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A
DEMOCRATIC STRATEGIST
STRATEGY MEMO

THE SURPRISING SIZE OF
"WHITE WORKING CLASS" AMERICA –
HALF OF ALL WHITE MEN
AND 40 PERCENT OF WHITE WOMEN
STILL WORK IN BASICALLY
BLUE-COLLAR JOBS

BY
ANDREW LEVISON

**A TDS STRATEGY MEMO:
THE SURPRISING SIZE OF “WHITE WORKING CLASS” AMERICA – HALF OF ALL WHITE MEN
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By ANDREW LEVISON

In the last two weeks an energetic argument about voting trends among white “working class” voters and the right way to properly define the group itself has mushroomed across the pages of the *New York Times*, the *U.K. Guardian*, *The New Republic*, *The Washington Monthly* and a variety of other political journals. The debate is intense and of critical importance because as the 2012 election nears it has become clear that the “base” voters of the Obama coalition—youth, minorities, single women, educated professionals and others are not by themselves sufficient to insure his re-election. By most calculations Obama must win somewhere close to 40% of white “working class” voters (defined as those with less than a four year college degree) in order to win the election. Right now Obama’s support in this group hovers in the low to mid-thirties.

As Tom Edsall noted in a round-up [article in the *New York Times*](#):¹

Political analysts, journalists and academics are fighting over white working-class voters—over how to define them and what their political significance is. Part of the reason for the furious tone of the argument is that this is an issue of central importance in American politics. And it’s not just crucial for the presidential election: understanding what the white working class is and where it is going is fundamental if we want to understand where the country is going...

...Part of the problem is that different people mean different things when they are talking about the working class. Is this cohort made up of those without college degrees; those in the bottom third of the income distribution; or those in occupations described by the federal government as “blue-collar”?

The most careful and systematic recent analysis of how to best define the white working class was presented by [Ruy Teixeira and Alan Abramowitz in a 2008 Brookings Institution study](#).² Teixeira and Abramowitz carefully compared the advantages and disadvantages of each of the approaches above and developed a sophisticated composite index that made use of all three forms of data.

In that same analysis, however, Teixeira and Abramowitz also noted that for several very practical reasons most polling companies, political strategists and media commentators today accept education rather than occupation or income as the best single way to define the term “working class.”

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¹<http://campaignstops.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/06/25/white-working-chaos/>

²http://www.brookings.edu/~media/research/files/papers/2008/4/demographics%20teixeira/04_demographics_teixeira.pdf

On the one hand, although the traditional conception of the term “working class” and most people’s mental image of working class individuals has historically been based on occupation, collecting useful data in this area presents serious practical problems. When polling companies call people on the telephone, getting them to provide clear, unambiguous definitions of their specific job and occupation is often extremely difficult and accurately categorizing those responses into broad categories like “blue collar” versus “white collar” frequently presents problems. In contrast, asking a person about the highest level of education he or she has obtained is generally straightforward.

The alternative approach of defining “working class” simply in terms of income level produces even greater complications. Low income individuals include all sorts of people—the retired, students, homemakers, the chronically ill or disabled and others who are not working at all and the group is simply not what political analysts and commentators really mean to refer to when they use the term “white working class.” The inescapable fact is that “lower income” people and “working class” people are actually very distinct sociological categories.

While it avoids these problems, using education to define the term working class does, however, also have its own downside. While, as we will see, education and occupation do indeed substantially overlap, they are not identical. When commentators use the term “the white working class” they are generally visualizing blue collar or other essentially physical or manual workers—a group that has very distinct social and cultural characteristics—rather than the more sociologically amorphous and hard to visualize social category of “less educated” individuals. In most people’s experience, blue collar and other basically manual workers are significantly different from white collar office workers, sales workers or technical workers who happen to have less than a four-year college degree and it is the former group rather than the latter that people generally associate with the term “working class.”

The Disappearing Working Class

In fact, there is a deep and unacknowledged political schizophrenia in American public attitudes toward the traditional, “blue collar” white working class. In the three or four months before elections journalists head to Ohio and Pennsylvania and send back reports from the blue collar diners, bowling alleys and pot-luck dinners in working class neighborhoods in those states because it is universally agreed that they are key battlegrounds in the elections. Other reporters go on the road and file dispatches from NASCAR races, tractor pulls, country music concerts and other parts of red state America to sample the mood of the other, “real” U.S.A. For a few weeks the papers and TV news programs are filled with images of the white working class—the America of weather-beaten, wood-siding houses with metal swing sets and cars with chipped and faded paint in the front yard, the America of deer hunters, roadside churches, Ford and Chevy trucks hauling john boats and off- road motorbikes to state parks on weekends and crowded bars that play commercial country music and show mixed martial arts on their TV’s. This world suddenly becomes visible because it is recognized that this is where the election will be decided.

But then, two or three weeks after elections are over, the white working class suddenly disappears. Commentators quickly revert to describing America as a block of socially homogenous “middle class” voters while the profound social chasm that exists within the white electorate is completely ignored. Whites, other than pro-Democratic professionals,

are routinely analyzed as rural or suburban rather than urban, red state rather than blue state and old rather than young. But they are rarely if ever distinguished as blue collar versus white collar.

Underlying this lack of attention to white working class Americans is the powerful image of the “modern digital economy”—the deeply rooted conviction that in the knowledge-based, post-industrial world traditional blue collar workers simply can’t be very important—politically or sociologically. This is reflected in the major clichés and buzzwords of modern political commentary. In the 1990’s images of a new white-collar electorate became popular—the famous “soccer moms”, “office park dads” and “wired workers”. More recently the “new working class”—“pink collar workers” or “waitress moms” among women and low paid, dead-end “lousy jobs” for young men—have also become journalistic clichés.

But traditional blue collar workers do not have a current cliché of their own. The 1950’s era image of the “average Joe” or “ordinary guy” as a basically decent fellow became transformed into the image of the conservative “Joe six-packs” and “hard hats” in the 1970’s. In recent decades the images switched to geography and culture rather than occupation—the gun owning, pickup truck driving “rednecks” and “bubbas” who supported George W. Bush and the religious right. In the 2008 election the most significant—and misleading—images of blue collar workers were both starkly Republican—“Joe the Plumber” and Todd Palin.

The Working Class Includes More Than Just Industrial Workers

The basis for this relative disinterest in the traditional white working class is the notion that it represents a rapidly shrinking minority of the electorate and society as a whole. Because this decline seems almost self-evident, factual support for the view is usually limited to the presentation of just a few illustrative statistics—the most common being that manufacturing workers declined from 40% of the labor force in 1940 to 10% today.

There is, however, a profound fallacy in this approach. While the demographic assertion about the decline of industrial workers is technically accurate it is also deeply and fundamentally misleading.

The number of manufacturing workers has indeed declined, but “industrial workers” represent only a small sub-set of the larger sociological categories “blue collar” or “working class.”

In fact, when one takes the critical step of looking separately at the occupations of white men and white women rather than combining them together and focuses first on the occupations of white men, the striking fact that quickly becomes apparent is that there are still many white workers who are basically blue collar even though they do not work in large factories. They work in sectors other than manufacturing—as auto mechanics, construction workers, warehouse workers, truck drivers, police and firemen. Nor is this a recent phenomenon. Even in the 1950’s industrial workers were not the only members of the American working class. Longshoremens, teamsters, construction workers, security guards, night watchmen, janitors, cops, garbage collectors and many others were all part of the broad Democratic conception of “working class” men—the “ordinary guys” or “average Joes” whose support provided the foundation of the new deal coalition.

But, oddly, in modern political commentary one literally never sees specific calculations of what fraction traditional blue collar workers constitute of the total white male labor force today. In most discussions the combination of the declining industrial work force and the growing white and pink collar “new working class” composed of both men and women is treated as sufficient evidence to logically deduce that white male blue collar workers are no longer a critical political force.

This notion so deeply ingrained in modern political discussion that anyone who flatly asserted that the number of white men who still work in basically physical or routine manual jobs actually represent half of the **white** male labor force in America would be dismissed as simply unfamiliar with the data.

But, in fact, if one looks carefully at the detailed Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) tables that list the number of white men who work in some 300 major occupational categories (which includes those “not elsewhere classified”, making it effectively include all white male workers) this is precisely what one finds. Almost exactly half of the white male labor force works in occupations that most political observers, commentators and ordinary voters would quickly and confidently define as basically “blue collar” or manual rather than “white collar.”

Blue Collar Versus White Collar

Let us look first at white men and then at white women. Here is a chart that divides the number of white male workers in the major occupations that are tracked by the Bureau of Labor Statistics into the two basic categories “blue collar” and “white collar.”

Occupations of white male workers – 2007		
Total Employed <i>(in thousands)</i>	62,461	
White Collar Occupations	31,086	49.8%
Managers/ Executives/Professionals	21,907	
Sales/Clerical /Office Workers	9,178	
Lower Level Supervisors/ Foremen <i>(Note: not included in either blue or white collar categories. See text)</i>	2,826	
Blue Collar /Working Class Occupations	31,376	50.2%
Traditional Blue Collar Workers	22,722	
Blue Collar Service Workers	6,943	
Blue Collar Clerical Workers	1,711	

(Note: in this chart the “traditional blue collar” category includes the two BLS top-level categories “production, transportation and material moving” and “Natural Resources, construction and maintenance.” These contain essentially the same set of occupations as the three traditional post-war BLS categories “craftsmen” “operatives” and “laborers”.)

People who are familiar with the occupational categories used by the Bureau of Labor Statistics will note that—unlike the chart above—BLS statistics do not separate out the blue collar workers in the “service” and “sales, clerical and office” categories from the white collar or pink collar workers in those same two categories. The reason is that the BLS categorization schemes are not designed to quantify the political and sociological categories “blue collar” and “white collar” but rather for quite different demographic and commercial purposes.

Specific Occupations

As a result, it is necessary to look more closely at the list of detailed occupations that lie beneath the broad categories in order to properly estimate the overall numbers of essentially blue collar versus white collar white men. The complete data and explanatory notes are presented at the end of the analysis.

Traditional Blue Collar Workers – there are 196 different specific occupations listed in the two BLS categories “Production, Transportation and Materials Moving” and “Natural Resource, Construction and Maintenance.” They range from carpenters, construction laborers and iron and steel workers to auto mechanics, heating and air conditioning repairmen, truck drivers, butchers, factory workers, machinists and tool and die makers.

Traditional blue collar workers include:

Manufacturing workers

- 400,000 welders: average weekly earnings..... \$661
- 44,000 electrical and electromechanical assemblers: average weekly earnings \$622
- 300,000 machinists: average weekly earnings \$802
- 51,000 cutting, punching and press machine operators: average weekly earnings .. \$637
- 1,100,000 Laborers and materials movers: average weekly earnings \$508

Transportation workers

- 2,400,000 truck drivers: average weekly earnings \$691
- 225,000 bus drivers: average weekly earnings \$660
- 180,000 taxi drivers: average weekly earnings..... \$570

Construction workers

- 1,100,000 carpenters: average weekly earnings \$624
- 680,000 electricians: average weekly earnings \$890

- 480,000 plumbers: average weekly earnings \$793
- 190,000 roofers: average weekly earnings.....\$521
- 115,000 sheet metal workers: average weekly earnings\$733
- 1,200,000 construction laborers: average weekly earnings.....\$596

Mechanics and linemen

- 680,000 auto mechanics: average weekly earnings.....\$680
- 340,000 heating and air conditioning mechanics: average weekly earnings.....\$862
- 140,000 phone and cable linemen and installers: average weekly earnings.....\$873

Agricultural and logging workers

- 510,000 miscellaneous agricultural workers: average weekly earnings\$415
- 47,000 logging workers: average weekly earnings.....\$613

Blue Collar Service Workers. There are 46 different occupations listed in this category. For men, it is overwhelmingly blue collar. The largest male occupations in this category include policemen, firemen, guards and prison workers, cooks, waiters, bartenders, and dishwashers, janitors, lawn care, pest control and grounds maintenance workers.

Blue collar service workers include:

- 515,000 police: average weekly earnings.....\$992
- 245,000 firefighters: average weekly earnings\$1055
- 500,000 security guards: average weekly earnings.....\$519
- 1,100,000 janitors: average weekly earnings\$494
- 890,000 cooks: average weekly income.....\$401
- 170,000 dishwashers: average weekly earnings.....\$327
- 990,000 grounds and landscape workers: average weekly earnings.....\$433
- 34,000 baggage porters: average weekly earnings.....\$564

Blue Collar Clerical/Sales/Office Workers – Within the clerical, sales and office category there are actually a substantial number of blue collar occupations. The largest blue collar occupations in this category include meter readers, mail carriers, shipping clerks and stock clerks.

Blue collar clerical/sales/office workers include:

- 170,000 mailmen: average weekly earnings \$952
- 45,000 bill collectors: average weekly earnings\$597
- 670,000 stock clerks and order fillers: average weekly earnings\$471
- 260,000 shipping and receiving clerks: average weekly earnings.....\$553

Lower-level Foremen and Supervisors – culturally and politically speaking, lower level foremen and supervisors generally share the blue-collar culture of the men they work with and who are often their friends and neighbors. In traditional industrial sociology, however, they were frequently considered a distinct, socially ambiguous group because they represent management. As a result, in calculating ratios of blue-collar to white collar workers, they were frequently set aside in a special “neither fish nor fowl” category.

If low-level foremen and supervisors are left out of the calculation, the percentage of blue collar and white collar white men in 2007 was almost precisely equal—50.2 to 49.8%. Including lower-level foremen and supervisors as part of the white collar total only increases that total by about 2%.

It is important to note that the economic crisis of 2008 actually eliminated almost 2 million working class jobs between 2007 and 2009, lowering the blue collar proportion of the labor force from 50% to 48%. It is reasonable to assume, however, that a significant number of these working class jobs will eventually return unless America remains in a permanent economic recession.

The basic conclusion is clear. Taken as a whole, the rather startling fact is that somewhere close to 50 percent of white men today are still in basically blue collar jobs.

For many people, this is quite unexpected. With the disappearance of the vast auto and steel plants of the 50’s and 60’s it became easy to imagine that the large majority of white American men and women had become part of an amorphous white-collar majority. But it simply is not true.

The Earnings of Working Class Men

It is also worth noting a few facts about these white workers’ income. During the 1950’s and 1960’s the cliché of the “affluent worker” became popular as many commentators noted that some skilled blue-collar workers earned more than many white collar workers. Even today, it is often suggested that blue-collar workers earnings are not really substantially lower than most white collar workers.

The facts, however, show the opposite. While many skilled workers and union workers in fields where they have substantial bargaining power can earn “affluent” incomes, most blue-collar workers earn distinctly less than their white collar counterparts.

Occupation (men)	Median Weekly Earnings
White Collar	
Management, business and financial	\$1,388
Professional	\$1191
Sales and Office	\$761
Blue Collar	
Natural Resources, Construction and Maintenance	\$730
Production and Transportation	\$661
Service	\$559

Every major white collar category makes more than any blue collar category. There are many specific occupations where white and blue collar weekly earnings overlap, but, seen on a larger scale, the pattern is clear.

A second point to note is that weekly earnings for the specific Blue Collar Service and Blue Collar Clerical and Sales occupations presented in the preceding pages provide confirmation that the blue-collar workers in those categories are indeed essentially “working class” rather than “middle class.” In most cases they earn less than skilled blue collar workers making them clearly part of the working class in terms of income as well as occupation.

Finally, it is important to note that looking at median weekly earnings provides a much more “down to earth” picture of workers’ financial situation than do annual figures. Looking at the weekly figures one can quickly convert them to the familiar hourly rates that Americans encounter in daily life—\$10 or \$12 dollar an hour for laborers or other unskilled workers and \$22-24 dollars an hour for construction and other skilled workers.

The Occupations of Working Class Women

Now consider the parallel statistics for white women:

Occupations of white female workers – 2007		
Total Employment <i>(In Thousands)</i>	53,740	
White Collar Occupations	41,218	
Managers/ Executives/ Professionals	23,509	
Sales/Clerical/Office Workers	17,709	<i>The Working Class total rises to 40% if the female Clerical and Sales category is assumed to actually be split 50/50 between basically blue collar and white collar jobs.</i>
Lower Level Supervisors/Foremen <i>(Note: not included in either blue collar or white collar categories. See text)</i>	763	
Blue Collar /Working Class Occupations	12,522	23% in traditional Working Class Occupations for women
Traditional Blue Collar Workers	3,445	
Blue Collar Service Workers	8,016	
Blue Collar Clerical Workers	1,061	

(Note: in this chart the “traditional blue collar” category includes the two BLS top-level categories “Production, Transportation and Material Moving” and “Natural Resources, Construction and Maintenance”)

As the chart above shows, 23%—about one fourth of white female workers are in traditional female blue collar/working class jobs. The number rises toward 40 % when one includes the essentially working class jobs contained within the Clerical, Sales and Office category. Once again, however, it is necessary to look at the detailed occupations to see the real story.

Traditional Blue Collar Workers – There have always been many blue collar occupations for women—circuit board assemblers in electronics plants, laundry workers, sewing machine operators, bus drivers and packaging workers among others. While blue collar “women’s work” often requires less gross muscularity than many male blue collar jobs, it frequently requires greater endurance, focus and tenacity making the jobs equally hard, mind-numbing, and exhausting.

Traditional blue-collar occupations for women include:

- 61,000 electronics assemblers: average weekly earnings\$481
- 213,000 miscellaneous assemblers: average weekly earnings\$475
- 75,000 laundry and dry cleaning workers: average weekly earnings\$361
- 105,000 sewing machine operators: average weekly earnings\$410
- 178,000 packers and packagers: average weekly earnings\$398
- 155,000 inspectors, testers and sorters: average weekly earnings\$549
- 238,000 bus drivers: average weekly earnings\$502

Service Workers – the largest specific occupations in this category include many of the classic working class jobs for women—maids, cleaning women, waitresses, cooks, dishwashers, hostesses, counter attendants, ticket-takers and child care workers. These are the kinds of low-level jobs that Barbara Ehrenreich very perceptively described in her book, *Nickel and Dimed*. They are generally low-paid, no-benefit jobs with constant pressure and close supervision. It is the jobs of this kind that led the London Economist to recently define the “modern” working class as people who “work with their hands or stand on their feet all day.” In fact, these jobs actually fit the traditional sociological criteria for blue collar work based on four major factors – (1) primarily physical rather than mental, (2) dull and repetitive, (3) closely supervised and (4) offering limited potential for advancement.

Blue collar service occupations for women include:

- 1,230,000 waitresses: average weekly earnings\$381
- 624,000 cooks: average weekly earnings\$381
- 200,000 hostesses restaurant and coffee shops: average weekly earnings\$337
- 992,000 maids and housekeeping cleaners: average weekly earnings\$376
- 539,000 building cleaners and janitors: average weekly earnings\$400
- 590,000 hairdressers, and cosmetologists: average weekly earnings\$462
- 970,000 child care workers: average weekly earnings\$398

Clerical, Sales and Office Workers – the clerical, sales and office category for women is huge—larger than all the traditional working class occupations combined. But, in fact, a substantial number of these jobs are more accurately described as “white (or pink) collar working class” rather than simply “white collar.” Some of the major occupations in this category include cashiers, telephone operators, file clerks, tellers, receptionists, and the lowest-level retail sales workers.

In sociological terms, it is clear that there is a deep social schism within this broad occupational category. Female real estate brokers and executive secretaries obviously live and work in a profoundly different environment than cashiers or telephone operators. White collar or pink collar working class jobs for women are, in general, preferable to working on an electronic assembly line for a minimum wage or scrubbing floors and making beds in hotels but many of these jobs come close to fitting traditional sociological definitions of working class status based on effort, monotony, lack of mobility and close supervision as well as in regard to broader issues like pay, benefits and social status.

Jobs for women in the clerical, sales and office categories that fit many of the traditional sociological criteria for “working class” occupations include:

- 1,700,000 cashiers: average weekly earnings.....\$366
- 1,350,000 retail salespersons: average weekly earnings\$421
- 307,000 tellers: average weekly earnings\$490
- 46,000 telephone and switchboard operators: average weekly earnings.....\$588
- 206,000 file clerks: average weekly earnings\$583
- 400,000 office clerks: average weekly earnings\$597
- 1,000,000 receptionists: average weekly earnings.....\$529

As far as earnings are concerned, for women as for men, all of the white collar occupational categories earn more than any of the blue collar ones.

Occupation (women)	Median Weekly Earnings
White Collar	
Management, business and financial	\$972
Professional	\$912
Sales and Office	\$600
Blue Collar	
Natural Resources, Construction and Maintenance	\$537
Production and Transportation	\$473
Service	\$423

The bottom line result is simple: close to half of white men and 35-40% of white women in the labor force are still essentially “working class.” Their occupations are basically blue collar rather than white collar and their earnings fall far below their white collar counterparts.

In one respect, this seems a new and startling conclusion. In another sense, however, it is something most people really suspected all along. The data that has been presented here dramatically illustrates that in the real world white blue-collar workers are a far more important social group than is generally recognized. They are not the desperate and jobless workers who “shaped up” in front of the factory gates every day to beg for work as factory workers did during the great depression. Many make decent money and vast numbers work as small independent contractors rather than hired employees. Nor do most working class men still talk or act like the inarticulate, hulking laborers portrayed by Marlon Brando in the 1950’s and Sylvester Stallone in the 1970’s. But they are united by sociological traits and cultural values that define many aspects of their social identity. Unlike the affluent or highly educated they see themselves as “real Americans” who are “just getting by.” They are “hard-working” “practical” and “realistic.” They believe in “old-fashioned traditional values” and trust in “character” and real-world experience rather than advanced education. They rely on “common sense” not abstract theories. These characteristics have not basically changed since the 1950’s when these workers considered themselves good Democrats and they remain important determinants of their political outlook today.

The fact that white workers are actually a far larger and more politically important group than the common wisdom of recent years has suggested explains why political reporters and campaign strategists suddenly find themselves focusing on the mood in blue collar diners, bowling alleys and pot-luck dinners in working class neighborhoods in to Ohio and Pennsylvania as election day approaches while other reporters go on the road and file dispatches from NASCAR races, tractor pulls and country music bars. If traditional blue collar white working class people were really as socially and politically marginal as the popular clichés suggest, this would simply not be necessary.

In fact, traditional white working class voters are still a central force in American politics—a far larger force than most political commentators recognize. This is a fact that would clearly emerge if public opinion polls could accurately categorize employed voters by their occupations. As the next section reveals, however, education is actually quite closely correlated with occupation, enough to allow public opinion researchers to use education as a valid proxy for the traditional occupationally based conception of working class status.

Education and Occupation Overlap – Three Quarters of High School Educated White Men are in Blue Collar Jobs.

One important benefit of the revised view of working class occupations provided in the preceding sections is that it provides a missing sociological underpinning for the modern approach of most political analysts, pollsters and strategists who now define the term “working class” in terms of education. Since 2000, and stimulated by the demographic work of Ruy Teixeira in his 1999 book, *The Forgotten Majority – Why the White Working Class Still Matters* and his subsequent studies, public opinion analysts have increasingly come to visualize the “working class” as those survey respondents who have either just a high school diploma or less than a college education.

Teixeira’s point of departure was the fact that in the modern economy people who had no more than high school diplomas were very severely limited in their occupational choices to either blue collar or the lowest level white collar jobs. Regardless of the precise nature of the work that was involved, individuals with only a high school education were confined to

the kinds of jobs that offered relatively low wages, meager or non-existent fringe benefits, very limited job security and opportunities for advancement, low social status and a variety of other negative characteristics. This made these jobs substantially different from the jobs available to individuals with higher education.

The resulting insight that education could therefore be used either as a very close proxy for occupation in studying the working class or be visualized as representing a new non-occupational way of defining the working class was tremendously important for political analysis because education levels are, as we saw, relatively easy to collect on opinion surveys while obtaining useful data on occupations has always been fiendishly difficult. Today, in political and polling analysis, education has become the most widely accepted way to define working class.

Few studies, however, have tried to directly relate the specific occupations that people hold with their level of education. But basic data is in fact available and provides a deeper sociological picture of people with high school or less than college educations.

Here is a chart that shows the situation for white men, once again from the BLS:

Occupations of White Men – by Years of Education – 2008			
Occupation	High School or Less	Some College <i>(including AA degrees)</i>	BA or Above
Total	40%	26%	34%
White Collar	26%	50%	86%
Blue Collar	74%	50%	14%

(Note: in this chart “blue collar” includes the three BLS top-level categories “Production, Transportation and Material Moving”, “Natural Resource and Construction” and “Service” occupations. The “White collar” total includes the BLS categories “Sales and Office” and “Management and Professional” (It is worth noting that if the blue collar workers in the clerical and sales category were allocated to the blue collar category the total would be even higher).

What this chart shows is that for white male workers with no more than a high school diploma—74%—three-fourths of the total—worked in blue collar jobs while only 26% percent had white collar occupations. For those with “some college”—Associate of Arts degrees or some college credits but no diploma—exactly half were blue collar and half white collar.

The heavy concentration of the high school educated in blue collar jobs is hardly surprising. It is in high school where young men and women’s social identities are formed and it is largely these social identities—the sense of “who I am”—that substantially determine the kinds of occupations and the level of education they seek when they graduate.

Across a wide variety of American high schools, the two basic social identities that always emerge are the opposed cultures of “Jocks vs. Burnouts”, “Greasers vs. Preppies”, “Punks vs. BOMC’s (Big Men on Campus)”, “Trash vs. Collegiates”. The particular names that are used vary from region to region but they always reflect the basic divide between working class and middle class students.

As anthropologist Penelope Eckert notes in her study, *Jocks and Burnouts – social categories and identity in the high school*:³

The Jocks and Burnouts are adolescent embodiments of the middle and working class, respectively; their two separate cultures are in many ways class cultures; and opposition and conflict between them define and exercise class relations and differences...

Although the majority of high school students do not define themselves as full-fledged members of one category or another, an important part of most adolescent's social identity is dominated by the opposition between the two categories.

In terms of occupational choice, the Jock vs. Burnout distinction marks the division between those who are aiming for college and a middle class life versus those who are gradually accommodating themselves to a future in the working class.

Many working class students tend to orient themselves toward occupations they perceive as “manly”. In Texas, for example, anthropologist Douglas Foley describes the working class students' attitudes as follows:⁴

Going to college was “too hard” and “cost too much money.” Most aspired to working class jobs like their fathers, such as driving a tractor, trucking melons, fixing cars, setting irrigation rigs, and working in packing sheds. Some wanted to be carpenters and bricklayers or work for the highway road crews.... [Working on road crews] was the rural equivalent of working in a factory or foundry. It was dangerous dirty heavy work that only “real” men did...They considered working with their hands honorable, a test of strength and manliness. In contrast school work was seen as boring “sissy stuff”.

While college is considered unattainable, students like these still seek to graduate high school because even most working class jobs now require at least a high school diploma. But they see the diploma as simply a piece of paper.

As sociologist Lois Weis notes in *Working Class Without Work – High School Students in a De-industrializing Economy*:⁵

In spite of the deeply felt sense that schooling is the only way to “keep off burgers,” (i.e. work at a Burger King) most concern themselves only with passing not with excelling, competing or even doing well. The language of “passing” dominates student discourse around schooling much as obtaining a union card dominated the discourse of previous generations of white working class males...most end up with C's and D's but they do pass...

The connection between a high school diploma and working class status is therefore extremely tight. Once in the labor market, men and women with only high school diplomas find themselves largely restricted to relatively dead end jobs and working class lifestyles.

³Teachers College Press, New York, 1989, p 5

⁴ *Learning Capitalist Culture: Deep in the Heart of Texas*, University of Penn Press, Philadelphia, p 87

⁵ Routledge, Chapman & Hall, New York, 1990 p. 30

There is, however, also a second major group within the working class—the more “aspirational” individuals who go on to community college. Many skilled working class jobs like automobile mechanics and heating and air conditioning installation and repair that were previously learned in union apprenticeship programs or through on the job training now require an Associate of Arts degree. As a result the more ambitious and disciplined working class students go to community college to get the necessary credential.

Occupations of White Males with AA Degrees		
	Technical	Academic
White Collar	43%	57%
Blue Collar	57%	43%

The social distinction between the blue collar and white collar graduates of community colleges is captured by their distribution between technical and academic degrees. Of the men with technical degrees, 57% were employed in blue collar jobs. Of those with academic degrees, 57% were in white collar jobs.

Looking at the educational data more broadly, in 2008, 40% of white men had no more than a high school education, 26% had some college and 34% had at least a bachelor’s degree. Using a “narrow” definition of “working class” as those with no more than a high school diploma, 75% were employed in blue collar jobs. Using a “broad” definition of working class—people with less than a four year college degree, 66% were blue collar workers.

Thus, either three-fourths or two-thirds of those men who are “working class” as defined by education are also blue collar workers in occupational terms. The working class as defined by education is not identical to the working class as defined by occupation, but the two approaches very substantially overlap.

Among women the ratio of blue collar to broadly defined white collar workers at the various educational levels cannot be accurately calculated with the available data because of the huge clerical, sales and office category which contains a complex mixture of both groups. But, the general picture is as follows: around one-third of women workers have a high school education or less, one-third have “some college” but less than a college degree and one-third are college educated. At the same time, about 40% are blue collar in occupational terms. Again, the “working class” as defined by education and by occupation substantially overlaps.

The overlap between occupation and education is not only important because it allows public opinion data from high school and less than college respondents to be used as a valid guide to the opinions of the “working class.” It is also critically important because it dispels the notion that the less-educated can be visualized as a unique and distinct social group, rather than simply as another way of describing working class Americans.

Notes on the Data

Some of the following data files are Excel files. If you have problems downloading the data from these links, please copy/paste the corresponding url at the bottom of each page into your browser.

The data on detailed occupations comes from the following unpublished table provided by the BLS

Employed Persons by Detailed Occupation Sex and Race 2007-2009 annual averages.

It can be downloaded [here](#).⁶

In calculating the data that appears in the two tables comparing blue collar and white collar employment in this analysis, five changes were made to the original BLS presentation of the data. The changes are displayed in the revised excel file titled:

Employed Persons by Detailed Occupation Sex and Race 2007 and 2009 - revised

It can be downloaded [here](#).⁷

The five changes are as follows:

1. The top-level BLS occupational categories (e.g. “Management, Professional and related occupations”) that were not included in the original BLS Excel table were added to the revised Excel file.
2. In the revised file the entire top-level category “service workers” was moved from above the “Sales and Office workers” category to below it instead.
3. The major blue collar occupations from the “Sales and Office workers” category were extracted and placed in a newly created category called “blue collar sales and office workers”
4. All “supervisors and managers” from the blue collar categories were extracted and placed in a newly created category called “first line supervisors and managers”

Apart from these broad changes no attempt was made to move individual occupations out of their positions in the original BLS tables.

The revised spreadsheet also has excel versions of the two tables included in the article (in the tab labeled sheet 1) and data extracted from the BLS table on occupation and employment (in the tab labeled sheet 3)

⁶ http://www.thedemocraticstrategist.org/_memos/Employed-persons-by-detailed-occupation-sex-and-race-2007-09_annual-averages.xlsx

⁷ http://www.thedemocraticstrategist.org/_memos/Employed-persons-by-detailed-occupation-sex-and-race-2007-and-2009_revised.xlsx

The data on earnings and occupation are derived from the following unpublished BLS table:

Table A-26. Usual weekly earnings of employed full-time wage and salary workers by detailed occupation and sex, Annual Average 2010

It can be downloaded [here](#).⁸

The same data was also provided as an excel file and edited for this analysis to present only the relevant information:

Earnings by Occupation – 2010 - revised

It can be downloaded [here](#).⁹

The data on education and employment are derived from the following unpublished BLS table:

Table 10. Employed persons by intermediate occupation, educational attainment, sex, race, and Hispanic or Latino ethnicity (25 years and over), Annual Average 2008 (Source: Current Population Survey)

It can be downloaded [here](#).¹⁰

⁸ http://www.thedemocraticstrategist.org/_memos/Earn26_2010.pdf

⁹ http://www.thedemocraticstrategist.org/_memos/earnings-by-occupation_2010_revised.xlsx

¹⁰ http://www.thedemocraticstrategist.org/_memos/Table10_Employed-persons-by-intermediate-occupation-educational-attainment-sex-race-and-Hispanic-or-Latino.pdf