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THE WHITE WORKING CLASS

Just who are these voters?

By John D. Skrentny
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The current battle between the presidential candidates for the votes of the white working-class requires an understanding of the culture of these voters. There are signs of a decline of an old Rust Belt culture, and the adoption of Southern culture – and both campaigns are responding.

The changes first struck me in an unforgettable moment several months ago when I saw what had become of the Rust Belt, white working-class voter. I was standing on the platform of the East Chicago, Ind., station for the local commuter train to Chicago. It was chilly, and the young man near me was wearing a jacket with a union local's name emblazoned on the back and above the left breast. But what he had on his head surprised me: he also wore a black baseball cap with the flag of the Confederacy on it.

Several months later, in a visit to my hometown of hyper-segregated Highland, Ind. – a neighbor of majority-black Gary – I witnessed a large Ford pickup truck cruising through what is left of our old downtown. And there it was again: flying proudly from the rear corners of the truck were a pair of Confederate flags.

These are only two simple observations, but both, I believe, are indicative of major changes taking place in the culture and identities of white working-class voters in the urban north.

The novelist and essayist Dave Eggers – himself a product of the Chicago suburbs – once wrote that the Midwest can be found 25 miles outside of any American city. But I think what is happening, and it is something with important implications for American politics, is that we are finding the American South all over the country. There is a “Southernization” of American politics.

Consider the ways that politicians used to court the white working class in the Rust Belt. The Nixon administration, which pioneered the strand of Republican populism that we see today, sought to appeal to them in three different ways.

First, it sought to “cultivate” (its word) relationships with union leaders. It would not do much for union workers economically, but it would stroke its union identities through words and deeds such as the appointment of Peter J. Brennan, head of the New York Building Trades Council, as secretary of Labor.

Second, it would appeal to working-class voters' identities as Catholics. The way to do this was to laud their institutions, particularly parochial schools.

Third, it celebrated these workers' ethnicity. The Nixon team fanned out across the Rust Belt and made appearances at Polish Pride Parades, Italian American Picnics and Serbfests.

Do we see any of these strategies today? Hardly – and with good reason. The work force in the still-unionized steel mills of Gary is only about a quarter of what it was in its heyday. It just does not make as much sense for the Republicans to tap pride in union membership. Appeals to Catholics are still common, but they come in a very different form. Rather than talking about what is distinctive about Catholics, Republicans appeal to what Catholic conservatives share with

evangelicals: opposition to abortion and gay marriage. Religious conservatives of many different faiths, as James Davison Hunter pointed out in “Culture Wars,” share more in common with each other than with the liberal wings of their own faiths. And rather than appeal to these voters' identities as Poles or Italians or Irish, they appeal to the cultural symbols of the American South.

And this strategy makes sense. The sociologist Richard Alba noted years ago that white ethnicity was being severely attenuated by intermarriage and migration to the suburbs. But what may be happening now is that the working-class voters across the country – even in Alaska – are gravitating not toward some bland or empty “whiteness,” but toward the cultural symbols of the South.

Of course, even Nixon used “Southern strategies” to appeal to the Rust Belt. But now these Southern-style appeals are all that are left. In 2008, Republicans appeal to the white working class across the country by stoking and responding to fears of racial change. According to The Washington Post, this year the Republicans' convention reversed its convention trend toward celebrations of diversity and hosted the fewest black delegates (36 out of 2,380) since the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies began keeping track. And we hear tough talk appealing to nationalism and insecurities about American power, we have a vice presidential candidate who is an avid hunter and gun owner (and who is culturally a snow-bound Southerner), and we hear strong defenses of Christian values.

This is a trend in the wider culture – not just politics. The death-knell for the distinctiveness of the old Rust Belt working class may have sounded when comedian Jeff Foxworthy, a native of Georgia wildly successful for his “you know you're a redneck when – ” comedy theme, appropriated the phrase “blue collar” for a show about the zany antics of himself and some other wacky hillbillies. “Blue Collar TV,” as it is called, is not about unions or white ethnics.

The Southernization of the working class is a perilous trend for Democrats. Obama chose an old-school Catholic, Joe Biden, for his running mate, ignoring the fact that the Democrats have not won the White House without a Southerner on the ticket since FDR. But they at least seem to be cognizant of the trend and are being strategic. For example, Barack Obama ended his acceptance speech at the Democratic convention as Brooks & Dunn's country music smash, “Only in America,” played triumphantly. The Obama campaign can only hope that the Rust Belt voters took note.

■ Skrentny is professor of sociology at the University of California San Diego and a specialist in race, class and affirmative action.

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