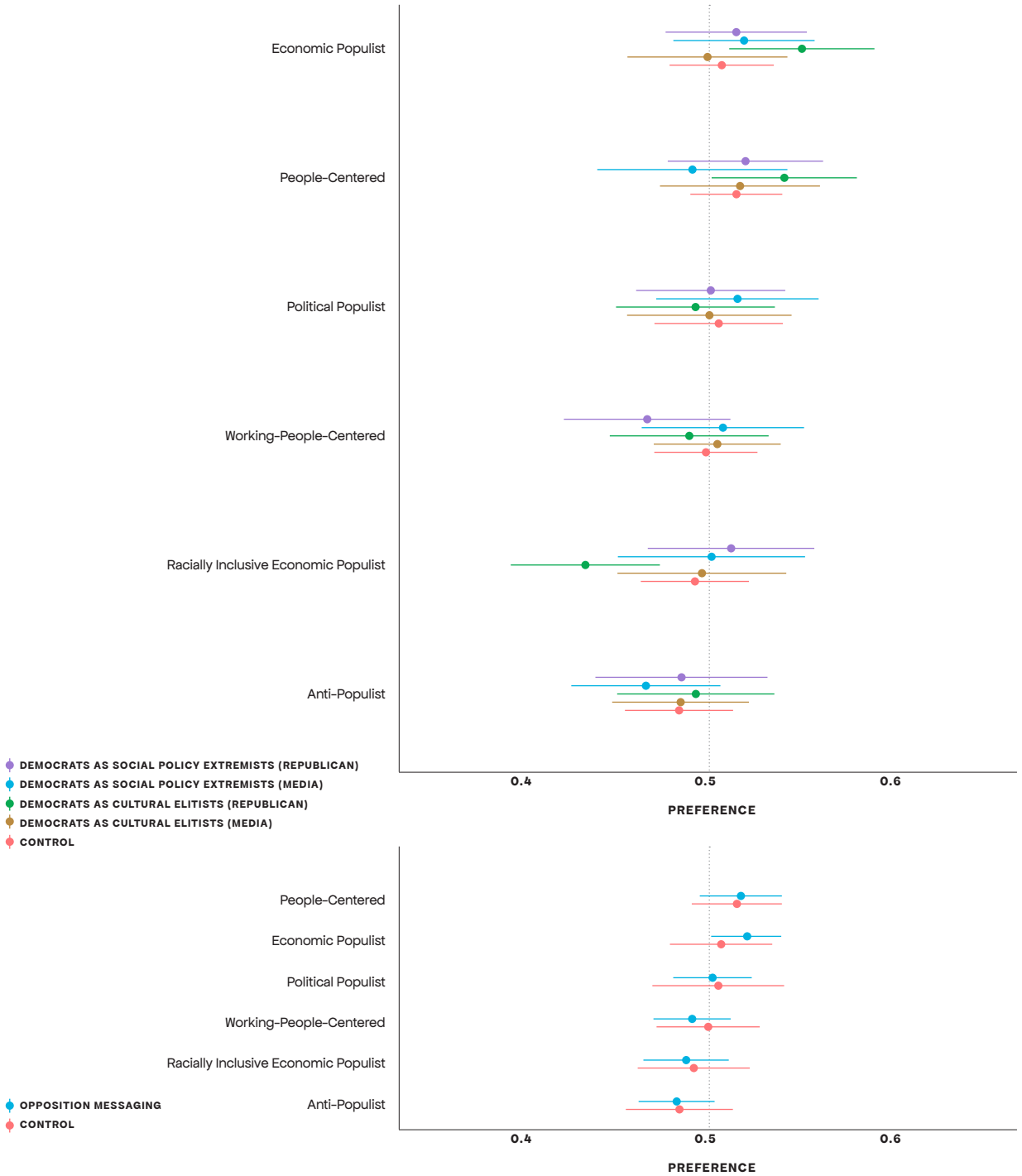


Democrats’ attempts to counter Republican anti-elite, populist messaging with populist appeals of their own were largely successful, with both economic and political populist candidates performing as well or better in the face of opposition messaging (**Figure 21**). Economic populist candidates were viewed positively overall in the face of opposition messaging, but not by respondents in the control group. This pattern was particularly evident with Republican messaging portraying Democrats as cultural elitists. By contrast, we did not find a significant difference in support for the political populist between respondents who received opposition messaging compared to those who did not. The racially inclusive economic populist messaging emphasizing the need to come together across race and class was generally unaffected by opposition messaging as well.

The one exception is that when respondents were exposed to Republican messaging portraying Democrats as cultural elites and then shown candidates who employed racially inclusive economic populist messaging, those candidates were viewed much less favorably than the same candidates among respondents who were exposed to Republican messaging portraying Democrats as social policy extremists (difference of 7.8 percentage points,  $p = .07$ ). This suggests that racially inclusive economist populist messaging may be particularly effective against Republican attacks that specifically invoke racial difference.

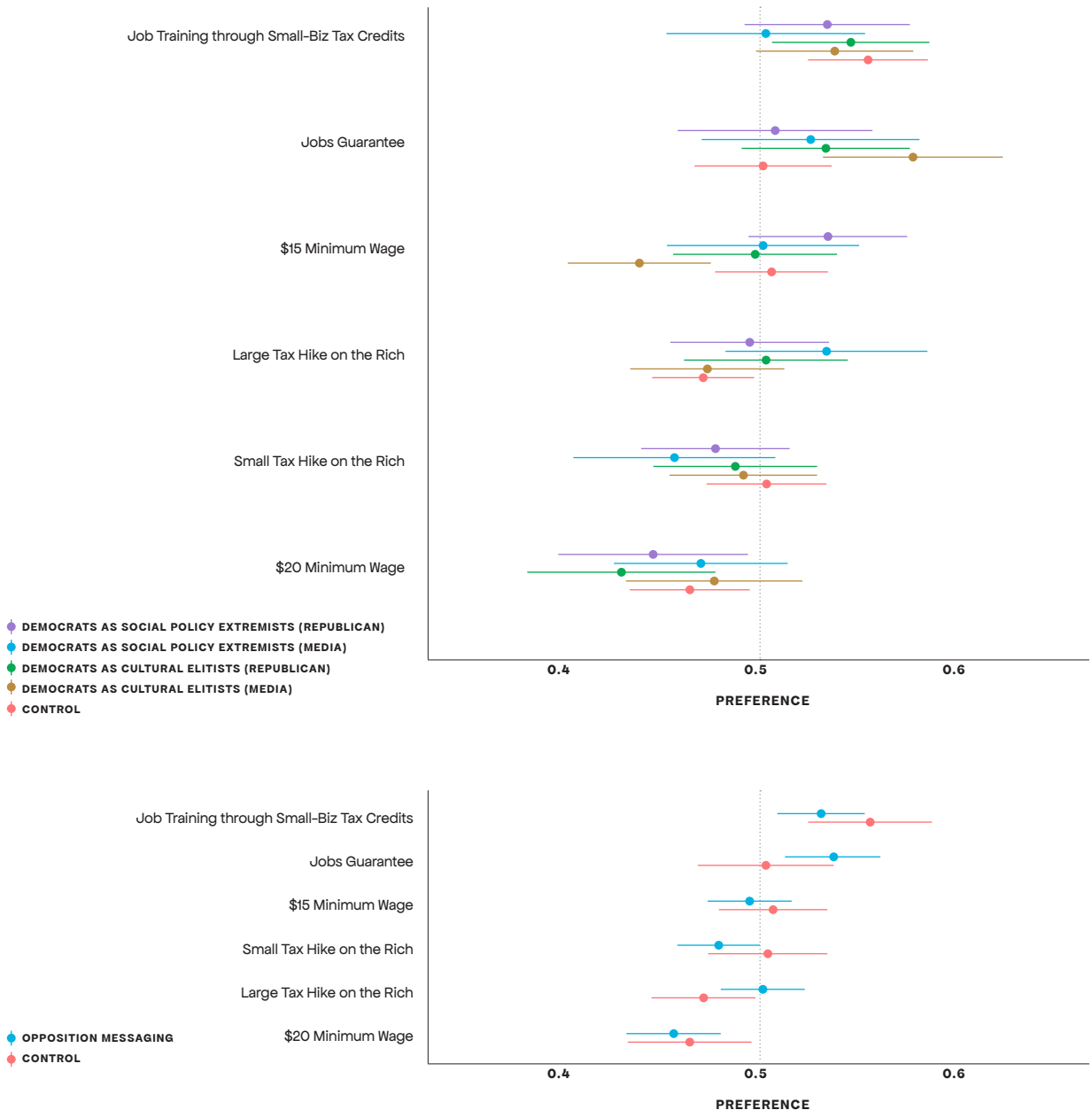


**Figure 21: Full Sample for Populism by Type of Opposition Messaging**



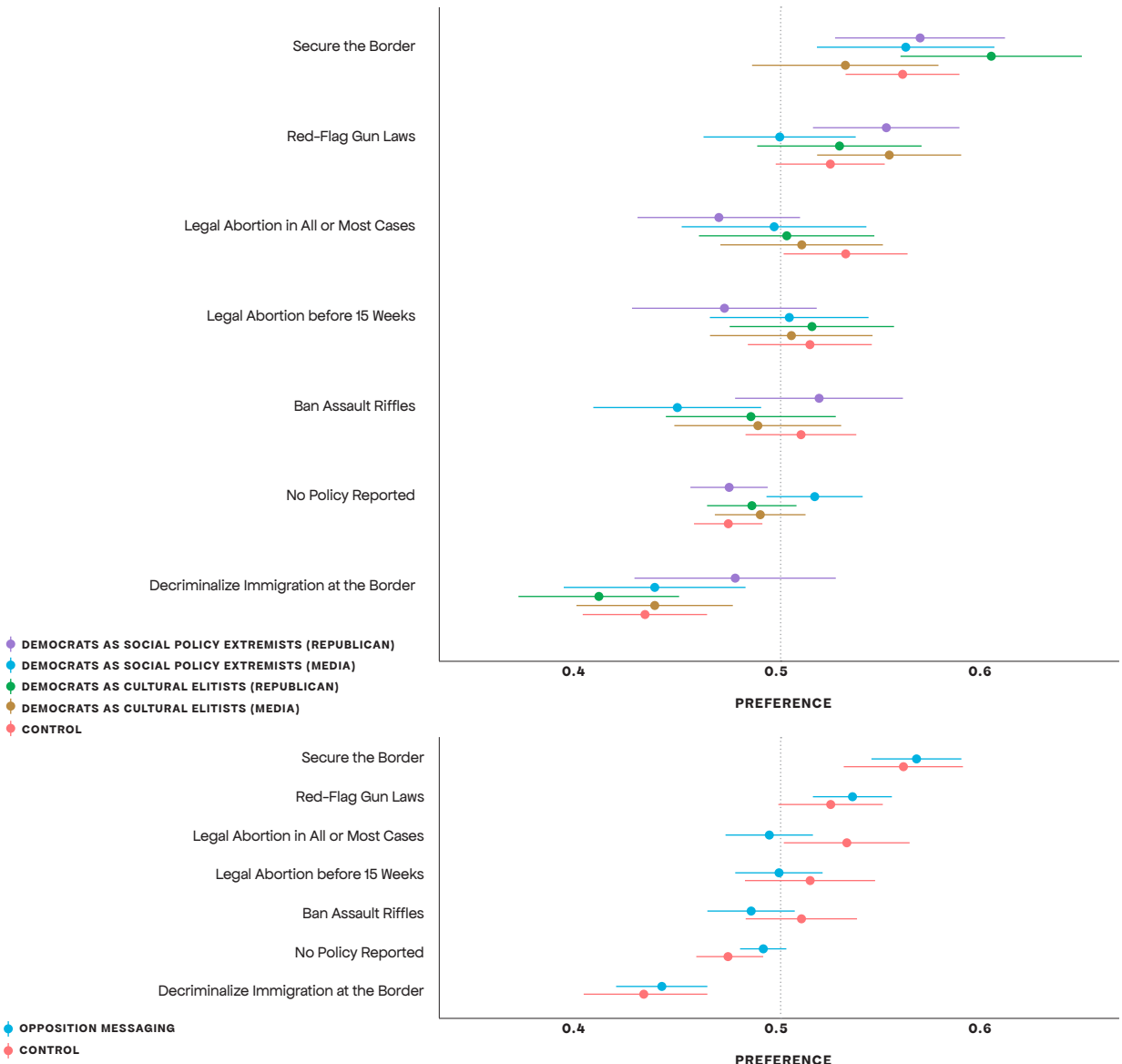
Interestingly, candidates who ran on progressive economic policies were only viewed unfavorably among respondents not exposed to opposition messaging but not among respondents who received some form of opposition messaging (**Figure 22**). This finding was driven primarily by candidates who promoted a federal jobs guarantee or a large tax hike on the rich. Favorability toward candidates who ran on a federal jobs guarantee was particularly strong among respondents who received critical media messaging describing Democrats as cultural elitists who have lost touch with the working class: these respondents preferred candidates running on a jobs guarantee in 57.6% of races, while respondents in the control group preferred jobs guarantee advocates in 50.3% of races.

**Figure 22: Full Sample for Economic Policies by Type of Opposition Messaging**



Finally, candidates who focused on progressive social policies were viewed unfavorably by respondents exposed to opposition messaging but not by respondents in the control group who received no opposition priming (Figure 23). That said, the absolute difference in support for candidates running on progressive social policies between the control group and respondents exposed to opposition messaging was relatively small (around 2 percentage points). Despite the unpopularity of progressive immigration policies overall, it was progressive abortion and gun policies that proved less resilient in the face of opposition attacks — though the absolute level of support for candidates running on progressive immigration policies was much lower than that of candidates running on progressive jobs or abortion policies. Candidates who campaigned on an assault-rifle ban proved particularly vulnerable to critical media messaging portraying Democrats as social policy elitists, while candidates running on access to abortion in all or most cases were affected most negatively by Republican messaging portraying Democrats as social policy extremists.

**Figure 23: Full Sample for Social Policies by Type of Opposition Messaging**



# How Does Candidate Background Affect Respondents' Views of Candidates?

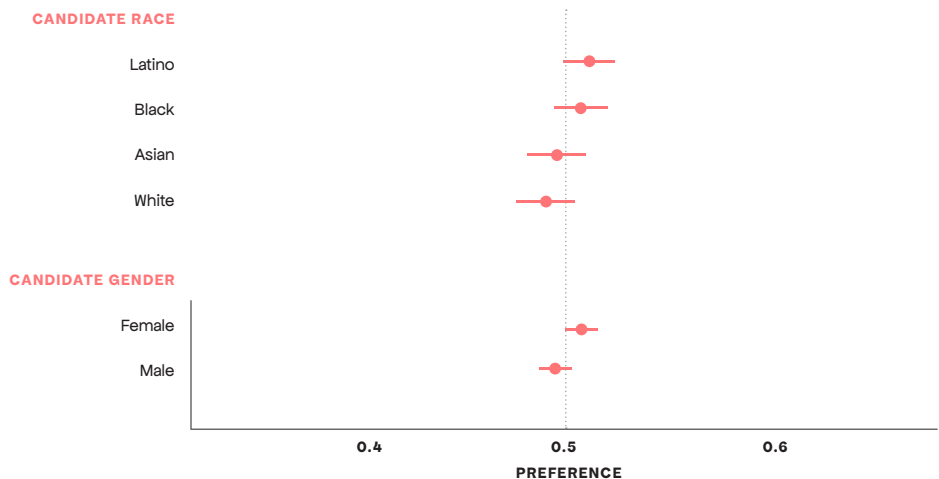
## Key Takeaways

- Overall, candidates from non-elite backgrounds, particularly pink-collar candidates, were viewed more favorably than upper-class and upper-middle-class candidates.**
- Working-class respondents prefer non-elite, working-class candidates regardless of their partisan affiliation.** By contrast, non-working-class respondents had substantially less positive views of non-elite, working-class respondents and significantly more positive views of elite and upper-class candidates.
- Independents are particularly favorable toward blue- and pink-collar candidates.** Independent respondents favored middle-school teachers and construction-worker candidates in 55% of contests — suggesting that this crucial constituency for Democratic candidates is open to Democrats from non-elite backgrounds.
- Candidates' race and gender have no observable impact on how they are evaluated by respondents.**

## UNPACKING THE RESULTS

Previous research has found that candidates' backgrounds can have an important impact on how they are evaluated by voters (Carnes and Lupu 2016; Teele, Kalla, and Rosenbluth 2018; Visalvanich 2017). Similarly, in our 2021 survey we found that candidate race/ethnicity and occupational background affect levels of support they receive from voters: among respondents without a four-year college degree, black candidates were preferred over other candidates, and candidates from non-elite backgrounds (veterans, teachers, construction workers) were preferred over candidates from elite backgrounds (lawyers, CEOs, doctors). Candidate gender had no effect. Interestingly, in this survey of available voters, we found that candidate race/ethnicity had essentially no impact on respondents' views of candidates (*Figure 24*).

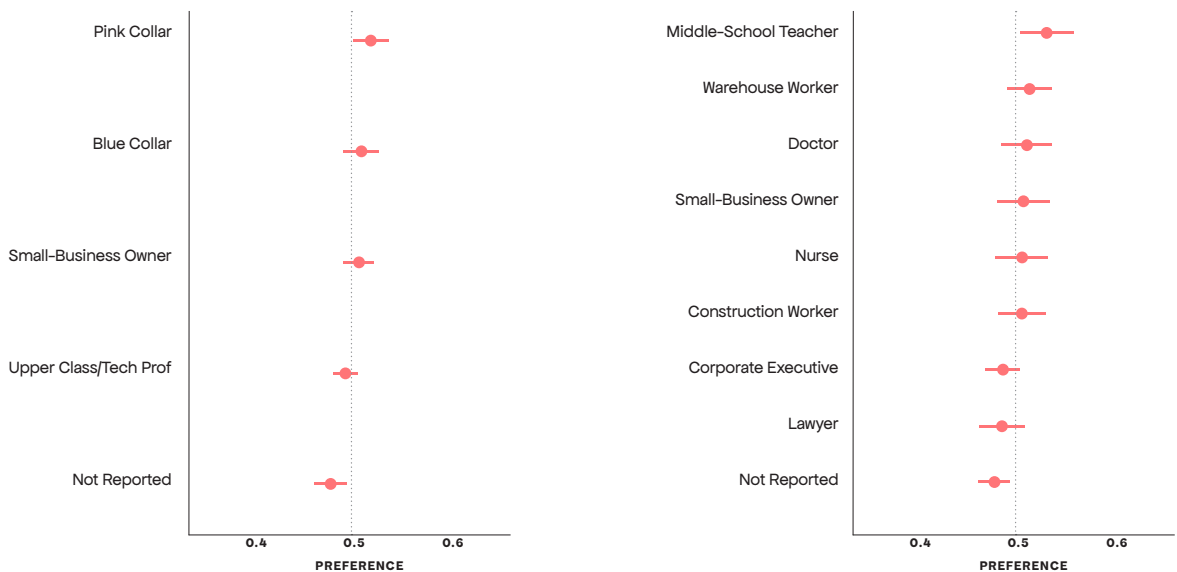
**Figure 24: Full Sample for Race/Ethnicity and Gender**



In turn, similar to our 2021 survey, we found that respondents preferred candidates from non-elite and working-class backgrounds. In this survey, however, we tested a wider range of candidate occupations that allowed us to examine differences in candidates' class background more rigorously (**Figure 25**). We found that, in general, blue- and pink-collar candidates were preferred over candidates from elite or upper-class backgrounds. For instance, pink-collar candidates were more likely to be chosen than upper-middle-class and upper-class professional candidates by a margin of 3 percentage points.

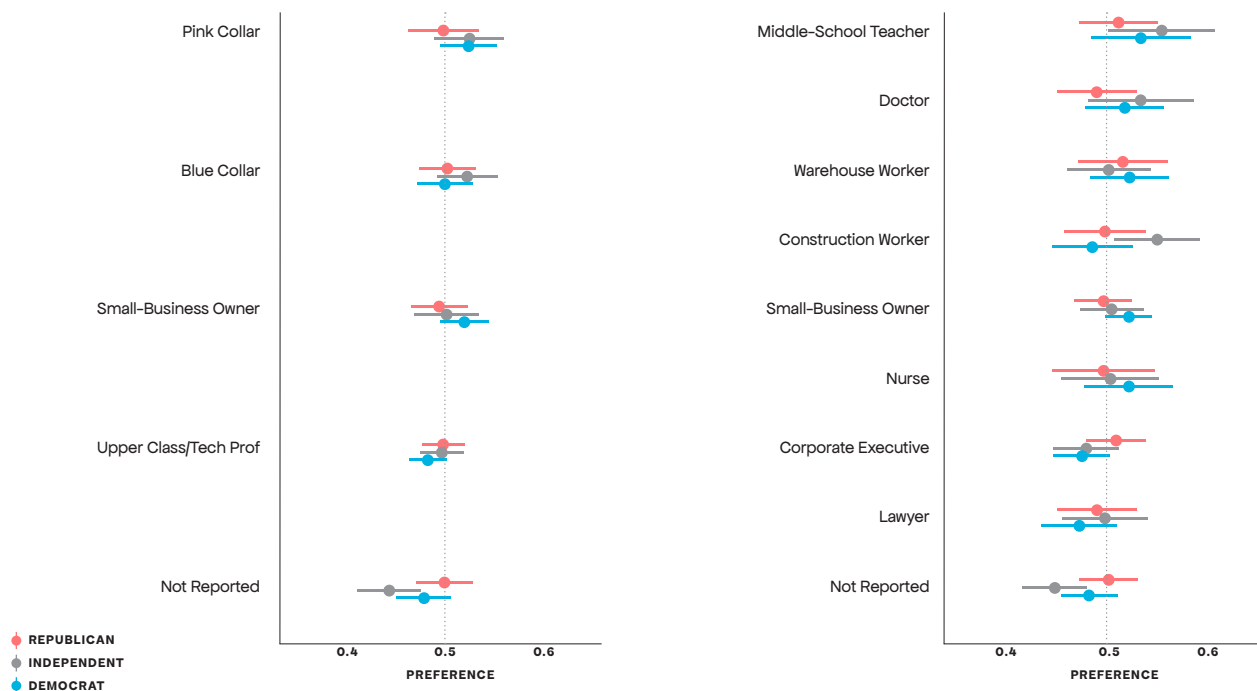
More specifically, we find that corporate executives and lawyers fared poorly against a variety of pink- and blue-collar candidates, particularly middle-school teachers (by a margin of 4–5 percentage points). These effects are more substantial than the effects of candidate race/ethnicity and gender.

**Figure 25: Full Sample for Candidate Class/Occupation**



We see interesting differences across partisan affiliation with respect to attitudes toward candidates' occupational/class background (**Figure 26**). First, while Democrats and independents drove support for pink-collar candidates, independents alone favored blue-collar candidates, particularly construction workers, whom they chose in 55% of contests, suggesting that this crucial constituency for Democratic candidates may be open to Democrats from non-elite backgrounds. By contrast, while Democrats also favored pink-collar candidates, unlike independents, they also favored small-business owners to the same extent. Republicans overall showed no preferences for candidates based on their occupation or class background, but, as we discuss below, these results obscure important within-class differences.

**Figure 26: Full Sample for Candidate Class/Occupation by Party**



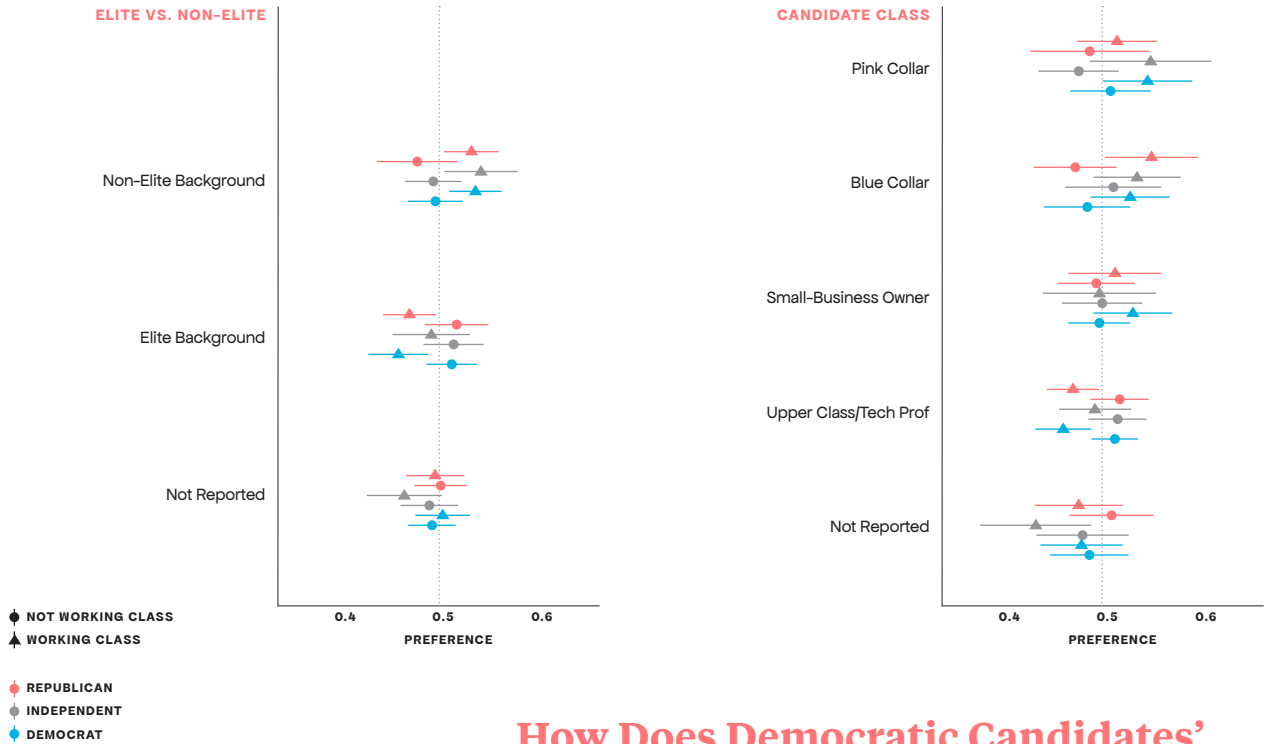
When we explore differences in candidate preferences across both partisanship and class, we find that working-class respondents prefer non-elite, working-class candidates *regardless of their partisan affiliation* (Figure 27). In particular, working-class respondents of all partisan affiliations had a positive view of non-elite candidates (pink- and blue-collar workers, small-business owners). Among working-class Democrats, the gap between pink-collar and upper-class candidates was nearly 9 percentage points. This suggests candidate background is a very important factor in motivating Democratic-base voters. Similarly, among Republicans, the gap between blue-collar and upper-class candidates was 8 percentage points.

Non-working-class Democrats and Republicans had substantially different candidate preferences than their working-class counterparts when it came to candidate occupation and class. Among Democrats, the gap in support for upper-class and technical/professional candidates between working-class and non-working-class respondents was 5 percentage points. We also see a significant gap in support for candidates from non-elite backgrounds between these two groups, with working-class Democrats more supportive than their non-working-class counterparts.

We see similar class differences among Republican respondents. Indeed, the largest within-party difference we observe is the 8-percentage-point gap between working-class and non-working-class Republicans' views of blue-collar candidates. Finally, we are not able to detect significant differences between working-class and non-working-class independents' preferences on candidate background.

These results suggest that Democrats need to think carefully about which constituencies they are trying to reach in different districts and align their candidate selection accordingly, as the implications of failing to do so could be large.

**Figure 27: Full Sample for Candidate Class/Occupation by Party and Class**



## How Does Democratic Candidates' Opinion of the Democratic Party Affect Voter Preference?

### Key Takeaways

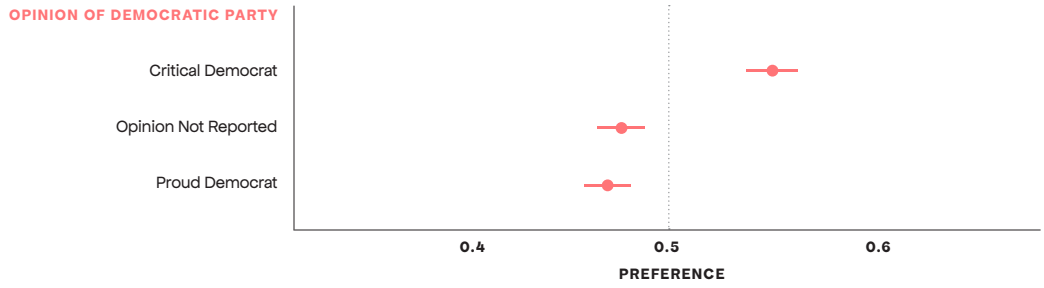
- Candidates who distance themselves from the Democratic Party are much more likely to be chosen than candidates who lean into their association with the party.**
- Respondents across all class backgrounds favor candidates critical of the Democratic Party over proud Democrats and candidates who took no position on the Democratic Party.**

### UNPACKING THE RESULTS

We tested three candidate approaches to describing their relationship with the Democratic Party (**Figure 28**). One stressed that they believe Democrats have delivered for working- and middle-class Americans (proud Democrat), while another criticized the Democratic and Republican Parties for being out of touch with working- and middle-class Americans. A third group declined to offer any information about their views of the party.

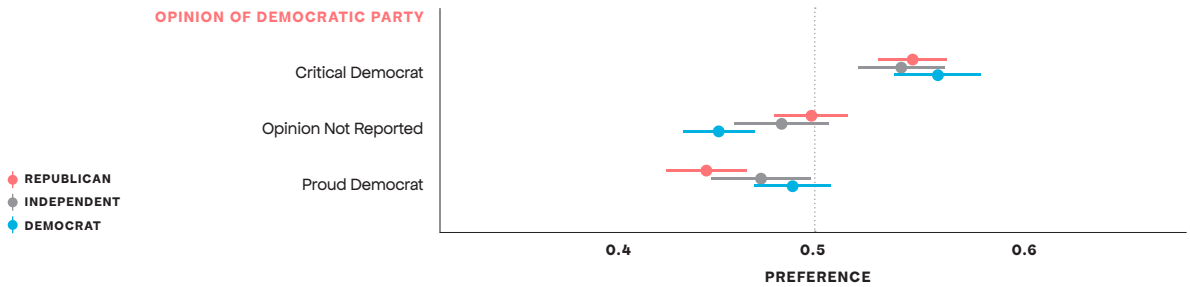
Across the board, respondents preferred candidates critical of Democrats than they did candidates who were proud Democrats or blank. Critical Democrats were viewed more favorably than proud Democrats or unreported Democrats by 6–7 percentage points. Critical Democrats were viewed favorably at 55% across all social classes; proud and unreported Democrats were viewed unfavorably.

**Figure 28: Full Sample for Candidate Opinion of the Democratic Party**



Finally, we see remarkably little variation across partisanship with respect to support for critical Democrats, but substantial differences with respect to proud Democrats (especially between Democratic and Republican respondents) (*Figure 29*). This suggests that Democratic candidates can be more appealing to Republicans and independents by distancing themselves from the Democratic Party without sacrificing their support among Democrats.

**Figure 29: Full Sample for Candidate Opinion of the Democratic Party by Party**





# Subgroup Analysis By Respondent Characteristics

## Subgroup Analysis: Partisanship

### Overall Partisan Results

#### Key Takeaways

- 1. Democrats and independents prefer candidates from working-class backgrounds, while Republicans had no significant preferences with respect to candidate class.** But the results by class show strong class divisions: working-class respondents from each party showed a preference for pink- or blue-collar candidates.
- 2. While respondents do not have strong preferences between populist and non-populist messages *in general*, there are important class differences within parties.** Working-class Democrats prefer populist messaging to non-populist messaging, while non-working-class respondents do not. This is particularly true for the racially inclusive economic populist message, which working-class Democrats support and non-working-class Democrats dislike. For their part, working-class Republicans were drawn to political populists, while other Republicans were not.
- 3. Overall, Democrats prefer progressive economic policies, independents were neither favorable nor unfavorable toward them, and Republicans prefer moderate economic policies.** The only policy that respondents from all three parties have a similar, positive opinion on is the progressive jobs guarantee. This is driven by class differences: working-class Democrats and Republicans are both substantially more favorable toward jobs guarantee than are non-working-class Democrats and Republicans.
- 4. More than anything else, voters across parties are divided by social policies:** Democrats prefer candidates with progressive policies such as legalizing abortion and banning assault rifles, while Republicans prefer moderate positions on immigration and abortion. As opposed to the working-class support that cuts across party identity for the key elements of left-wing populism — candidates with working-class backgrounds, populist rhetoric, and progressive economic and social policies polarize voters by party, not class.
- 5. Respondents across all parties and classes agree on one thing: they prefer Democratic candidates who criticize the Democratic party for not serving the interests of middle- and working-class Americans.** This suggests that Democratic candidates are best positioned to appeal to the widest range of voters across the political spectrum if they distance themselves from the Democratic Party.

## Democrats

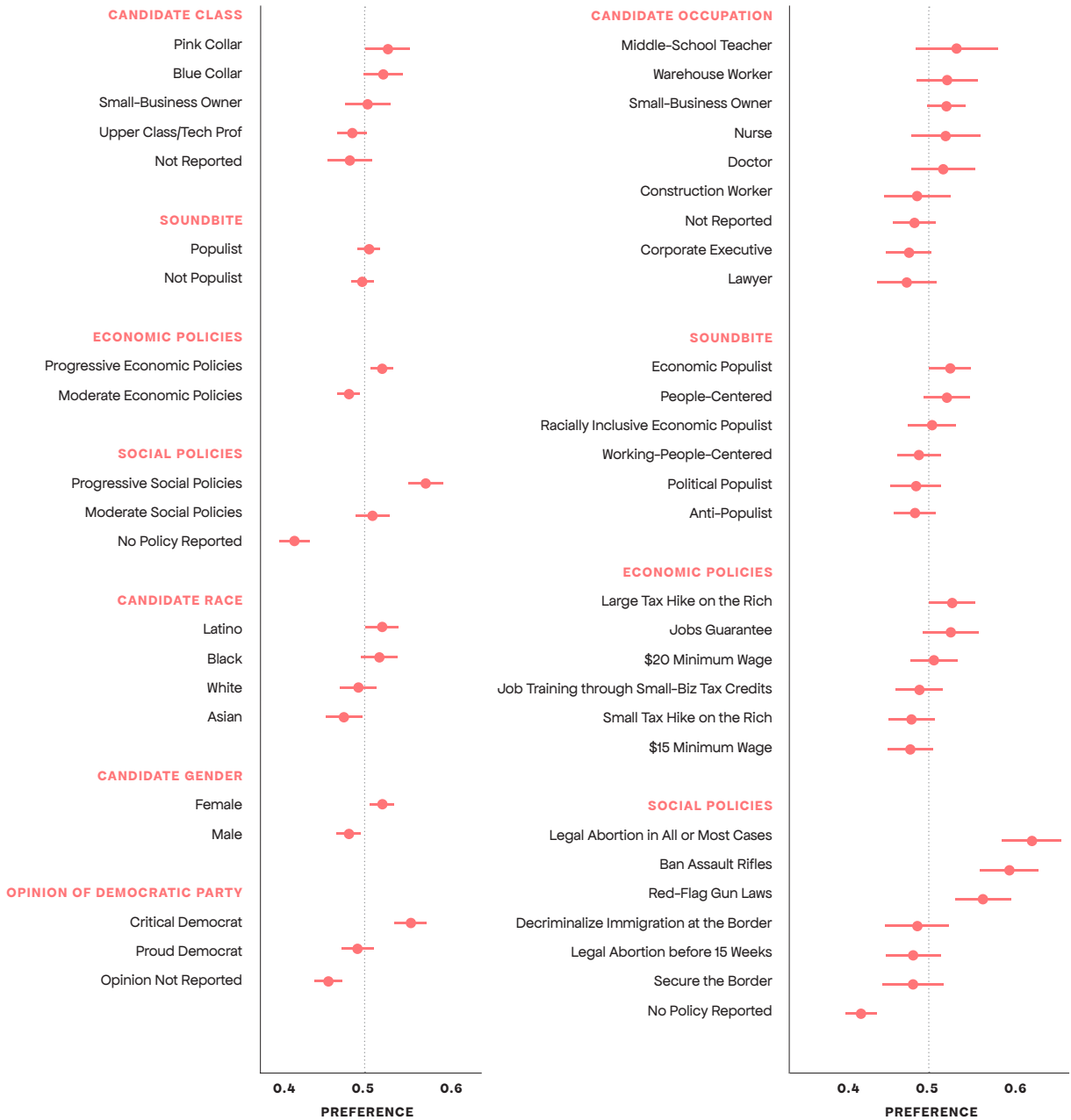
### *What kind of Democratic candidates do Democratic voters prefer?*

Democratic respondents in our sample — those who weakly identify as Democrats or lean toward Democrats — are likely to vote for a Democratic candidate in any given election. However, many of them are unreliable and may or may not show up on election day. Roughly 25% of weak identifiers and leaners said they didn't reliably show up to vote for a Democratic candidate in 2016 and 2020, and roughly 30% said they might not choose to vote for a Democratic candidate after evaluating pairs of Democratic candidates in our survey. Therefore, Democratic candidates need to focus on turning these voters out on election day. So which kind of Democratic candidates do weak Democrats and Democratic-leaning independents prefer?

Overall, Democratic respondents prefer Latino candidates, female candidates, candidates who come from a pink-collar background, and candidates with an economic populist message (**Figure 30**). When it comes to economic policy, Democratic respondents prefer progressive economic policy to moderate policy. This was mainly driven by their support for a large tax on the rich.

More than anything else, Democratic respondents prefer candidates with progressive social policies. This was primarily driven by their strong support for legal abortion, followed closely by a ban on assault rifles. Interestingly, Democrats do not show a significant preference for the progressive policy to decriminalize immigration, and they also preferred candidates with the moderate position on guns (red-flag laws). Overall, these results suggest that to turn out Democratic voters in general, Democratic candidates need to take a progressive stance on abortion and guns, first and foremost. However, candidates may attract more Democratic voters if they lead with a large tax on the rich; so could female or Latino candidates from a pink-collar background who use economic populist rhetoric.

**Figure 30: Full Results for Democrats Only**

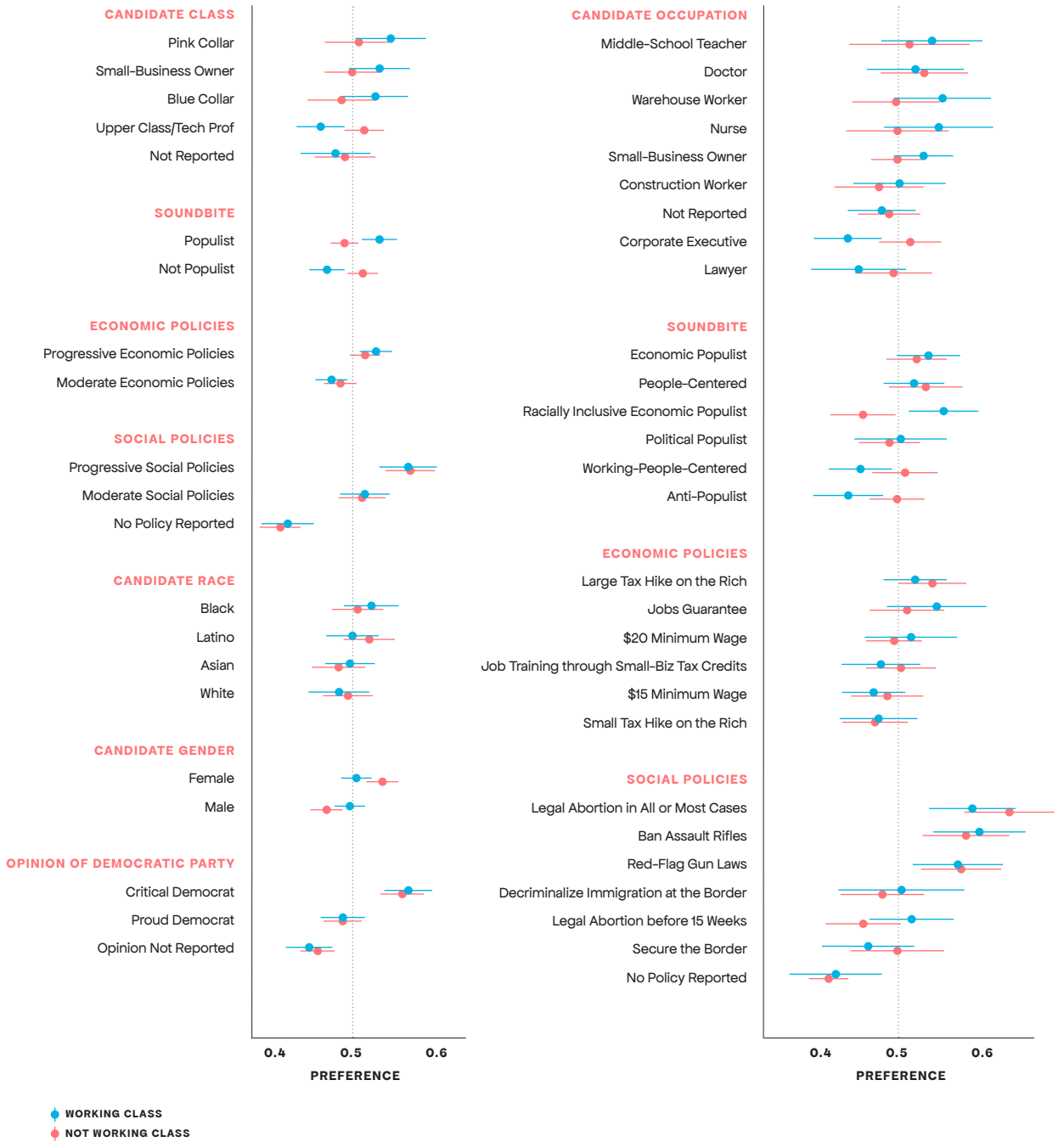


### *Democrats — by Class*

Looking at the Democratic respondents by their class background, however, reveals important differences (**Figure 31**). Respondents from working-class occupations prefer candidates from pink- and blue-collar occupations (though blue-collar is not quite statistically significant), while respondents from middle- or upper-class backgrounds do not. Working-class Democrats disliked candidates from upper-class backgrounds, particularly CEOs, while non-working-class Democrats did not. Similarly, when it comes to populism, working-class Democrats preferred populist messaging over non-populist messaging. This is primarily driven by their strong preference for both racially inclusive economic populist and economic populist messaging that pits the working class against economic elites. Interestingly, working-class Democrats were one of the only groups in our survey who showed a strong preference for the racially inclusive economic populist soundbite. Non-working-class Democrats had the opposite reaction and disliked this message. This suggests a potential tradeoff with respect to employing populist messaging among different parts of the Democratic base.

On economic policies, preferences do not significantly diverge by class: non-working-class Democrats preferred candidates running on a large tax hike, while working-class Democrats reacted more positively to the progressive jobs guarantee (though results are not statistically significant). Similarly, the class differences aren't prominent when it comes to social policies either. Both working-class and non-working-class Democrats shared similarly strong support for banning assault rifles, legalizing abortion, and adopting a moderate position on red-flag gun laws. The only divergence is on the moderate abortion position, where non-working-class Democrats show a negative opinion and working-class Democrats do not.

**Figure 31: Full Results for Democrats Only by Class**



## Independents

### *What kind of Democratic candidates do independent voters prefer?*

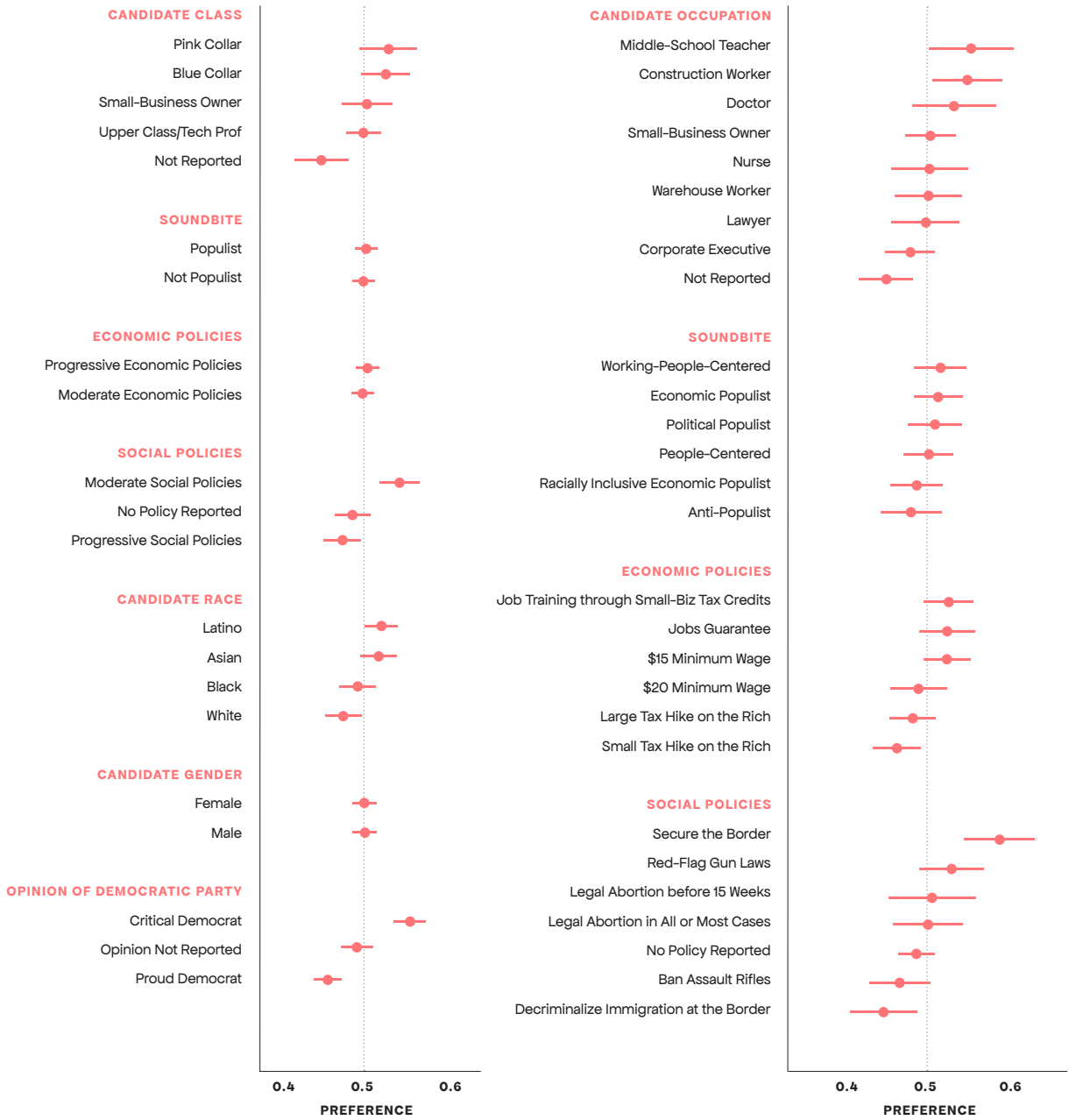
Independents — those who lean toward neither party— represent roughly 12% of the American electorate. They tend to be the least likely to vote at all, care the least about politics, and tend to have mostly “middle of the road” views. However, independents are still important because they have unpredictable voting behavior and may choose whether or how to cast their vote depending on what kind of candidates are on the ballot. So, what kind of Democratic candidates do independent voters prefer?

In general, independents did not show many strong preferences between most types of Democratic candidates. However, they preferred blue-collar and pink-collar candidates, particularly middle-school teachers and construction workers (**Figure 32**).

While Democrats preferred candidates with progressive economic policies and Republicans preferred candidates with moderate economic policies, independents showed no general preference between the two.

Independents, unlike Republicans and Democrats, didn't have many strong opinions on social policies either. The main exception is immigration, where they preferred the moderate position of securing the border and disliked the progressive position of decriminalizing immigration. When it comes to gun policies, independents, again, preferred the moderate position of adopting red-flag laws over the progressive ban on assault rifles — though this difference did not quite reach statistical significance ( $p = .12$ ). Lastly, independents did not express a significant preference between the moderate and progressive positions on abortion, showing no preference between candidates who proposed legalizing abortion in all or almost all cases and candidates who proposed making abortion legal only for the first 14 weeks. These results suggest that immigration is a very important issue for independents, and, like Republican voters, they strongly prefer the moderate position over the progressive one.

**Figure 32: Full Results for Independents Only**

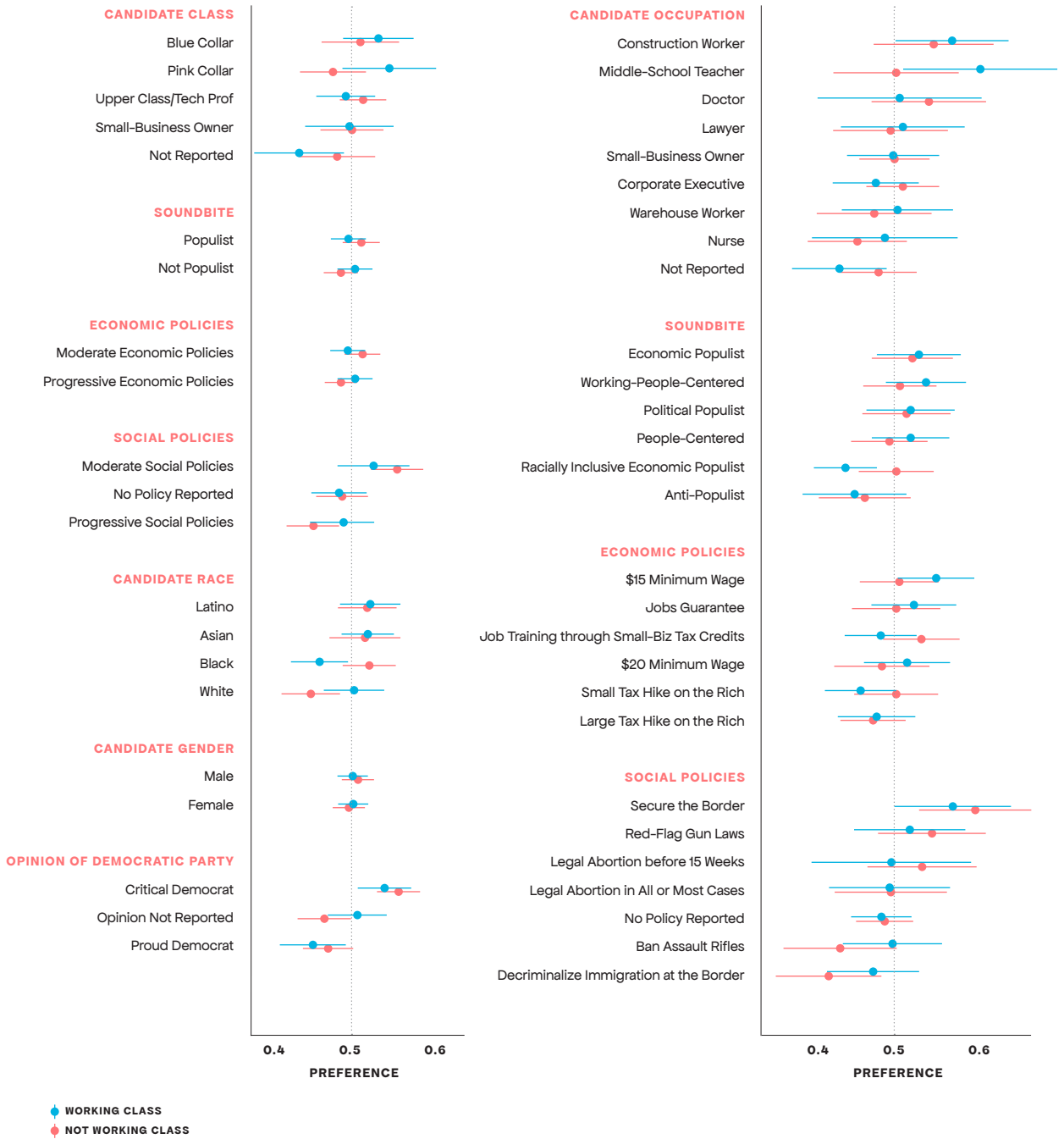


### *Independents — by Class*

Due to the smaller sample size of independents in our sample, and the fact that independents generally do not have strong political opinions, the class differences within independents were not very pronounced (**Figure 33**). Working-class and non-working-class independents do not react strongly to most candidate characteristics. However, there are just a few exceptions worth noting: working-class Democrats and working-class Republicans preferred candidates from working-class, particularly pink-collar backgrounds. In general, across the social policies, while non-working-class independents preferred moderate social policies and dispreferred progressive social policies, working-class independents were neither favorable nor unfavorable toward either moderate or progressive social policies. Overall, the only candidates who independents from both working-class and non-working-class backgrounds have a strong preference for and agree on are Democratic candidates who criticize the Democratic party for not serving the interests of working-class and middle-class Americans.



**Figure 33: Full Results for Independents Only by Class**



## Republicans

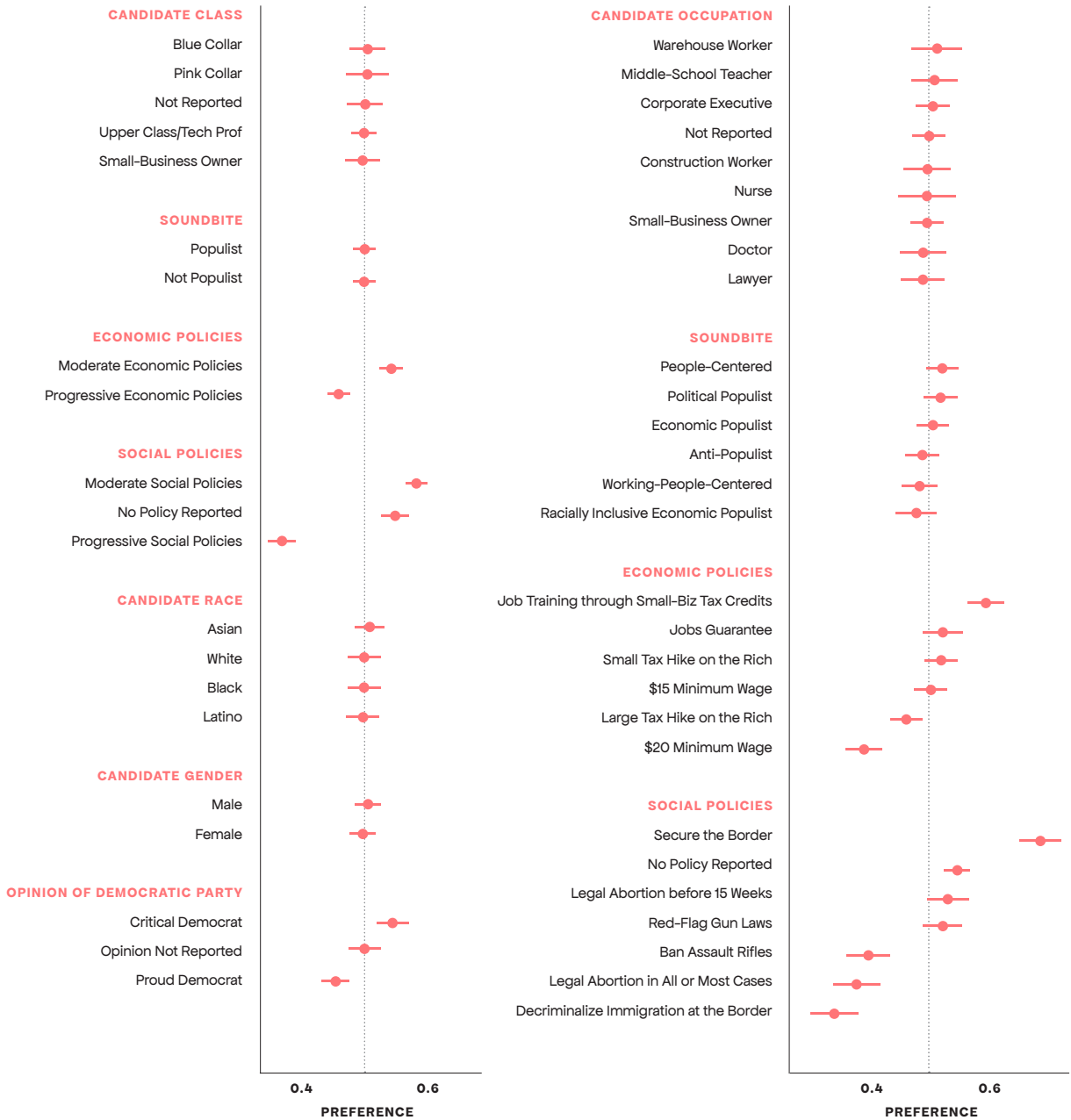
### *What kind of Democratic candidates do Republican voters prefer?*

Most Republicans, even those who are included in our sample because they are not strong Republicans, will not vote for a Democratic candidate no matter who it is (**Figure 34**). However, nearly 25% of these Republicans are unreliable voters, and may or may not show up to vote during an election. In fact, in our survey, only around 62% of Republican respondents consistently said they would definitely vote for a Republican after evaluating pairs of Democratic candidates, therefore leaving roughly 38% saying they might not vote at all or sometimes even vote for a Democratic candidate. In short, while most Republicans in our sample will not change their vote to a Democratic candidate, they might be more or less likely to show up to vote on election day depending on how much they like or dislike the candidates on offer. If they strongly dislike a Democratic candidate, they might be more likely to show up to vote Republican, and similarly, if they actually do prefer a Democratic candidate, their vote for a Republican is less guaranteed. So, what kinds of Democratic candidates do weak Republicans and Republican-leaning independents prefer?

Overall Republicans had no strong preferences by candidate race or gender, candidate background, or even the general types of populist or non-populist rhetoric. What they cared about was economic policy and especially social policies. They much preferred candidates with moderate economic policies over progressive economic policies. This was primarily driven by their strong dislike toward a \$20/hour minimum wage and their very strong preference for the moderate tax credit policy for job-training programs.

Republicans were also very concerned with social policies. Overall, they strongly disliked Democratic candidates who ran on any of the three progressive social policies: decriminalizing immigration, making abortion legal in most cases, and banning assault rifles. Their favorite social policy by far was the moderate position on immigration to secure the border by modernizing border infrastructure. These results suggest that Democrats are unlikely to win over many Republicans if they run on any kind of progressive social policy.

**Figure 34: Full Results for Republicans Only**



### *Republicans — by Class*

Republicans, however, are not a monolithic block, and they exhibited different preferences based on their class background (**Figure 35**). Crucially, working-class Republicans differed from non-working-class Republicans when it came to several key elements of left-wing populism. Like working-class Democrats and independents, working-class Republicans preferred candidates from blue-collar backgrounds, especially construction workers.

On economic policy, working-class Republicans showed a general dislike for most progressive economic policy, but less so than their middle- and upper-class Republican counterparts. Unlike middle- and upper-class Republicans, they were not opposed to a large tax increase on the rich, and actually preferred candidates who ran on a progressive jobs guarantee, just like working-class independents and Democrats. When it comes to a progressive \$20/hour minimum wage, however, they disliked this policy just as much as non-working-class Republicans.

The class divisions within Republicans were also strong when it came to populist messaging. Unlike upper-class Republicans, they preferred candidates with political populist rhetoric who pitted “the people” against out-of-touch political insiders in Washington. In this way they differed from Democratic working-class respondents, who instead preferred economic populist candidates who lifted up the working-class.

Lastly, on social policies, the pattern was clear. Respondents were dramatically divided across parties based on whether Democratic candidates ran on moderate or progressive social policies. Working-class Republicans, like non-working-class Republicans, significantly preferred candidates who ran on moderate social policies over progressive ones, especially on immigration. It’s interesting to note, however, that working-class Republicans weren’t any more opposed to progressive social policies than are non-working-class Republicans — if anything, it was non-working-class Republicans who appeared to take the strongest stance against progressive social policies.

**Figure 35: Full Results for Republicans Only by Class**



*In summary*, these results show that there are several ways for Democratic candidates to appeal to voters across the political spectrum. While social issues have by far the largest impact on voter preferences, they polarize voters by their party identity. A Democratic candidate running on legalizing abortion or banning assault rifles gains significant support among Democrats, therefore potentially increasing turnout among the Democratic base. However, this may repel Republican voters.

The results, however, point to other promising pathways to not only increasing turnout among Democrats, but also to gaining support from voters from across the political spectrum who favor elements of left-wing populism. Key components of left-wing populism, such as candidates from blue- or pink-collar backgrounds, candidates running on populist rhetoric, and candidates running on a progressive jobs guarantee, are favored by working-class Democrats, independents, and Republicans. While social policies may polarize voters by party identification, left-wing populism appears to be the most promising way to win support from working-class voters across the political spectrum.

## Subgroup Analysis: Swing Voters

It is common knowledge that swing voters decide most close elections. However, it is very difficult to find out who those swing voters are and what kinds of candidates they prefer. In this section we zoom in specifically on the voters in our sample who are most likely to change their vote in an election. The idea is that these are likely to be the swing voters that Democratic candidates should pay special attention to and appeal to because it might be possible to influence their decision about whom to vote for and, especially, whether to vote or not at all.

We identify these voters in two ways: first, by looking at voters who changed their voting behavior in one or more of the past two presidential elections, in 2016 and 2020, either by switching the party they voted for or, more commonly, by turning out one year and not the other. We call these voters “volatile” voters because they didn’t consistently turn out and vote for the same party. The second way we identify potential swing voters is to look at the choices they make in our survey: after they evaluate each pair of Democratic candidates and choose their favorite, respondents are asked whether or not they would actually choose this Democratic candidate over a Republican option in an election, or whether they might not vote at all. Any voter who consistently said they would vote for a Democrat, no matter what kind of Democratic candidate they were presented with in the seven pairs of Democrats, can be considered a reliable Democratic voter. And the same goes for the voters who consistently said they would vote for a Republican, no matter what Democratic candidates they were presented with. This leaves a third group, roughly 42% of our sample, who changed their voting decision based on the Democratic candidates we presented (either by choosing to vote Republican or, more commonly, by saying they are not sure or wouldn’t vote). The theory is that these voters, who do not consistently say that they would vote for one party or another, are the group of swing voters whose inconsistent voting behavior is important for deciding elections. For the sake of simplicity, we’ll call these voters “undecided.”

## Key Takeaways

- 1. Swing voters prefer non-elite, working-class candidates.** Volatile voters prefer candidates from pink-collar backgrounds, while undecided voters prefer candidates from blue- or pink-collar backgrounds.
- 2. Swing voters have weak preferences with respect to populism.** Candidates who employ populist messaging are not likely to benefit from doing so among swing voters, but nor is populist messaging a liability among swing voters.
- 3. Undecided voters prefer candidates running on jobs-related policies.** The only policies preferred by undecided voters are the moderate tax credit to spur small-business job-training programs and the progressive jobs guarantee.
- 4. Both types of swing voters prefer candidates with moderate positions on immigration and guns, and they dislike the progressive position on immigration.**

## UNPACKING THE RESULTS

### Volatile Voters

First, we found that volatile voters preferred candidates with a pink-collar background (*Figure 36*). This was almost entirely driven by their strong preference for candidates who were middle-school teachers over all others. They disliked lawyers.

We did not detect a preference for populist messaging overall among these voters. However, when we break down this effect into the effects of specific soundbites, we found that they support the people-centered message, and disprefer the working-class version of this message, as well as the anti-populist message.

Volatile voters did not display significant preferences on economic policy proposals. However, when it comes to social policies, they showed a preference for the moderate position on immigration (over the progressive position) and the moderate position on guns (red-flag laws). Lastly, and perhaps unsurprisingly, like almost all voters, they preferred Democratic candidates who were willing to criticize the Democratic Party for not focusing on the working and middle class.

**Figure 36: Full Results for Volatile Voters Only**



### Undecided Voters

Looking instead at the voters who showed mixed preferences in our survey, we found similar results (*Figure 37*). These swing voters also much preferred candidates from blue- and pink-collar backgrounds over those from elite backgrounds. They were particularly favorable toward construction workers or middle-school teachers and unfavorable toward corporate executives.



These swing voters didn't show any strong preferences for or against any of the soundbites. They tended to prefer candidates who focused on jobs, either with the progressive jobs guarantee or the moderate tax credit. They cared most about immigration, where they preferred the moderate positions on immigration (modernizing border infrastructure) and guns (red-flag laws).

**Figure 37: Full Results for Undecided Voters Only**



# Subgroup Analysis: Working-Class Respondents

## *Key Takeaways*

- 1. Candidates who focus on a progressive jobs guarantee are viewed positively by working-class respondents, across all parties.** This result is driven by non-credentialed service workers (cashiers, custodians, warehouse workers, etc.).
- 2. Working-class respondents prefer populist candidates.** Candidates who employed any populist messaging — and particularly those who employed economic populist rhetoric — were viewed favorably by working-class respondents. Working-class support for economic populist candidates is driven by manual workers. No occupational group had a statistically significant negative response to economic populist candidates.
- 3. Working-class respondents in general view non-elite, working-class candidates favorably and upper-class candidates negatively.** Manual workers supported blue-collar candidates, and non-credentialed service workers supported pink-collar candidates. Though frontline professionals had weaker preferences around candidates' class background, they did have a negative view of blue-collar candidates. This suggests Democrats face a tradeoff with respect to which elements of their coalition they wish to appeal to.
- 4. Using educational attainment as a measure of class obscures important insights into working-class political preferences.** Working-class respondents measured by occupational status prefer populist candidates; within that group they especially prefer economic populist candidates. In contrast, working-class respondents measured by educational attainment prefer neither. Further, when we measure the working class by educational attainment rather than occupational status, it appears that the working class is more conservative with respect to both economic and social policies than it is when measured by occupation.
- 5. Working-class preferences in social policies depend on the particular issue at play.** In general, working-class respondents are more favorable toward moderate social policies, but the difference in their support varied substantially by issue: immigration policies were highly polarizing, while gun policies were much less so; and working-class respondents barely registered a difference between candidates promoting progressive or moderate abortion policies.
- 6. Working-class respondents are less polarized around social issues than are non-working-class respondents.** This suggests that any potential traction Republican appeals on social issues have among the electorate may be substantially weaker among working-class respondents.
- 7. Democratic working-class respondents strongly favor candidates promoting progressive social policies, while independents and especially Republicans oppose them.** By contrast, moderate social policies appear to be less polarizing across partisanship among working-class respondents, with all three groups having at least a slightly positive reaction to candidates employing them. Once again, this implies a significant

tradeoff between appealing to the Democratic base and appealing to working-class independent and Republican voters.

### UNPACKING THE RESULTS

Our primary method for determining whether respondents are working class or not uses Oesch’s (2003) classification scheme to categorize subjects’ occupations into different subgroups within and outside of the working class. To supplement this primary analysis, however, we also show the results employing educational attainment as an indicator of the working class, a common approach in popular media coverage of class-based voting. In this approach, individuals with no college degree are considered working class.

### All Working-Class (Oesch) Respondents

We began by examining our results for all working-class respondents (**Figure 38**). For our primary measure of class, we rely on a modified version of Oesch’s (2003) occupational classification scheme, consisting of working-class respondents (credentialed and non-credentialed service workers, manual workers) and non-working-class — or middle-class/upper-class — respondents (managers, technical/organizational professionals, frontline professionals, small-business owners).

Group	Percent of Available Voters	Percentage Support for Biden in 2020
<b>Non-Working-Class</b>	<b>54.7</b>	<b>52.5</b>
Managers	24.5	55.9
Technical Professionals	8.8	53.9
Frontline Professionals	11.2	54
Small-Business Owners	10.2	42.8
<b>Working Class</b>	<b>45.3</b>	<b>48.6</b>
Credentialed Service Workers	22.3	49.2
Non-Credentialed Service Workers	10.4	59.6
Manual Workers	12.6	38.3

Neither candidate race nor candidate gender had statistically significant effects on working-class respondents’ candidate choices. By contrast, candidate occupation *did* matter. Blue- and pink-collar worker candidates performed substantially better than elite, upper-class candidates among working-class respondents. The largest point estimate was for middle-school teachers, who were chosen roughly 56% of the time. Construction workers came in a close second, attracting 55% of all working-class support, while lawyers, corporate executives, and candidates whose occupation was not reported fared poorly, securing less than 50% of working-class votes.

We see a clear, if substantively small, preference for us-versus-them populist messaging over non-populist messaging overall. In terms of specific forms of populist messaging, economic populist messaging fared the best,

securing nearly 53% support among working-class respondents. Anti-populist messaging fared the worst, with these candidates attracting just under 46% of working-class votes. We do not detect positive or negative views of candidates employing other messaging styles.

On economic policy, working-class respondents preferred candidates who ran on a progressive jobs guarantee (54% support) but not a \$20/hour minimum wage (46%). None of the remaining economic policies that we tested attract a percentage of the vote that is significantly different than 50%.

In terms of social policies, we see a clear preference for moderate policies overall, and a negative opinion toward candidates promoting progressive social policies (though the magnitude of this negative effect is several percentage points smaller than that of the sample as a whole). That said, this result is driven largely by immigration policy. Border infrastructure modernization is most popular among working-class respondents, securing over 55% of their support, while decriminalizing immigration was supported only around 43% of the time. Working-class respondents expressed no meaningful preference for moderate abortion policy over progressive abortion policy. Finally, candidates who did not take a position on social policies fared poorly, receiving around 48% of the vote.

Overall, the range of effects for social policies among working-class respondents was substantially smaller than it was for their non-working-class counterparts: the gap between the least and the most popular social policy among working-class respondents was 13 percentage points, whereas the same difference among non-working-class respondents was 20 percentage points. This suggests that potentially divisive Republican appeals around social issues may find a more muted reception among working-class voters.

Candidates hoping to win working-class votes would do well to voice criticism of the Democratic Party: our results indicate that candidates who were critical of the party attracted just over 55% of all working-class support. Candidates who took no position on the Democratic Party and candidates who presented themselves as proud Democrats do poorly among the working-class, attracting 48% and 46% support, respectively.

**Figure 38: Full Results for Working-Class (Oesch) Respondents**



A number of interesting additional patterns emerge when we explore differences in working-class preferences across partisanship (*Figure 39*). First, while working-class respondents as a whole showed no significant preference for candidates of one race or ethnicity over those of any other race or ethnicity, working-class independents reported a negative view of black candidates (who they supported in 45.8% of races), while working-class Democrats reported a substantially more positive view of black candidates (52.2% support).

These results also show that support for populism overall was driven largely by Democratic and Republican working-class respondents, though the former preferred economic populists and the latter, political populists, but also by positive (though statistically insignificant) support for most forms of populism by working-class Republicans and independents. In the next section we show that economic populism performs particularly well among manual workers, a group that typically breaks for Republicans.

We also observe substantial differences in support for candidates employing progressive versus moderate economic policies, with Democrats predictably favoring the former, Republicans favoring the latter, and independent working-class respondents showing no preference. We observe a similar, but more polarized, pattern with respect to social policies.

**Figure 39: Full Results for Working-Class (Oesch)  
Respondents by Party**



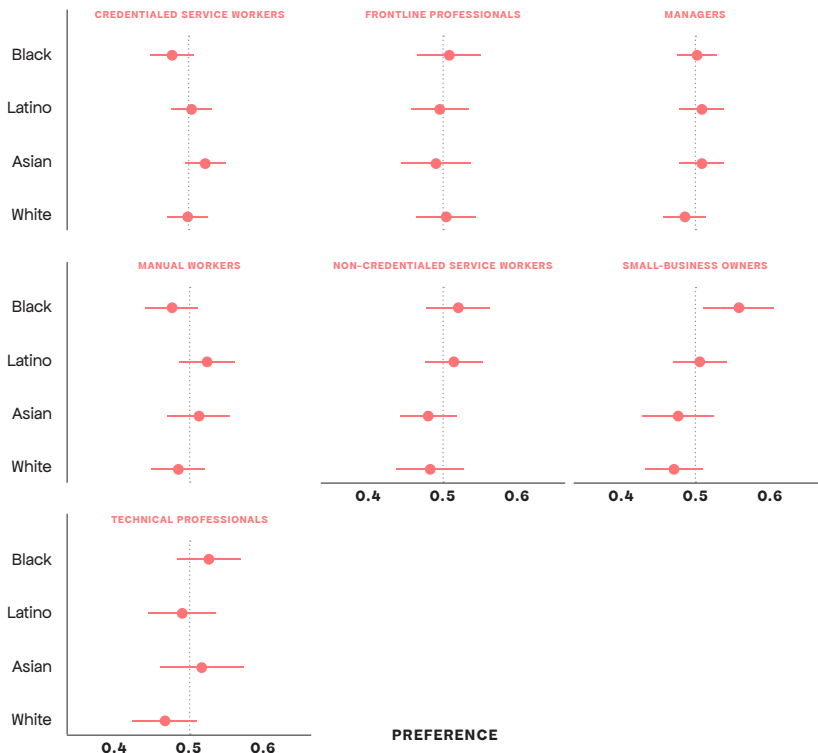
## Subsetting Within and Outside of the Working Class

There were also important differences in our results across these seven occupational categories: credentialed service workers, non-credentialed service workers, manual workers, managers, technical/organizational professionals, frontline professionals, and small-business owners). See **Figures 40 to 50**.

In particular, there are two groups that offer interesting possibilities for Democrats interested in pursuing an economic populist approach: manual workers (from electricians and truckers to warehouse workers and landscapers) and non-credentialed service workers (hostesses, security guards, cashiers). In both cases, we observe interesting patterns that are obscured by looking at the working class as a whole.

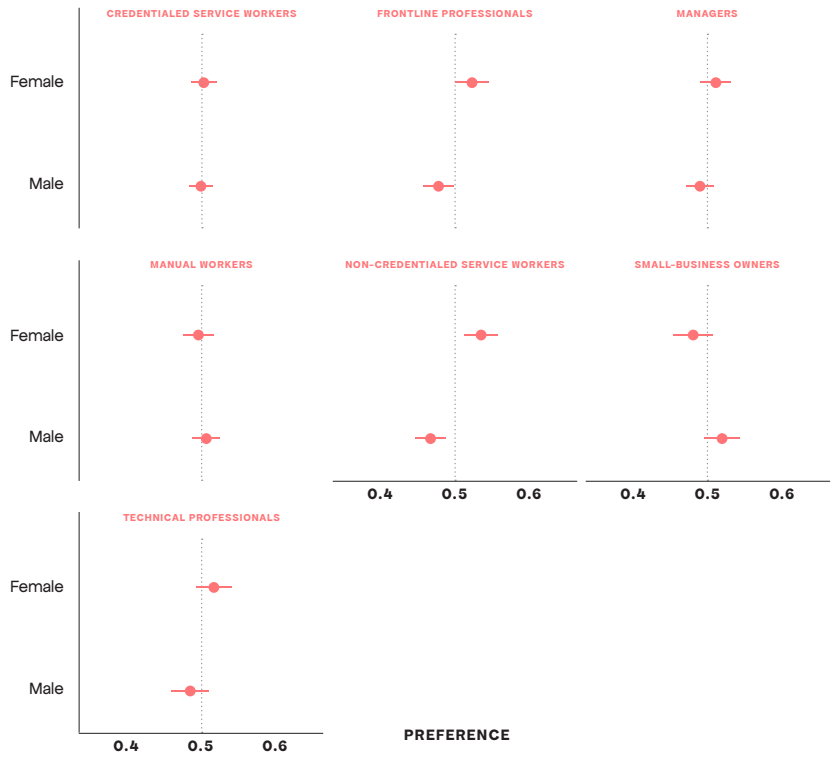
First, economic populists were the only candidates favored by manual workers (55% support), and manual workers were the only occupational group among whom economic populists were viewed favorably. In turn, consistent with their occupational background, manual workers showed the highest level of support (55%) for candidates with a blue-collar background and had no statistically significant preference for candidates from any other class background. This underscores the importance of finding candidates who key constituencies can identify with. For their part, not only were non-credentialed service workers the only occupational group (in or outside the working class) who favored candidates running on progressive economic policies more than candidates running on moderate economic policies (by a 5 point margin), but they were the only group with a statistically significant preference for a federal jobs guarantee (57.6% support). Finally, non-credentialed service workers were substantially more likely to support pink-collar (though not blue-collar) candidates — who they favored in nearly 60% of races — than most other occupational groups.

**Figure 40: Full Sample for Race/Ethnicity by Subclass**

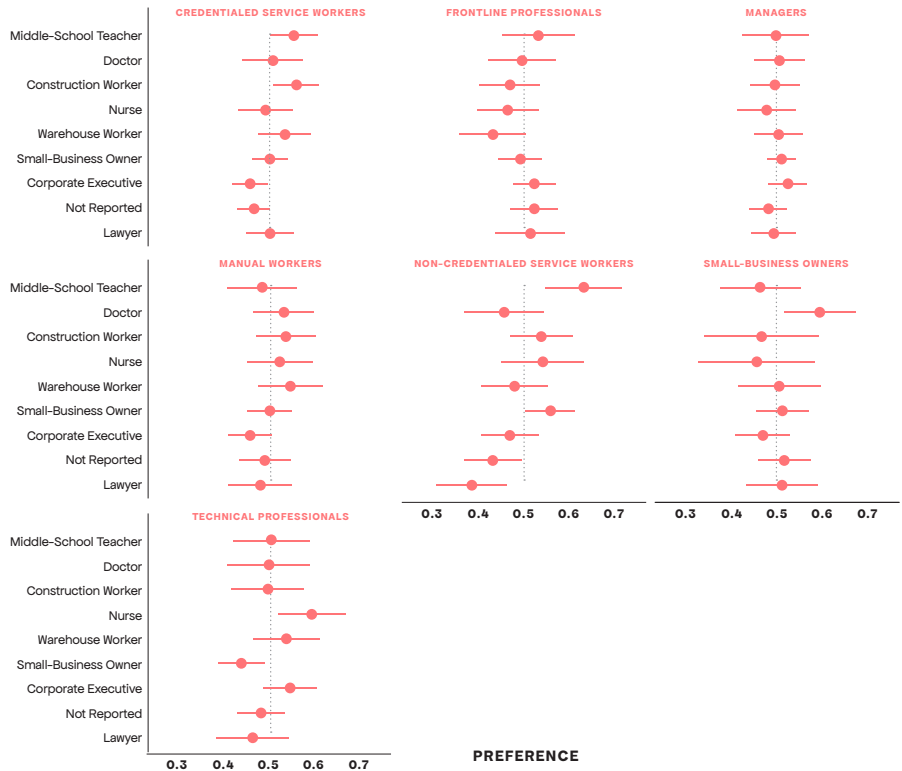




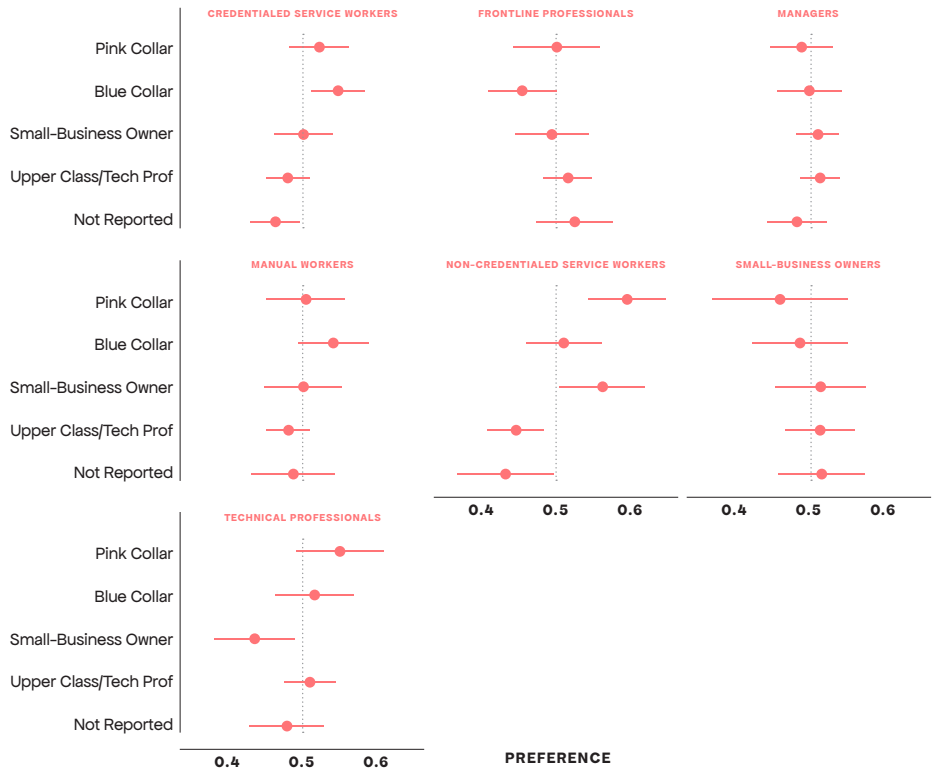
**Figure 41: Full Sample for Gender by Subclass**



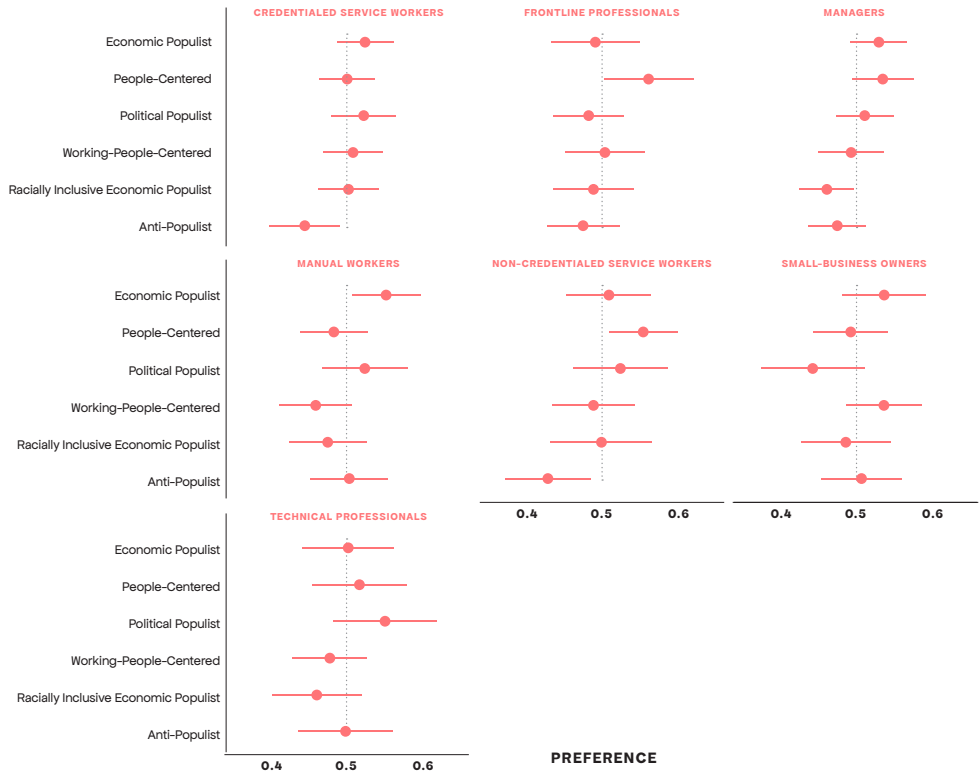
**Figure 42: Full Sample for Candidate Occupation by Subclass**



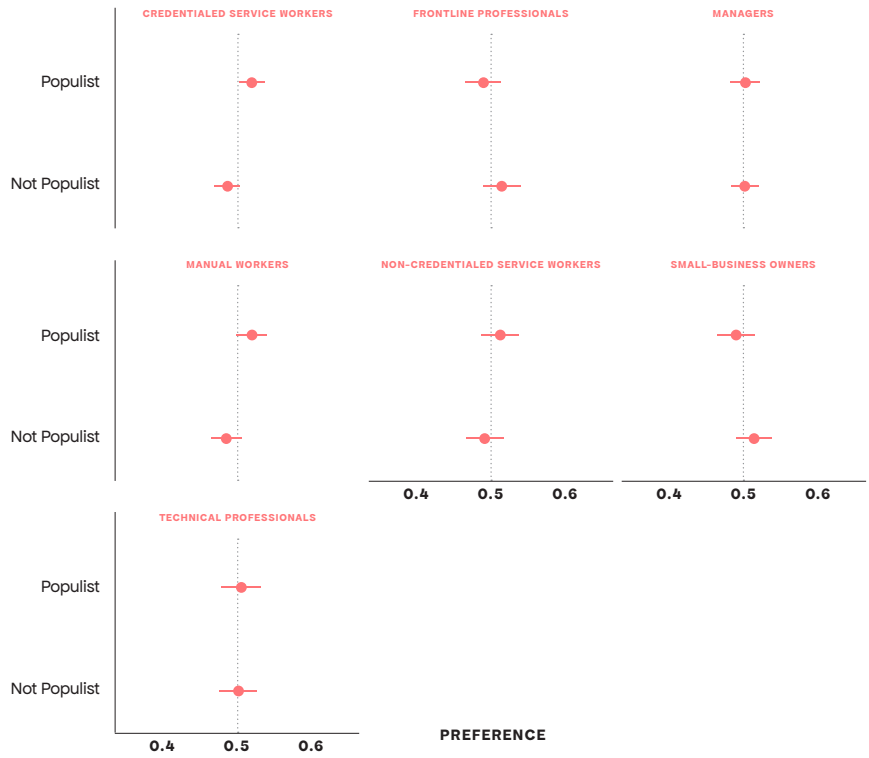
**Figure 43: Full Sample for Candidate Class by Subclass**



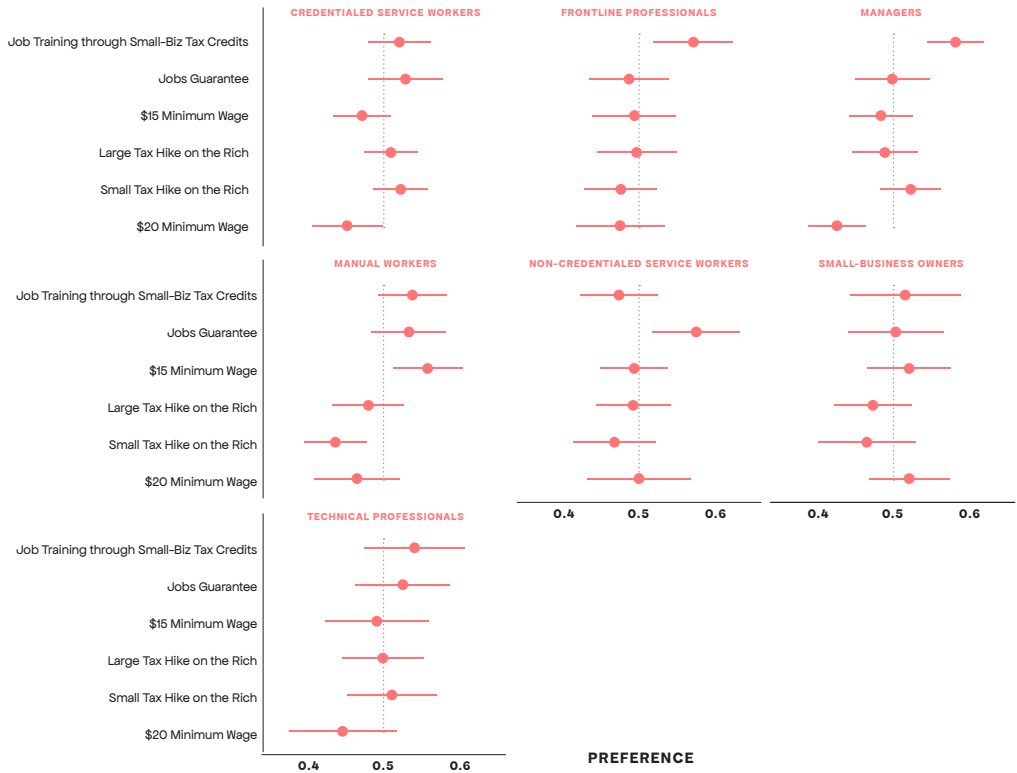
**Figure 44: Full Sample for Populism (I) by Subclass**



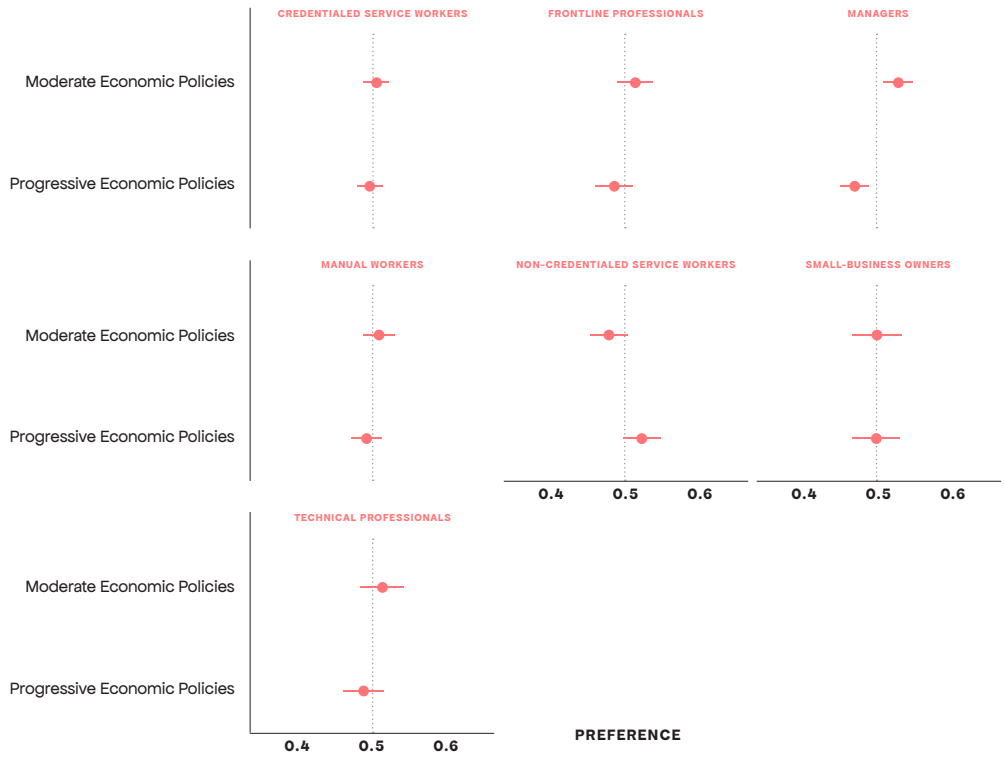
**Figure 45: Full Sample for Populism (II) by Subclass**



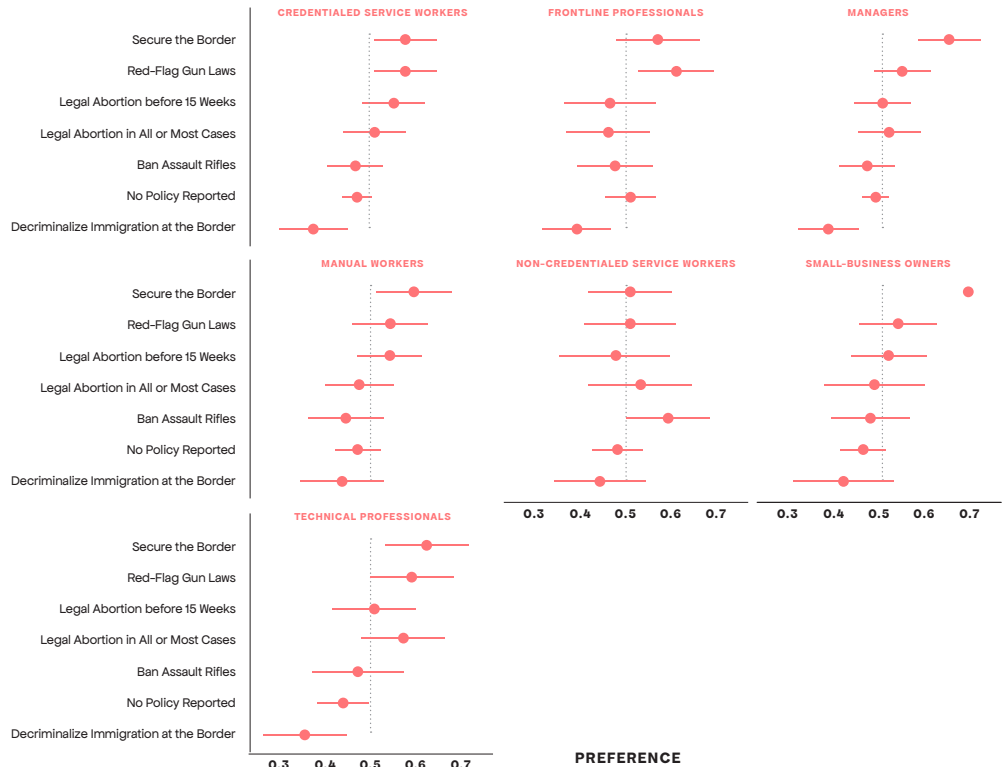
**Figure 46: Full Sample for Economic Policies (I) by Subclass**



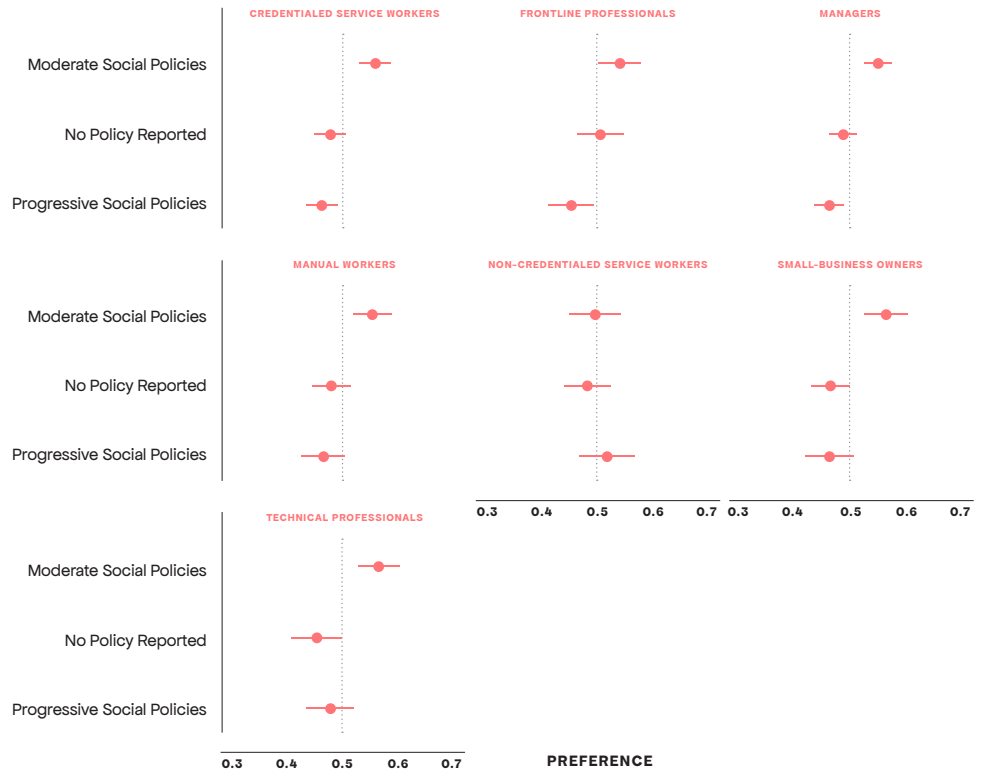
**Figure 47: Full Sample for Economic Policies (II) by Subclass**



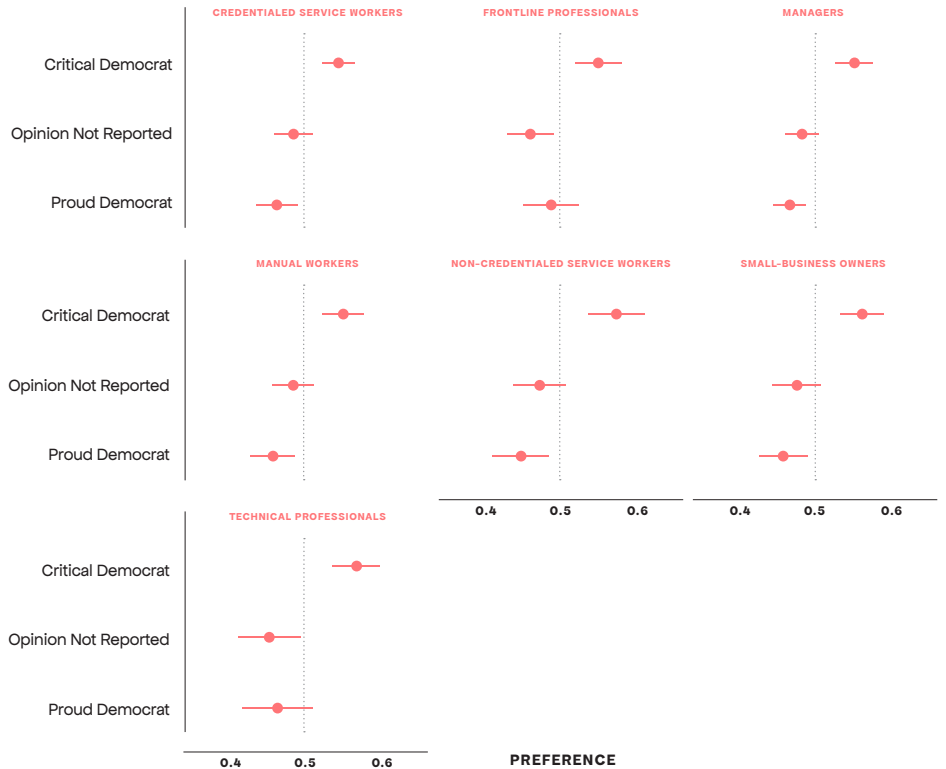
**Figure 48: Full Sample for Social Policies (I) by Subclass**



**Figure 49: Full Sample for Social Policies (II) by Subclass**



**Figure 50: Full Sample for Candidate Opinion of the Democratic Party by Subclass**



## Education

The social class typology most often used in popular news and political journalism is the one based on education: people who have a four-year college degree versus those who do not. This typology flattens a great deal of nuance into a binary. For this reason, it's often frowned upon by social scientists, but those criticisms notwithstanding, class-as-education is not a meritless model. Since at least the 1980s the American labor market has steadily bifurcated into a growing "knowledge economy" sector that demands a university degree and a low-wage service sector that typically requires none. As the manufacturing sector shrank, those without a college degree suffered wage losses.<sup>18</sup> By virtually any metric, workers without a college degree are doing worse socially, economically, and even physically, than their college-educated peers. As such, the education divide can tell us a lot about the nature of class politics today and should not be ignored or explained away by simple references to incongruities: while there are many wealthy people who have never attended college and scores of near-destitute adjunct professors, these do not invalidate the overall picture.

Group	Percent of Available Voters	Percentage Support for Biden in 2020
Four-Year College Degree or More <sup>19</sup>	31.6	59.2
Less than Four-Year College Degree	68.4	43.9

For our purposes the education divide is especially significant considering the composition of the Democratic Party electorate, which skews more toward voters with a four-year college degree each year. So, what do voters without a college degree look for in winning candidates?

Let's begin with what these two groups have most in common (**Figure 51**). Respondents — both those who have a four-year college degree and those who do not — preferred candidates who were critical of the Democratic Party more than half of the time. Both groups strongly preferred candidates who advocated "modernizing our border infrastructure," and both tended to reject candidates who supported immigration decriminalization. In contrast to working-class respondents measured by occupational group, neither group of respondents (that is, with or without a college degree) was moved by populist messaging in general or economic populist messaging in particular.

Yet there were many areas where these groups diverged. Like working-class respondents when measured by occupation, respondents without a four-year college degree preferred blue- and pink-collar candidates over elite, upper-class candidates, while college-educated respondents showed no statistically significant preference here.

On social policies, respondents who do not have a college degree were 5.8 percentage points less favorable toward candidates who advocated Roe-like progressive abortion policies compared to respondents with a four-year college degree. We observed no comparable difference when using the occupation-based measure of class above. Non-college-educated respondents have substantially stronger preferences around social issues than the working-class as defined by an occupation-based measure: the difference in candidate favorability between the most and least popular social policies was 17.7 percentage points among non-college-educated respondents and 13 percentage points among the occupation-based working class.

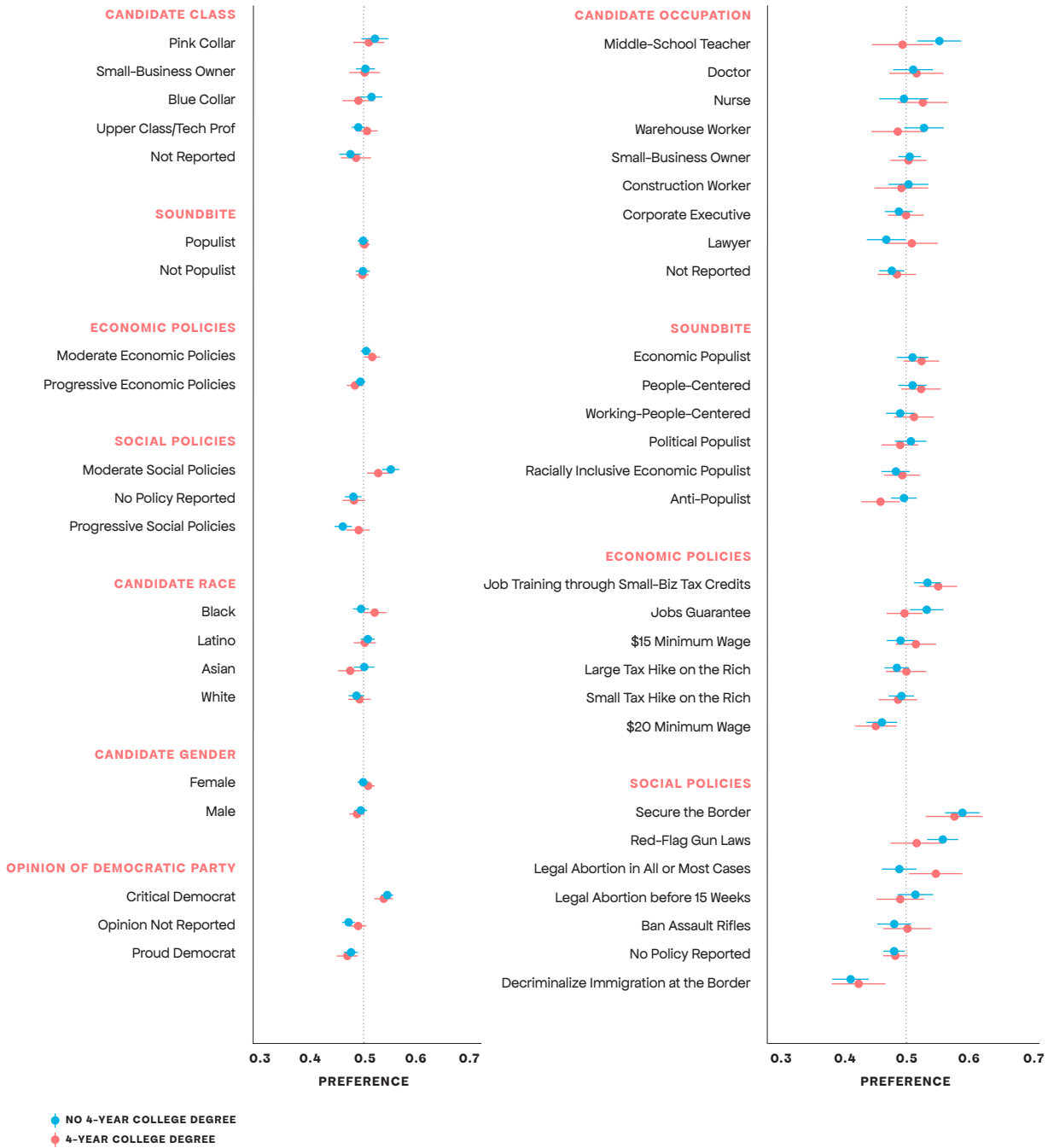
<sup>18</sup> <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/misc/R45090.pdf>

<sup>19</sup> Analyses exclude respondents who reported being currently enrolled as students.

When it comes to candidate demographics, respondents without a college degree did not show much preference for candidates based on their stated race or ethnicity, though they tended to reject white candidates slightly more than half of the time and preferred Latino candidates slightly more than half of the time. For respondents with a college degree the story is different: they expressed negative opinions of Asian candidates and were especially favorable toward black candidates.

With respect to economic policies, respondents both with and without a four-year college degree preferred candidates advocating moderate rather than progressive policies, though there were significant differences by issue, particularly with respect to candidates advocating a jobs guarantee. This stands in contrast to working-class respondents measured by occupation, who showed no preference for candidates employing either moderate or progressive economic policies. Similar to the occupation-based working class, however, respondents without a college degree strongly preferred candidates who advocated for a jobs guarantee — though unlike the occupation-based working class, non-college-educated respondents were equally favorable to the small-business tax credit to stimulate job-training programs. College-educated respondents showed no significant preference for candidates running on a jobs guarantee and had a positive view of the small-business tax credit.

**Figure 51: Full Sample Results by Educational Attainment**





# Subgroup Analysis: Rural, Suburban, and Urban

## Key Takeaways

- 1. While Americans living in cities are known for voting reliably blue, they support only one aspect of left-wing populism: candidates from working-class backgrounds, particularly from pink-collar occupations.**
- 2. Rural Americans, on the other hand, are attracted to several key components of left-wing populism: candidates from non-elite backgrounds, populist messaging in general (especially political populism), and the progressive jobs guarantee proposal.** However, they are also supportive of the moderate position on jobs, strongly dislike the progressive minimum wage policies, and are very opposed to decriminalizing immigration.
- 3. Suburban respondents do not support key components of left-wing populism: they show no preference for non-elite candidates and prefer moderate economic policies over progressive economic policies.** Yet suburban respondents do respond favorably to one type of populist messaging: Bernie-style economic populist messaging that pits working Americans against an economic elite.
- 4. Candidates who do not mention any social policies are more popular among rural respondents than candidates who promote any progressive social policies, while city residents punish candidates more for staying silent on cultural issues than for campaigning on progressive social issues.** This suggests our overall finding that candidates who report no social policy are less popular than most candidates who report any social policy — progressive or moderate. This is driven more by liberal voters in cities who punish Democrats for not addressing important social issues they care about, than by more conservative rural voters who assume Democrats who stay silent on social issues are progressive policy extremists.
- 5. Respondents across the geographical spectrum — from the cities to the suburbs to rural America — prefer Democratic candidates who criticize the Democratic party for not caring enough about middle- and working-class Americans.**

## UNPACKING THE RESULTS

American voters are increasingly divided based on geography. Rural areas are reliably red, and cities are blue. Suburban areas, caught in between, are now pivotal battlegrounds and play a major role in determining elections around the country. In this section we test whether left-wing populism can win voters across these geographical divisions (*Figure 52*). Overall, while key elements of left-wing populism are popular across the board, their popularity differs based on the geographical area.

## Urban<sup>20</sup>

Respondents in cities show a strong preference for black candidates, while taking a negative view of Asian candidates. They also preferred candidates from a non-elite working-class background, especially from pink-collar occupations like nurses or middle-school teachers. When it came to populist messaging and progressive economic policies, people in cities expressed no significant preferences. The economic policy they strongly disliked was a proposal for a small tax on the wealthy. Surprisingly, despite the progressive reputation of cities, these respondents showed a slight preference for moderate social policies over progressive social policies, though this preference is not as strong among residents of cities as it is for suburban and rural respondents. The support for moderate social policies in cities, however, was not universal, and depended on the specific policy: they preferred the moderate position on immigration to the progressive one and the moderate position on guns to the progressive one. And lastly, like almost everyone surveyed, urban Americans preferred a candidate who is critical of the Democratic Party.

## Rural<sup>21</sup>

While rural Americans showed no preference for candidate race or gender, they did show strong support for candidates who came from a pink-collar background, particularly middle-school teachers. Rural respondents also support candidates who are small-business owners, and they disliked candidates from elite backgrounds, such as lawyers and CEOs. With respect to messaging, rural respondents prefer populist messaging over non-populist messaging, and they showed a statistically significant preference only for political populist messaging framed against Washington insiders (though they were nearly as supportive of the economic populist message framed against millionaires). On economic policy, rural respondents show no preference between moderate and progressive positions; and of the policies we surveyed, they were only attracted to jobs-related policies: both the moderate proposal of a tax credit for small and medium businesses to train low-skill workers and the progressive position of a jobs guarantee. Jobs were much more important than the minimum wages, and rural respondents dislike the \$15/hour minimum wage and, especially, the \$20/hour minimum wage.

Overall, rural Americans preferred moderate social policies to progressive ones. However, this was almost entirely driven by their opinion on immigration, followed to a lesser degree by their opinion on guns. They showed no preference between progressive and moderate positions on abortion.

## Suburban<sup>22</sup>

Overall, respondents in suburbs showed no preference for candidates based on their race, gender, or their general class background. Instead of preferring candidates from non-elite backgrounds, such as pink-collar occupations, suburban respondents show a strong preference for just one group: doctors. Regarding populist messaging, suburban respondents also do not have a

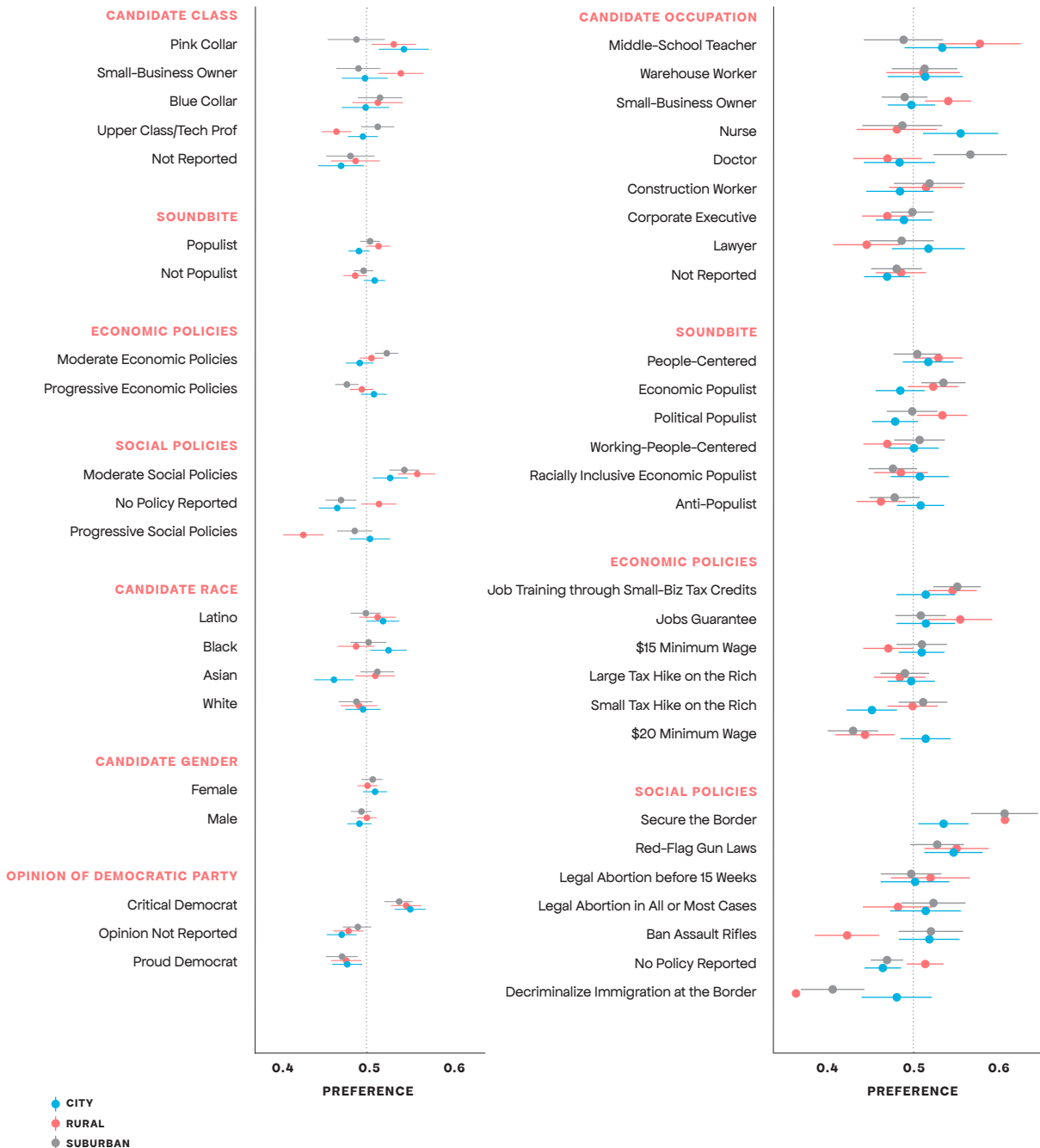
20 American voters living in cities are more likely to be non-white and vote for Democrats, compared to their rural and suburban counterparts.

21 Americans living in rural areas are much more likely to be white, identify as working class, work in manual jobs, not go to college, say they are financially insecure, and vote Republican than other Americans.

22 Americans living in suburbs are the most likely to describe themselves as “middle class” and say that they are financially secure. They tend to be evenly split between Democrats and Republicans.

general preference. Separating out the different types of populist messaging, however, we see surprisingly strong support for a Bernie-style economic populist message that pits the working class against economic elites. But if suburban respondents were potentially attracted to left-wing populism, it was only based on this rhetorical messaging. On economic policies, suburban respondents show no preference for any progressive policy. Lastly, suburban respondents are somewhere between urban and rural respondents in terms of social policies: they share a strong dislike for progressive immigration policy but are more indifferent when it comes to guns and abortion overall.

**Figure 52: Full Sample Results by Geography**



## Geography and Party

### *Key Takeaways*

- 1. Rural Democrats are the strongest supporters of left-wing populism.** They prefer pink-collar candidates over candidates from all other class backgrounds, populist messaging over non-populist messaging, and candidates running on progressive economic policies — particularly a jobs guarantee — over candidates promoting all other economic policies. Yet rural Democrats are not as supportive of progressive social policies as are urban or suburban Democrats.
- 2. Rural Republicans and independents favored aspects of left-wing populism, but the others did not.** Rural Republicans preferred candidates who used political populist messaging, while we detected no significant preferences among rural independents with respect to populist appeals. Among rural independents the only economic policy that was viewed favorably was a jobs guarantee. Both rural Republicans and rural independents had a negative view of elite and upper-class candidates.
- 3. Suburban Democrats, like their suburban Republican and Independent counterparts, prefer candidates who use populist rhetoric.** But that's where their support for left-wing populism ends: they do not prefer pink- and blue-collar candidates, and they do not favorably view candidates who campaign on the progressive jobs guarantee.
- 4. Urban Democrats are the only group that prefers candidates running on a \$20/hour minimum wage.** Even urban Republicans aren't as opposed to a \$20/hour minimum wage as their suburban and rural counterparts.

### **FOR DEMOCRATS BY GEOGRAPHY SEE *figure 53***

- 1. Rural Democrats** are the most attracted to key aspects of left-wing populism: they prefer candidates from pink-collar occupations, candidates with populist messaging that focuses specifically on the working class against an economic elite, and they also prefer progressive economic policies, especially the jobs guarantee. It's important to note, however, that rural Democrats are not as supportive of progressive social policies as urban or suburban Democrats, especially when it comes to immigration and guns.
- 2. Urban Democrats** are also attracted to most policy aspects of left-wing populism but do not view populist rhetoric favorably. Urban Democrats are the only group of Democrats (by geography) who support candidates proposing a \$20/hour minimum wage. On social policies, urban Democrats are very progressive.
- 3. Suburban Democrats** are the least attracted to left-wing populism: they do not show any preference for candidates with blue- or pink-collar backgrounds or with progressive economic policies. While they do react favorably toward economic populist rhetoric, the results aren't statistically significant. The one thing they care about most is progressive social policies, especially when it comes to banning assault rifles and protecting abortion rights.

**Figure 53: Full Results by Geography — Democrats Only**



#### FOR REPUBLICANS BY GEOGRAPHY SEE *Figure 54*

- 1. Rural Republicans** are attracted to some aspects of left-wing populism: they disliked candidates from upper-class backgrounds — preferring candidates who are small-business owners above all others. When it comes to rhetoric, they prefer candidates with a political populist message, pitting the people against out-of-touch political insiders in Washington. On economic policy, rural Republicans prefer candidates who run on a moderate job tax credits to spur small-business job-training policy. They also had a favorable view of candidates running on a jobs guarantee, but this preference was not statistically significant. Lastly, on social policies, rural Republicans are just as opposed to progressive policies as are suburban and urban Republicans.
- 2. Urban Republicans** are not attracted to most aspects of left-wing populism. They do not have strong preferences based on candidates' occupational background, and when it comes to populist rhetoric, they are one of the only groups to show a preference for candidates who use anti-populist rhetoric — though this preference is slight and not statistically significant. The only silver lining is that urban Republicans are not strongly opposed to (or in favor of) progressive economic policy. Lastly, on social policies, they have similarly conservative views as other Republicans.
- 3. Suburban Republicans** are also not attracted to most aspects of left-wing populism: they do not show any preference for candidates with blue- or pink-collar backgrounds, and they are the most opposed to progressive economic policies, including the almost universally supported progressive jobs guarantee.

**Figure 54: Full Sample Results by Geography — Republicans Only**



**FOR INDEPENDENTS BY GEOGRAPHY SEE *Figure 55***

- 1. Rural independents** are similar to rural Republicans in their support for several key aspects of left-wing populism: they prefer candidates from pink-collar occupations (middle-school teachers) over all others and have a negative view of candidates from upper-class backgrounds. When it comes to rhetoric, they dislike the anti-populist message. On economic policy, while rural independents dislike a large tax increase on the rich, they are most supportive of candidates who run on a progressive jobs guarantee. Lastly, on social policies, rural independents prefer moderate policies to progressive policies, especially on immigration and guns.
- 2. Urban independents** are also attracted to some aspects of left-wing populism, such as pink-collar candidates and the jobs guarantee (though not statistically significant). While they show some support for populist rhetoric that focuses on a racially inclusive working class (not statistically significant), they dislike candidates with an economic populist message.
- 3. Suburban independents** do not show any preferences for progressive economic policies, but they do prefer candidates from blue-collar backgrounds running on an economic populist message.



**Figure 55: Full Results by Geography — Independents Only**



# Subgroup Analysis: Men and Women

## *Key Takeaways*

- 1. In general, we find little evidence of systematic differences in candidate preferences across respondents' gender.**
- 2. Unsurprisingly, one of the few discernable gender gaps we observed with respect to social policies is abortion.** While women were favorable to candidates who ran on a progressive Roe-like abortion policy, men showed no significant preference for these candidates.
- 3. Women disfavor candidates with upper-class professions significantly more than men.** This could potentially be due to these professions being more male dominated.

## **UNPACKING THE RESULTS**

We observed surprisingly few differences between men and women across all candidate attributes, with a few comparatively minor exceptions (**Figure 56**). First, candidates who supported legal abortion in almost all cases did much better among women than men, receiving just under 53% of the vote among women but only about 48% of the vote among men.

When it comes to economic issue positions, candidates who supported small-business tax credits to stimulate job-training programs did noticeably better among men than women, securing just under 56% of the male vote and just under 52% of the female vote.

Finally, upper-class candidates fared especially badly among women, capturing just 48% of their votes. By contrast, upper-class candidates garnered nearly 51% of the male vote.

**Figure 56: Full Sample Results by Gender**



# Subgroup Analysis: Race and Ethnicity

## Key Takeaways

- 1. Black respondents prefer non-white candidates (particularly Latinos) over white candidates by a substantial margin.** We do not detect any significant differences in preferences for candidates based on race/ethnicity among white or Latino respondents.
- 2. Candidates campaigning on moderate social policies are viewed positively by both white and black respondents.** Among Latinos, we see a sharp class divide: working-class Latinos strongly favor progressive social policies, while non-working-class respondents do not.
- 3. The only economic policy that is viewed favorably by both white and black respondents is a federal jobs guarantee.** The largest point estimate of any policy among black respondents was for a jobs guarantee (58% support).
- 4. White respondents prefer pink-collar candidates over upper-class candidates.** However, we observe a large class divide among white (as well as Latino) respondents, particularly with respect to upper-class candidates.

## UNPACKING THE RESULTS

The most significant differences across racial groups showed up in support for particular social and economic policies (*Figure 57*). In terms of economic policies, the jobs guarantee was the only economic policy picked by white and black respondents in a majority of head-to-head matchups, while we observed no significant preference for candidates running on a jobs guarantee among Latino respondents.

The clearest differences we observe with respect to social issues are concentrated among white respondents. Overall, white respondents viewed candidates running on moderate social policies much more favorably than candidates running on progressive social policies (a difference of 8.6 percentage point). We see a similar pattern among black respondents, but sample size limitations preclude us from drawing firm inferences in this case. Interestingly, though, white respondents were uniform in their dislike of progressive social policies across class; working-class Latinos were dramatically more favorable toward progressive social policies compared to non-working-class Latinos (by a margin of 15 percentage points).

In terms of specific social policies, the moderate immigration position was viewed most favorably by white respondents (garnering their support in nearly 60% of matchups). The progressive position (decriminalizing immigration) was least popular among white respondents. Latino respondents did not show a significant preference for or against the progressive immigration policy and showed a modest, not statistically significant, preference for the moderate immigration policy. Interestingly, the only social policy for which we see a statistically significant impact (at the .1 level) among Latinos is the moderate abortion policy, which Latinos supported just 42% of the time.

Our results also revealed some important findings about the popularity of particular candidate profiles among different racial groups. For example, the candidate's race did not play a significant role in driving support for

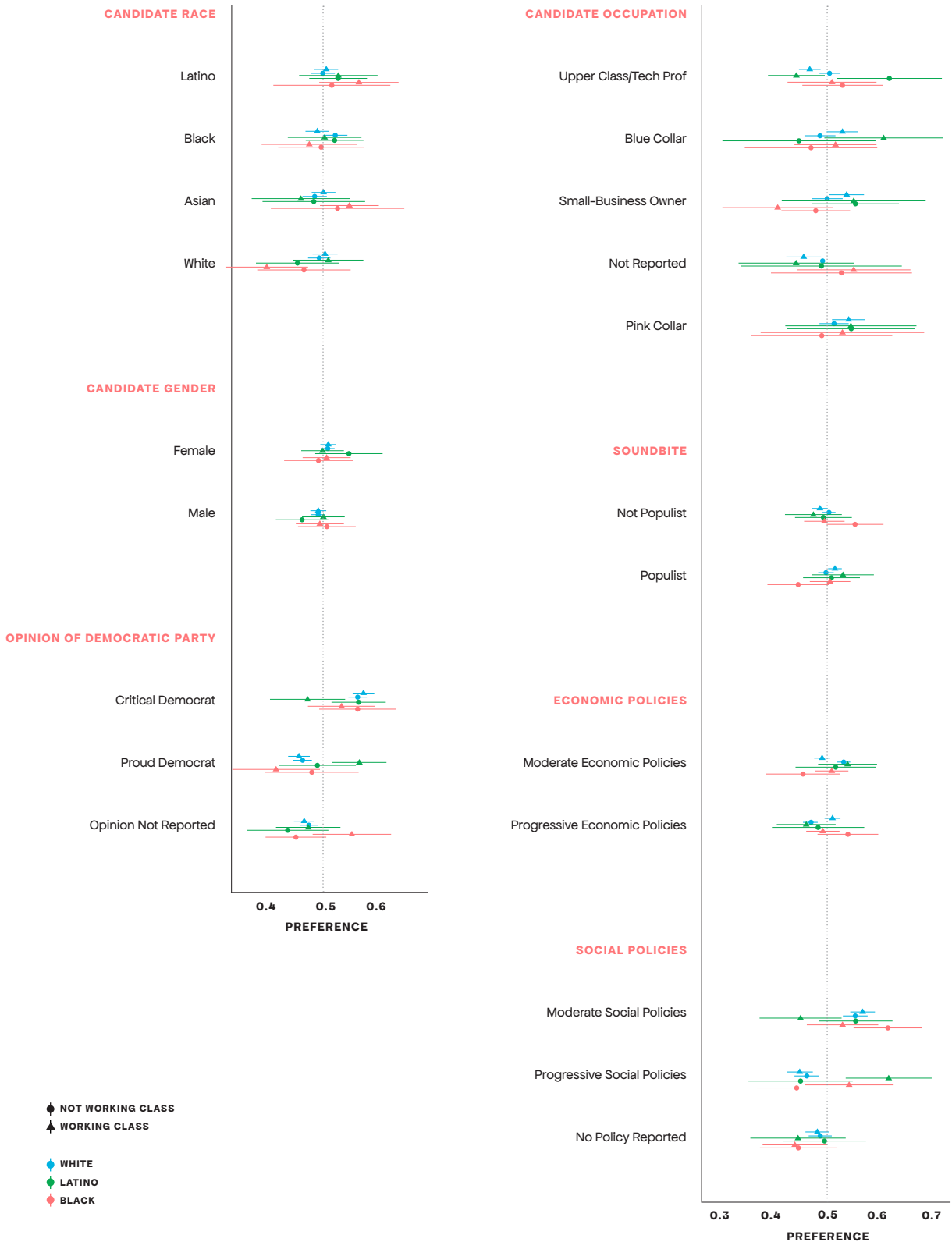
white or Latino respondents. By contrast, non-white candidates were much more popular among black respondents than white candidates, by up to 12 percentage points.

There were also interesting differences based on the class of the respondent (**Figure 58**). Overall, whites tended to favor non-elite, working-class candidates over upper-class and elite professional candidates. White respondents were favorable toward pink-collar candidates, though working-class whites viewed both blue-collar and pink-collar candidates positively. Yet there was a substantial class divide among Latinos with respect to respondent class: opposition to elite, upper-class candidates was driven by working-class Latinos, whereas non-working-class Latinos viewed upper-class candidates positively.

**Figure 57: Full Sample Results by Race/Ethnicity**



**Figure 58: Full Sample Results by Race/Ethnicity and Class**



## Subgroup Analysis: Likely (Registered) Voters

### Key Takeaways

- 1. Candidates who run on jobs policies — either moderate or progressive — are viewed more favorably than other candidates.**
- 2. Moderate social policies are appealing to registered voters, while progressive social policies were not — though this effect varied substantially across issue area.**
- 3. Immigration is highly salient for registered voters.** Registered voters were 19 percentage points more favorable toward candidates who campaigned on “modernizing our border infrastructure” compared to those who prioritized decriminalizing immigration. The moderate immigration policy had twice the persuasive effect as the most popular economic policy — tax credits for small businesses to create jobs.
- 4. Registered voters are more likely to prefer Democrats who are willing to be critical of their own party, as opposed to a proud Democrat or a Democrat who voices no opinion on the subject.**
- 5. Registered voters view pink-collar candidates favorably and upper-class and technical/professional candidates unfavorably.**

### UNPACKING THE RESULTS

Registered voters, as one might expect, skew more white, older, and conservative, and are more likely to have a four-year college degree on average (*Figure 59*). Ideologically, most registered voters identified as moderate (43%). More identified as conservative and very conservative (28%) than liberal or very liberal (22%).

Registered voters showed a statistically significant preference for candidates from pink-collar backgrounds and dispreference for upper-class and technical/professional candidates.

Candidate gender and race/ethnicity were not salient among registered voters overall, who showed no preferences for men versus women or for candidates of one race/ethnicity over another.

Similarly, registered voters had weak preferences for candidates based on the type of messaging they employed. Registered voters were slightly favorable toward economic populist candidates, choosing them in 51.6% of races, but were equally disposed toward candidates who employed people-centered rhetoric. They viewed anti-populists slightly unfavorably (48.3% favorability).

Registered voters had stronger preferences around candidates’ economic and, especially, social policies. On the economic front, registered voters had favorable views of candidates who ran on both progressive (52.4% support) and moderate jobs policies (53.8% support). By contrast, registered voters viewed negatively candidates who ran on a \$20/hour minimum wage policy — selecting those candidates in 46% of races. Interestingly, while surveys have found that Americans are generally (though far from overwhelmingly) favorable toward tax hikes for the rich, we find that raising taxes on the wealthy — either in a small or a large way — has little bearing on how registered voters evaluate candidates.



In terms of social policies, overall, registered voters strongly prefer moderate social policies over progressive social policies. Again, however, their views of candidates based on social policies varied dramatically by issue. Immigration appears to be highly salient for registered voters. The moderate immigration policy had the most favorable effect of any policy, whether it be economic or social, and was selected in 59.4% of races. The moderate immigration policy had over twice the persuasive effect as the most popular economic policy — tax credits for small businesses to create jobs. Conversely, decriminalizing immigration had a powerful negative effect on candidate support, receiving support from registered voters in just 40.6% of races.

The second most popular social issue was strengthening red-flag laws; candidates who ran on this policy were chosen in 54.6% of races. By contrast, registered voters supported candidates running on the progressive policy to ban assault rifles in just 48.2% of races. Interestingly, however, offering a progressive or moderate position on abortion made little difference in how registered voters evaluated candidates.

Finally, like respondents across most groups, registered voters had a significantly more positive view of candidates who were critical of the Democratic Party compared to those who defended the party or were silent on the topic. The favorability gap among registered voters between critical Democrats and proud Democrats was 7.6 percentage points (54.7% support versus 47.1% support, respectively), and the gap with “silent Democrats” was similar.

**Figure 59: Full Results Registered Voters Only**



# Subgroup Analysis: Non-Voters in 2020

## Key Takeaways

- 1. Non-voters find blue-collar candidates appealing — especially construction workers.**
- 2. Non-voters view economic populist candidates favorably.**
- 3. Non-voters find candidates running on a jobs guarantee appealing; they viewed negatively candidates who ran on a modest tax hike for the wealthy.**
- 4. Non-voters prefer candidates with moderate social policies over progressive social policies, though social policies in general are less polarizing for non-voters than for most other groups.** This suggests that non-voters may be relatively less susceptible to culture-war rhetoric than registered voters as a whole.

## UNPACKING THE RESULTS

The 2020 election saw the highest voter turnout in 120 years, yet there were still 80 million Americans who sat the election out. Some researchers have investigated why these Americans chose not to vote, for example in the “Nonvoters 2020: Counted Out” survey by Northeastern University, Ipsos, and NPR. Less is known about what types of candidates, candidate messaging, and policy positions are most persuasive to non-voters.

Our survey (**Figure 60**) found non-voters in 2020 are younger, less religious, more likely to be a service or manual worker, non-white (45%), identify as independent (52%), and not have a college degree (81%). The most common self-reported ideology was “moderate” (45%), followed by “not sure” (19%), “liberal” (13%), “conservative” (12%), “very liberal” (7%), and “very conservative” (5%). And despite not voting in 2020, many non-voters were registered to vote (40%).

Candidate class appeared to matter for non-voters. Non-voters preferred blue-collar candidates in 53.6% of races and were particularly favorable toward construction-worker candidates, who received their support in 54.7% of races.

Notably, the only candidate soundbite with a statistically significant preference by non-voters was the economic populist soundbite, which was preferred in 53.3% of races.

For economic policies, non-voters had a favorable view of candidates running on a jobs guarantee (54.7% support) and an unfavorable view of a small tax hike on the rich (46.2% support).

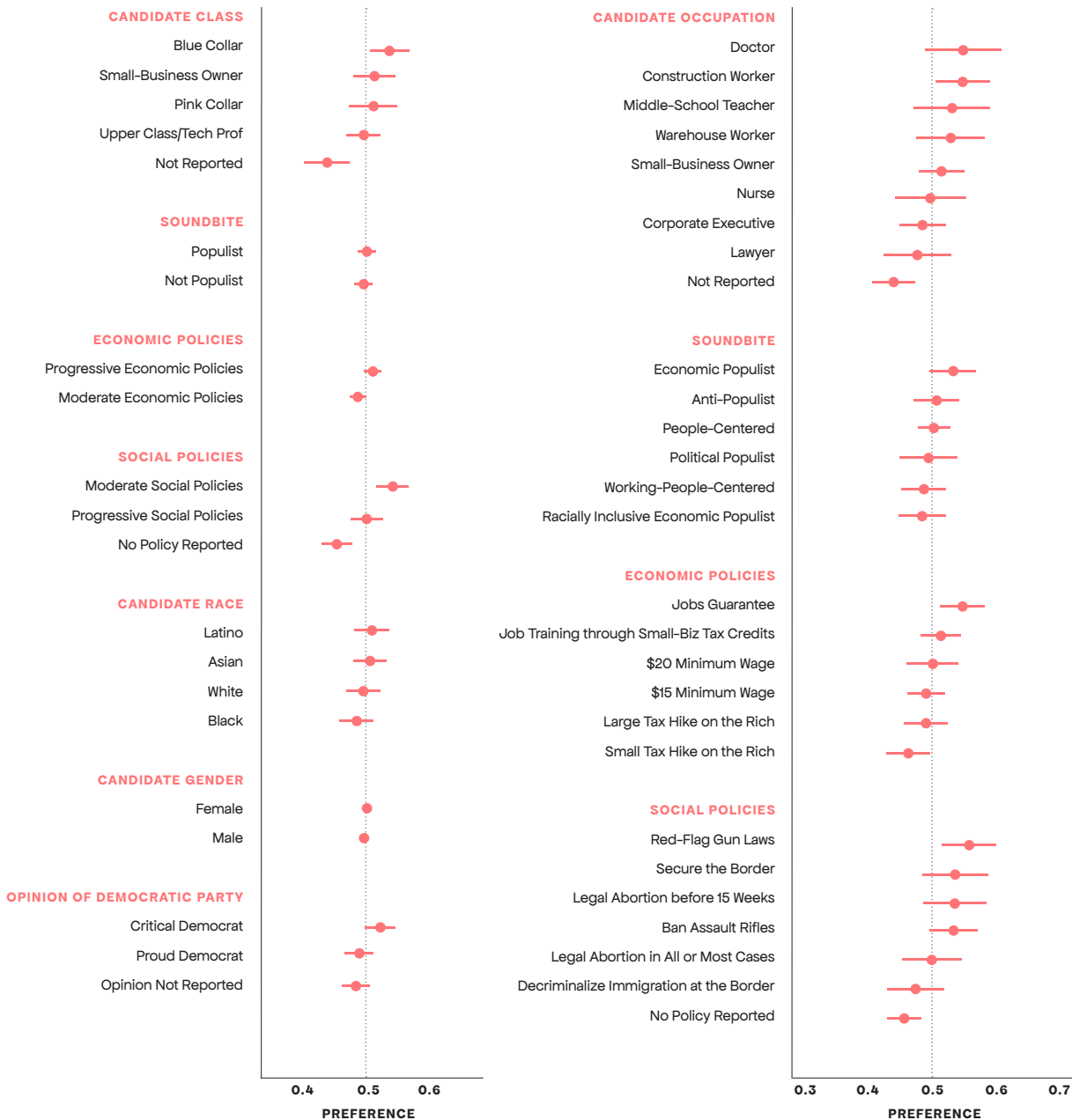
With the exception of candidates who advocated red-flag laws, who were viewed positively 55% of the time, and candidates with no stated social policy stances, who were viewed negatively (45% support), we could not detect preferences for non-voters on social policy messaging.

While, like most groups we examined, non-voters prefer moderate over progressive social policies, they were less polarized around social issues than were many other groups. For example, the range of effects for social policies among non-voters (not including candidates who did not report any social policies) was the same as the range of effects for economic policies (8.5 percentage points from least to most popular policy). By contrast, among

registered voters the gap between the most and least popular economic and social policies was 18.8 and 9 percentage points, respectively. This indicates that non-voters may be relatively less susceptible to culture-war rhetoric than registered voters as a whole.

Together, these results help clarify the ideological and policy preferences of often ignored non-voters. Non-voters are not as concerned with candidate race, gender, or candidate message; instead, they are more responsive to candidate occupation, jobs-centered economic policies, and moderate social policies.

**Figure 60: Full Results Non-Voters Only**



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# Authorship and Methodology

## Authors

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## Methodology

Our survey was fielded by YouGov between August 23 and August 29, 2022. YouGov interviewed 1,817 US adults who were then matched down to a sample of 1,650 to produce the final dataset. The respondents were matched to a sampling frame on gender, age, race, and education. The frame was constructed by stratified sampling from the 2020 Cooperative Congressional Election Study, with selection within strata by weighted sampling with replacement.

The matched cases were weighted to the sampling frame using propensity scores. The matched cases and the frame were combined and a logistic regression was estimated for inclusion in the frame. The propensity score function included age, gender, race/ethnicity, years of education, and region. The propensity scores were grouped into deciles of the estimated propensity score for inclusion, and post-stratified according to these deciles. The weights were then post-stratified on 2016 and 2020 presidential vote choice, and a four-way stratification of gender, age (four categories), race (four categories), and education (four categories), to produce the final weight.

## Sponsors

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

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

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