

Contested Majority: The Representation Of The White Working Class In Us Politics From The 1930s To The 1990s

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Abstract

This dissertation examines the representation of the white working class in US politics from the 1930s to the 1990s: how politicians, journalists, pollsters, pundits, political commentators, social movement groups, and others have studied, written about, and claimed to speak for white working class people and how this work has shaped American politics. Most existing literature on the role of the white working class in American politics has examined political opinion and political identity formation among white working class people, too often treating the "white working class" as a homogenous group with uniform political views. This project takes a different approach, focused on elite engagement with the white working class as a social and political category. It traces how prominent elite-level understandings of white working class identity, politics, and culture—from progressive workers combating economic elites to culturally conservative "Middle Americans" opposed to liberalism—emerged and impacted political contestation. In doing so, it stresses the importance of the white working class as a political symbol, one that has consistently been at the center of conflict around fundamental issues in US politics, including the nature of privilege and disadvantage, challenges to racial, gender, and class inequality, the state's sphere of responsibility, and the contours of national identity.

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