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The **Democratic Strategist** is a web-based publication edited by three leading American political strategists and thinkers—political theorist William Galston, polling expert Stan Greenberg and political demographer Ruy Teixeira. It seeks to provide a forum and meeting ground for the serious, data-based discussion of Democratic political strategy.

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A  
DEMOCRATIC STRATEGIST  
STRATEGY MEMO

**THE WHITE WORKING CLASS IS A  
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AND MOST OF WHAT YOU READ  
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BY  
ANDREW LEVISON

**A TDS STRATEGY MEMO:**

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By ANDREW LEVISON

As Election Day 2012 draws near it will become more and more apparent that the white working class is a pivotal group whose electoral choice will largely determine the outcome. If the percentage of white working class support for Obama remains where it is today, in the low to mid 30's, an Obama victory will be extremely difficult. If Obama's level of support rises reasonably close the percentage he received in 2008, Obama's victory becomes almost certain. As a result, in the weeks between now and November 2<sup>nd</sup> there will be a huge outpouring of analyses seeking to explain the opinions and likely electoral choices of white working class voters.

Unfortunately, the vast majority of these analyses will be fundamentally wrong.

The reason is simple. The conventional way of examining the opinions of white working class voters—a group that is generally defined as those with just a high school diploma or those who have less than a four year college education—is to note their views on a variety of subjects and then compare those opinions with the opinions of white voters who have graduated college or gone on to post-graduate educations.

The results are predictable. Aside from certain “pockets” of populist views on subjects like corporations, Wall Street and profits, across a wide range of issues white working class voters' opinions consistently appear to be more conservative than the more educated. On this basis, analysts and commentators invariably proceed to create a composite stereotype—a “typical” white worker who is significantly more conservative than his more educated counterparts across a wide range of issues. Based on this political composite columnists and pundits then quickly conclude that winning the support of this typical white working class voter requires “moving to the right” and appealing to his or her basically conservative views.

This cliché of “the typical white worker as a conservative” has a long history in political thinking. In its modern form it first appeared in 1970 in Scammon and Wattenberg's book, *The Real Majority* in which a fictional 40 year old machinist from Ohio took his place alongside similar clichés about “conservative Hard Hats” and the TV character of Archie Bunker. Since that time it has survived largely unchanged as “the Joe Six-Pack vote,” “The Bubba vote”, “the NASCAR vote” and “gun-rack on the pick-up truck vote.”

But on the most basic level, this is simply the wrong way to think about white working class people.

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*Andrew Levison is the author of two books and numerous articles on the politics and sociology of working class Americans.*

For one thing, very often the differences between more and less educated white voters on specific issues are not large—often as little as 10 or 15%. This kind of difference is simply not enough to justify maintaining a stereotype of one group as being fundamentally more conservative than another. When comparing the views of two different groups of 30 individuals on a particular topic, for example, a 10% difference between the two groups will only represent a difference in the views of three of the 30 individuals. This is hardly enough to reasonably characterize one group as basically “conservative” and the other as “liberal” or “progressive”

### Three Kinds of Workers

Far more important, however, is the fact that the stereotype of the “average conservative white worker” fails to capture the most important fact about these voters—that most are not “average.” On the contrary White working class Americans are profoundly split into three distinct groups.

- The first is the substantially diminished but still significant group of “liberal” or “progressive” white workers. At the heart of this group are members of trade unions or retired unionists in the northern and rust belt cities who are still committed to the New Deal ideology of the early post World War II trade union movement—a combination of an economic liberalism that pictures the Democrats as the party of the “common man” or “ordinary guys” and Republicans as country club plutocrats along with a cautious social liberalism supporting “color-blind” racial justice and equality.

Once, when 40% of industrial workers were in unions, this progressive ideology among the white industrial working class was a major force in the North and Midwest. It is now a fraction of its former size but is still significant enough to produce majority support for many Democratic candidates among white union workers. The remarkable grass-roots pushback against anti-union measures in Wisconsin and the successful referendum campaign against SR-5 in Ohio demonstrated the continuing residual power of this ideology.

- The second major group is the conservative “true believers”—the white working class men and women who are deeply immersed in the Rush Limbaugh/Fox News world view. For all practical political purposes, these voters can be viewed as completely immune to persuasion. Other than long-term one-on-one efforts at complete ideological conversion, they will not be swayed by ads, leaflets, canvassing, news events or other political communication.
- The final group is the white working class moderates who are not fully convinced by either the conservative or progressive narratives. They are ambivalent or “open-minded” and describe themselves as having “*not completely made up their minds,*” or “*seeing some truth on both sides.*”

Conventional opinion polling obscures the existence of these three very distinct groups within the white working class but they are familiar figures to local trade union officials, political canvassers and grass-roots organizers who have day- to-day contact with working class Americans.

## The Grass Roots Perspective

The most extensive progressive grass-roots operation aimed at reaching and communicating with white working class voters today is run by Working America, the community affiliate of the AFL-CIO. Working America's members are working class moderates—88% of them white and many church-going gun owners who rarely if ever talk to progressives.

Working America has 3 million members and its field canvassers generally conduct anywhere from 10,000 to 20,000 or 25,000 one-on-one doorstep conversations a month in nine major states (Ohio, Wisconsin, Michigan and Pennsylvania Colorado, Minnesota, Oregon, Virginia and Missouri) as well as conducting smaller outreach efforts in others. During the 2008 campaign Working America spoke to a remarkable 1.8 million people.

In short, while its work is little known, Working America has more face-to-face, in-depth contact with and a deeper understanding of moderate and conservative working class voters than does any other progressive group in the U.S. Here is the basic approach they take to these workers:

“Working America engages not the fixed 30-35% or so at each end of the political spectrum (including the firm conservatives who are not and never will be with us on the issues) but rather than 30-40% in the middle—working class moderates whose personal ambivalences make them swing voices in the public policy debates.”

In another internal memo Working America describes its view as follows:

One-third of the people we talk to are with us. One third will never be with us. The challenge is to reach the middle third.

Thus, from the perspective of the most important progressive grass-roots organizing effort among white working class voters, the core approach to political organizing is not based on a superficial stereotype of a single “typical” or “average” white worker who is generally conservative but rather on targeting the key group of “ambivalent” or “open-minded” white workers.

### How “open-minded” workers think

In political science and mainstream journalism, “ambivalent” individuals are often dismissed as “low-information voters” or even as essentially “dumb” or “scatterbrained” people who have not really thought seriously about the issues and who offer superficial replies that they make up on the spot. There are, of course, voters who fit this description but there are also a very substantial number of other Americans—including the bulk of the white working class moderates—who do think quite seriously about issues, but do so in a fundamentally different way than do ideologically committed people.

What many white working class people who consider themselves “open-minded” do when they think about issues is to examine and balance opposing partisan or ideological narratives using a distinct “*on the one hand, but on the other hand*” mode of thought. The typical kinds of statements people like this make when they are thinking through a political issue are expressions like the following:

“You know, I believe government should leave people alone and stay the hell out of their business but I don’t think a little kid should be denied health care when he really needs it.”

Or

“Well, you know, I can’t see any evidence that the stimulus really worked and I don’t think just making phony leaf-raking jobs is a real solution. But I also think there must be some way the government can get people back to work and I don’t think just laying off state employees or giving rich people lower taxes is the answer either.

Working people generally refer to this “*on the one hand, on the other hand*” process of thought as using “*common sense*” or applying “*my personal philosophy*” to a question and it is familiar, indeed almost universal, in social scientific field studies of white working class Americans, in the transcripts of focus groups and also in the first-hand accounts of Working America’s field canvassers.

The reason this form of thinking is largely ignored in American political commentary is that it is far more difficult to capture on standard opinion polls than are straightforward divisions of opinion between “yes” and “no” and “agree” or “disagree.” In fact, most opinion polls are very carefully constructed to minimize or eliminate ambiguous responses and to direct respondents into providing clear yes or no answers. A “good” question is one that produces a clear and unambiguous response; a “bad” question is one that produces a response that cannot be so easily categorized.

Some opinion poll questions, however, do make it possible to examine “*on the one hand, on the other hand*” thinking. In 2008, for example, the Center for American Progress designed a survey<sup>1</sup> that examined opinions on a wide range of issues. However, rather than frame the questions as simple yes-no polarities, the survey presented the respondents with alternative question wordings that expressed the distinct ways that propositions about particular issues are typically stated by conservatives and liberals. For example, respondents could agree with either just one or with both of the following opposed propositions:

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<sup>1</sup>[http://www.thedemocraticstrategist.org/\\_memos/levison\\_paper\\_wwc.pdf](http://www.thedemocraticstrategist.org/_memos/levison_paper_wwc.pdf)

<p>“Government regulation of business does more harm than good”</p> <p>“Government regulations are necessary to keep business in check and protect workers and consumers”</p>
<p>“Government spending is almost always wasteful and inefficient”</p> <p>“Government investments in education, infrastructure and science are necessary to insure America’s long-term economic growth”</p>
<p>“Military force is the most effective way to combat terrorism and make America safer”</p> <p>“America’s security is best promoted by working through diplomacy, alliances and international institutions.”</p>

When the specific totals for white, high school educated working class voters were tabulated, the quite surprising result was that 31% of the respondents agreed with both of the two propositions above about government regulation, 52% agreed with both of the propositions about government spending/investment and 41% agreed with both propositions about military force and diplomacy.

In short, from one third to one half of the respondents expressed some degree of agreement with both sides of these polarized positions. Had they been confronted with the apparent incompatibility of the two they would have explained their responses with “*on the one hand, on the other hand*” forms of logic.

A more recent survey by Pew Research in the spring of 2011 provided another, even larger large set of questions that allowed a more precise measurement of the proportion of white working class voters who fit in the “open minded, ambivalent” category. In the 2011 Pew Political Typology survey<sup>2</sup> a number of the questions were presented as matched pairs of opposing conservative and progressive propositions. Respondents could “strongly agree” or “weakly agree” with the first proposition, be “neutral” about both propositions or “strongly” or “weakly” agree with the second, opposing proposition. As a result, this unique question design made it practical to calculate the proportions of the respondents who were “true believers” in a wide range of conservative or progressive views (i.e. those who “strongly agreed” with one view or another) versus those who were relatively ambivalent or open-minded.

### Cultural Traditionalism versus Conservatism

At first glance, some of the results on the survey seem to confirm the stereotype of the “conservative” white working class. 68% of the sample, for example “*strongly*” agreed that “*Religion is an important part of my life,*” 54% “*strongly*” agreed that “*it is necessary to believe in God to be moral and have good values*” and 53% “*Strongly*” believed that “*most people who want to get ahead can succeed if they are willing to work.*”

<sup>2</sup><http://www.people-press.org/2011/05/04/beyond-red-vs-blue-the-political-typology/>



But calling these views “conservative” reflects a widespread confusion between two related but very distinct concepts: cultural traditionalism and conservatism.

White working class Americans are overwhelmingly cultural traditionalists. At the most basic level, their political opinions are deeply shaped by the four basic value systems into which they are socialized beginning in childhood -- value systems that are rooted in the major social institutions of working class life—the church, the military, small business and the school system. These institutions systematically inculcate the values they represent—patriotism, religious piety, free enterprise and the “American system of government” (the last being essentially the Constitution, the Bill of Rights and democratic elections). As a result, by the time typical working Americans reach the age where they begin to pay attention to political issues, they already have internalized a firm set of interlocking value systems that define what is right and wrong, true and false and good and bad.

But within the framework of this essentially universal respect for “traditional” social institutions and culture, however, there is a profound division between essentially conservative and more progressive or open-minded outlooks. This profound division is generally not understood or even perceived by many liberals and progressives because both points of view are expressed entirely within the language and cognitive framework of working class cultural traditionalism.

To take a simple example, a person expressing sincere concern for the hardships illegal Mexican immigrants face and a desire that some kind of long-term solution to their legal status be found is expressing a clearly “liberal” or “progressive” view. But if he or she is doing so at a Wednesday night prayer meeting in a weather-beaten roadside evangelical church in rural Georgia and justifies the view by quoting Jesus’ words about concern for “the least of these” and the parable of the good Samaritan, many progressives would hesitate to define this person as being the same kind of “real” or “authentic” progressive as themselves.

This distinction quickly becomes clear when one looks at the data in the Pew survey. Consider the charts that appear after the following notes on the data:

### **SOME IMPORTANT NOTES ON THE DATA**

*There are several important facts that must be kept in mind when examining the charts on the following pages:*

*First, the **Pew survey**<sup>A</sup> was conducted in the spring of 2011. This was at the height of the debt ceiling debate and before the occupy Wall Street protests or Obama’s shift to a more consistent progressive stance on economic issues. As a result, on some questions opinions may have shifted since the survey was done.*

*Second, in political opinion research, the term “working class” is now generally applied to either individuals with a high school education (or less) or else to individuals with less than a four-year college degree. Ruy Teixeira, who pioneered this approach, defines the first as the “narrow” definition of “working class” and the second as the “broad” definition.*

Based on the “conservative white worker” stereotype, an analyst would tend to expect that the opinions of the larger, “less than four year college degree” group would be substantially more liberal or progressive than the opinions of only those who have just a high school education since the former group also includes individuals with some college experience.

Surprisingly, however, in this particular survey the difference between the responses of whites in the “narrow”, high school educated group and the “broader” less than four year college degree group was consistently quite small, amounting to only a few percentage points and in no case changed the conclusion that would have been drawn by examining the results for the white high school educated respondents alone.

As a result, with this particular data it is possible to work exclusively with either the broad or the narrow definition of working class without having to constantly refer back and forth and discuss the differences between the results for two definitions. The key reason for choosing one rather than the other therefore becomes either (1) the difference in sample size between the two or (2) their degree of sociological precision.

In this sample, the white, less than four year college degree subsample included 1303 individuals, producing a simple margin of error of 3.6%. The white high school or less group included 678 individuals, producing a simple margin of error of 4.9%.\*

These are both very exceptionally large subsamples of white working class individuals. Most typical survey subsamples of these groups contain less than one-third this number of respondents with correspondingly larger margins of error.

All else being equal, one would ordinarily tend to choose the subsample with the largest number of respondents and smallest margin of error. But the smaller high school or less group is sociologically much more homogeneous in occupational terms and closer to what most people think of as the traditional “white working class.” *Approximately 75% - three quarters—of white men with at most a high school diploma work in traditional blue collar or manual service occupations.*<sup>B</sup> In contrast, among white men with less than a four-year college degree, only about two thirds are in traditional working class jobs.

Since the conclusions that are drawn from the data are not affected by the 1.3% difference between the margin of error between the larger and smaller group, for this study of the white working class it makes sense to use the “narrow” definition of working class and focus our attention on the opinions of just those with a high school diploma or less. This is the group that most closely resembles the traditional image of “white working class” individuals.

A few other points also need to be mentioned in passing:

- The percents in the charts do not add to exactly 100 because of “don’t know” and other unclassifiable responses
- In the published reports of the Pew Political Typology Survey the data are combined into a series of composite categories derived by factor



*analysis (i.e. categories like “the disaffected”) and not by standard categories like age, education and so on. However Pew also releases the underlying data to researchers without these factor-derived categories and indexed by standard demographic and political variables (i.e., education, income etc.).*

- It is important to keep in mind that these data include both men and women—“waitress moms” as well as “hard-hat dads.” Although the sample size makes disaggregated analysis of the sexes significantly imprecise, on a number of issues men do indeed tend to be more “conservative” than women.*

- Only a subset of the full set of questions on the Pew political ideology survey are framed as direct choices between contrasting progressive and conservative views—the distinctive format that makes them uniquely suitable for this analysis. For brevity, however, this subset of contrasting questions will simply be referred to as “the Pew survey” rather than more precisely as “the contrasting questions subset of the Pew survey” whenever the Pew data is mentioned.*

- The full set of charts and dataset for both the narrow (high school or less) and broad (less than BA) groups can be found at: [http://www.thedemocraticstrategist.org/\\_memos/Charts-and-Data-for-Almost-everything-you-read-about-the-white-working-class.doc](http://www.thedemocraticstrategist.org/_memos/Charts-and-Data-for-Almost-everything-you-read-about-the-white-working-class.doc)*

Note: The MOE given above is the simple MOE assuming that the sample was completely random. In reality the Pew methodology is more complex and tedious to calculate for each individual question but the resulting MOE based on the Pew method is actually smaller than the MOE’s presented here rather than larger so the simple MOE is entirely adequate for this discussion.

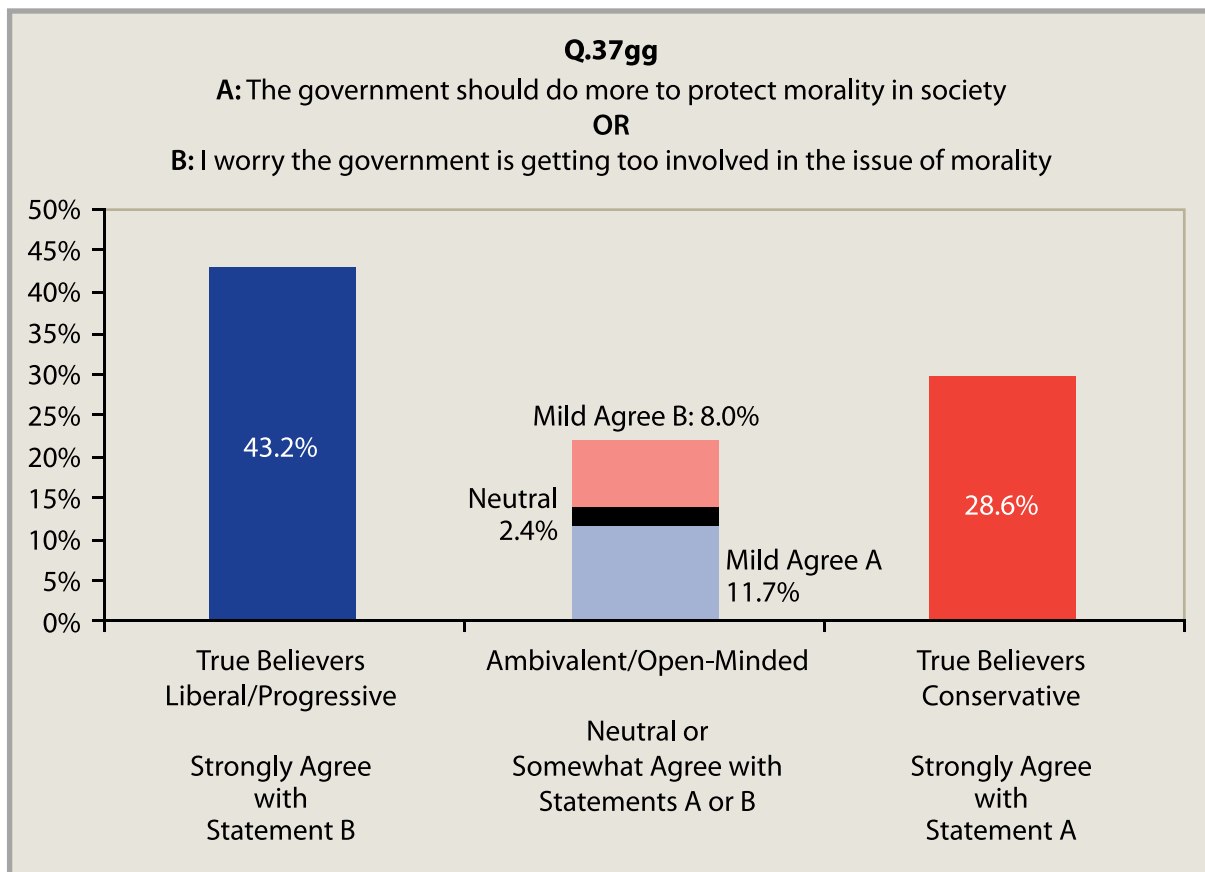
<sup>A</sup> <http://www.people-press.org/2011/05/04/beyond-red-vs-blue-the-political-typology/>

<sup>B</sup> [http://www.thedemocraticstrategist.org/\\_memos/tds\\_SM\\_Levison\\_Working\\_Class\\_American.pdf](http://www.thedemocraticstrategist.org/_memos/tds_SM_Levison_Working_Class_American.pdf)

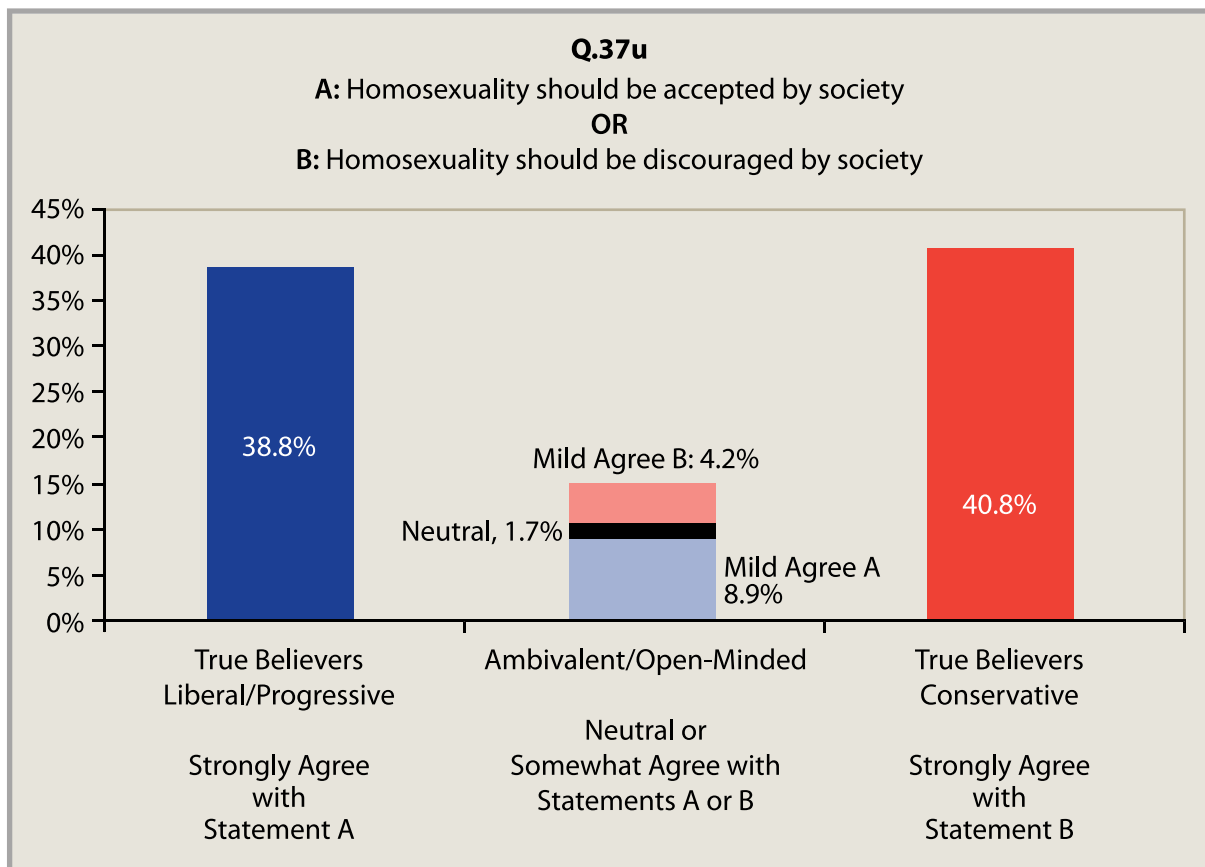
## Moral Issues

When questions about moral issues are not framed as abstract statements of approval or disapproval for traditional “morality” in general but rather as questions about the more practical question of whether government should be made responsible for enforcing conservative morality, only 29% of white working class voters turn out to be conservative “*true believers*” who strongly agree with the idea. In fact, a significantly larger group of 43% strongly disagrees and holds that the government is actually “getting too involved” in the issue.

But even more significant, nearly a quarter of the respondents are somewhat ambivalent or open-minded on this issue. As the chart below makes dramatically clear, they represent the key swing group whose support can convert either side into a majority.



The same pattern is also apparent even with the much more specific and controversial issue of homosexuality. Quite surprisingly, about equal numbers of white working class respondents are “strongly” in favor of accepting it as are in favor of discouraging it. At the same time, the key swing group of almost 15% is ambivalent or open-minded.

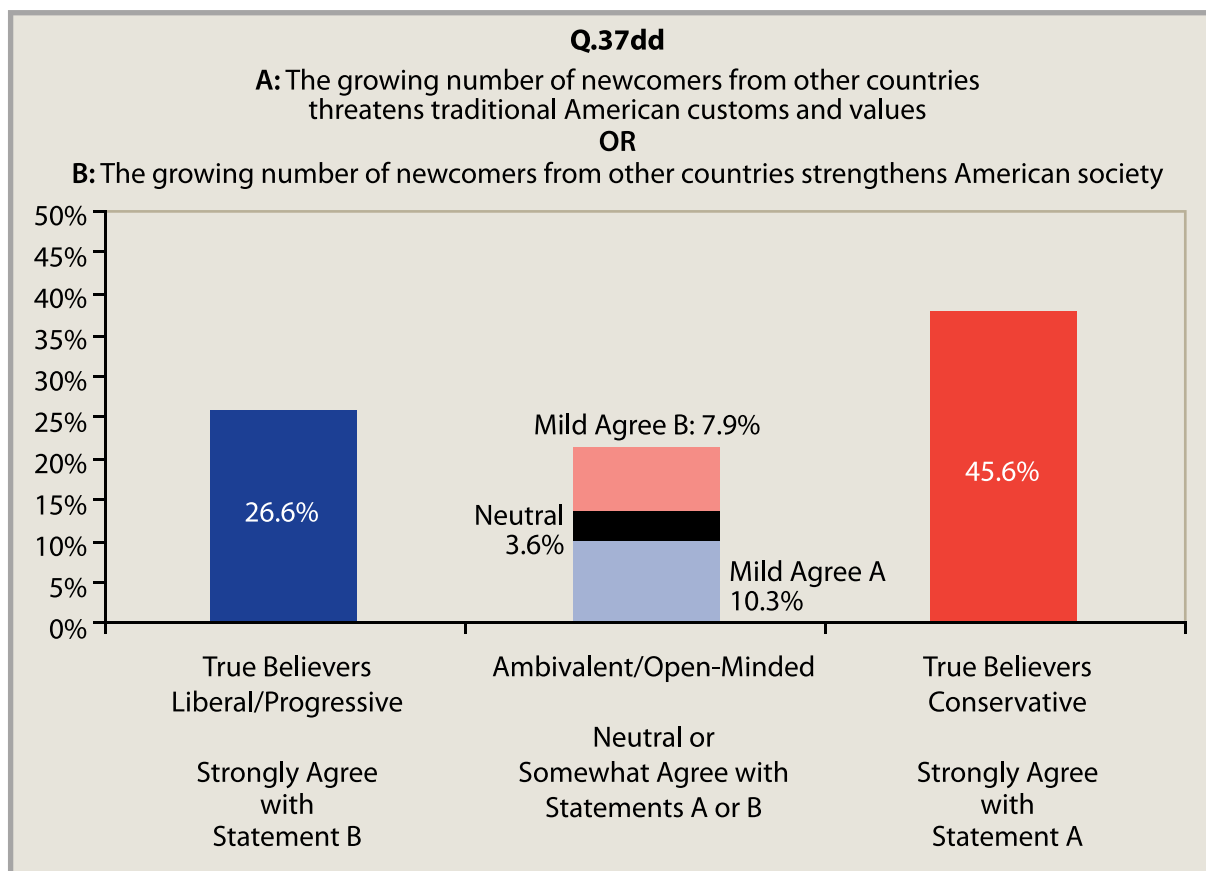


These results illustrate a pattern that runs through all of the Pew data. When conservative “true believers” (i.e. those who “strongly” agree with a conservative position) are separated from the ambivalent or open-minded, they turn out to be a minority rather than a majority of white working class Americans. The majority is composed of people who are either opposed to or somewhat ambivalent about hard-line conservative views.

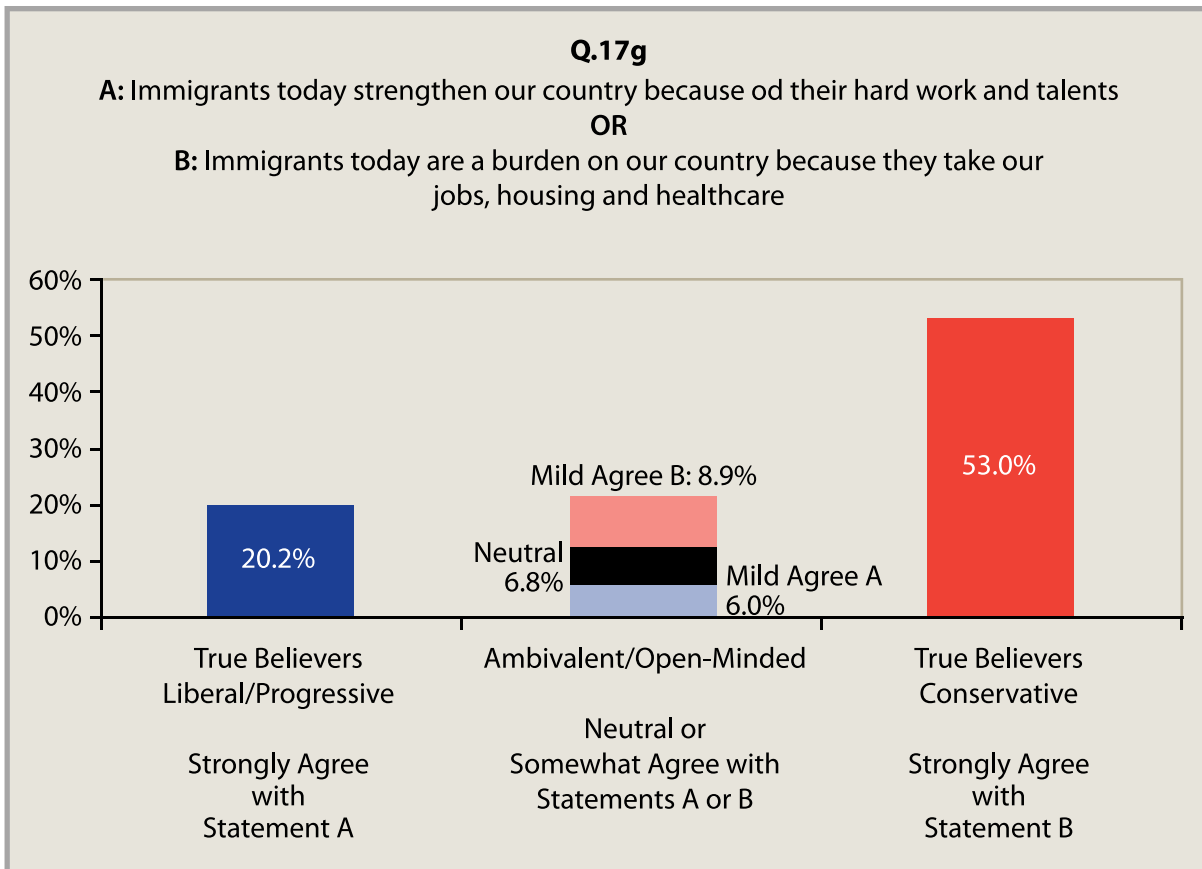
## Immigration

Hostility to immigrants is one of the two areas in the Pew survey (as well as in other surveys) where white working class Americans display the greatest degree of “conservatism.” For example, 56% of the white working class respondents in the Pew survey either strongly or somewhat agreed that recent immigrants “threaten traditional American customs and values,” which is one of the highest percentages favoring a “conservative” view in the entire set of Pew questions.

Yet even in this area, the number of respondents who “strongly” agree with this proposition is less than a majority and is almost exactly equaled by the total of those who either disagree or are ambivalent.



It is only when immigration is framed in starkly economic terms as a competition between immigrants and American workers over jobs and resources rather than directly as a cultural/ethnic issue that a majority of American workers “strongly” express a conservative view. This is displayed in the chart below where an unambiguous majority of 53% “strongly” agree that immigrants are a burden because they “take our jobs, housing and health care.”

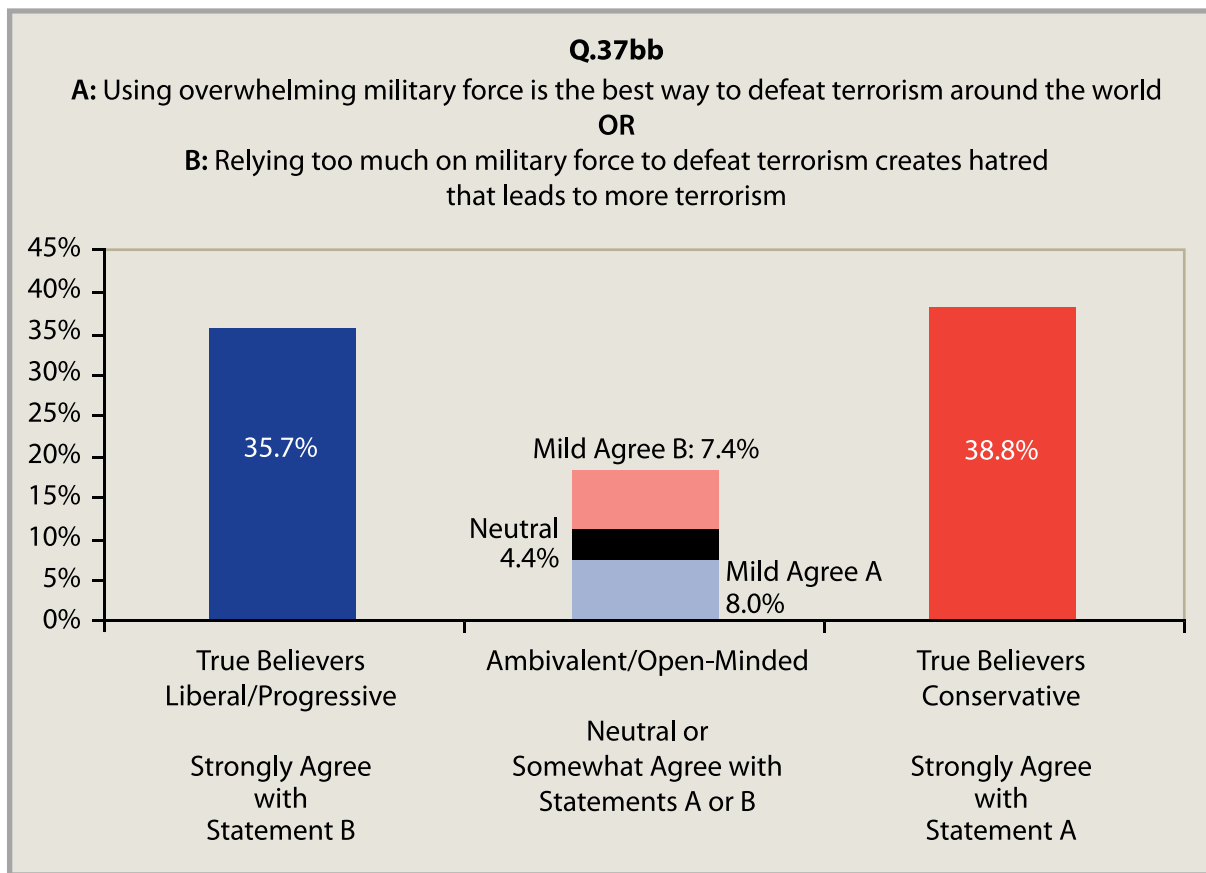


These results confirm the undeniable strength and intensity of white working class antagonism to recent immigrants, but the fact that when the question is framed in explicitly cultural/ethnic terms there is almost an even split between those who are “strongly” hostile and those who are not still suggests the degree to which it is still inaccurate to stereotype most white working class people as conservative “true believers” in regard to immigration.

## Military and International Affairs

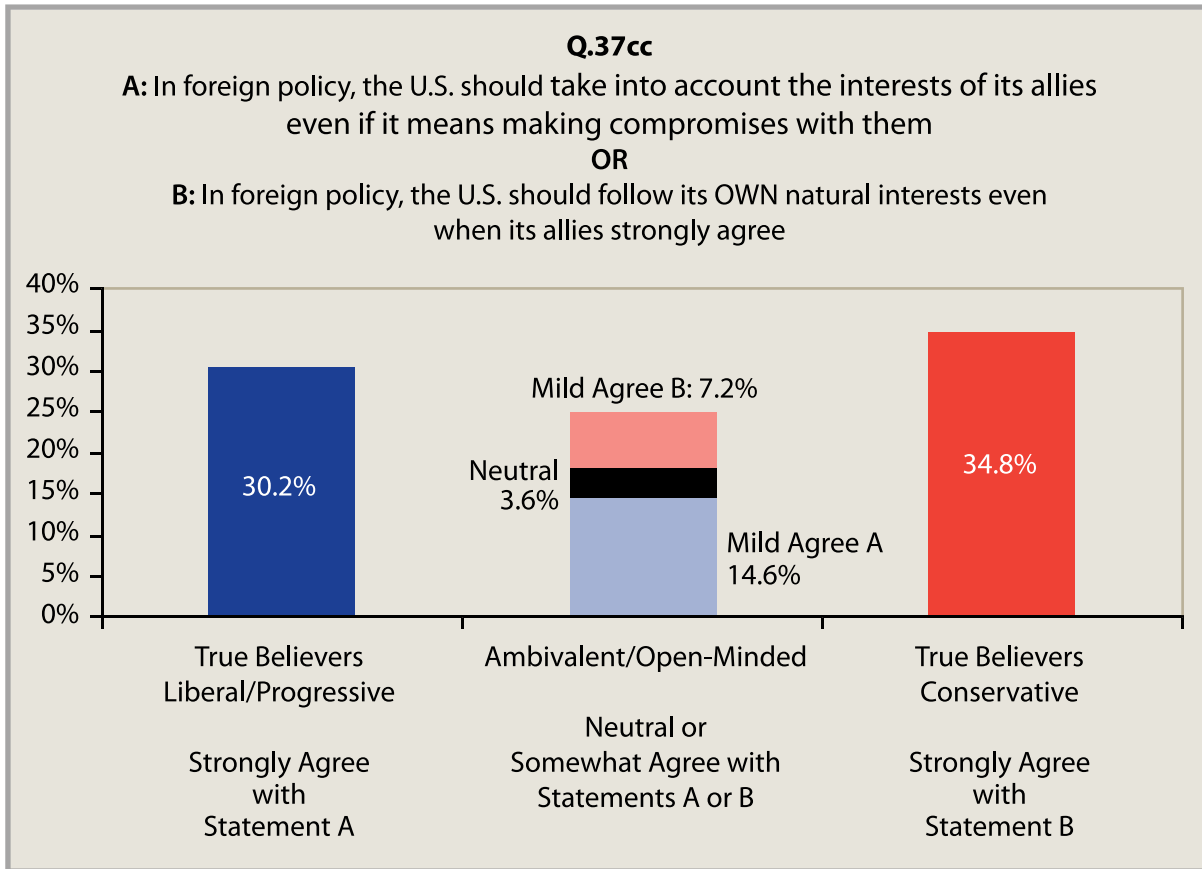
When the questions in the Pew survey shift to military and international affairs, the distinction between liberal/progressive views and conservative views no longer involves an underlying split between relatively tolerant and intolerant attitudes toward minority social groups like Atheists, Gays and Latinos. Rather, the division becomes one between those who support a single-minded reliance on military force as the solution to all problems versus those who favor a more cautious approach that emphasizes using military force in a limited and careful way.

Consider the following chart:



Despite the fact that on basically all major opinion polls there is always near-universal support for “*our men and women in uniform*” among white working class Americans, only slightly more than one third of the white working class respondents endorse “overwhelming military force” as the best way to fight terrorism. An almost equal number sees the single-minded reliance on military force as counterproductive. Most important, it is, once again, the ambivalent or open-minded 20% of the respondents that represents the critical “swing” group on the issue.

The same pattern is repeated with questions that enquire about balancing the interests of U.S. allies versus “going it alone.” The “true believers” on both sides are minorities while 25% fall in the category of the ambivalent or open-minded.

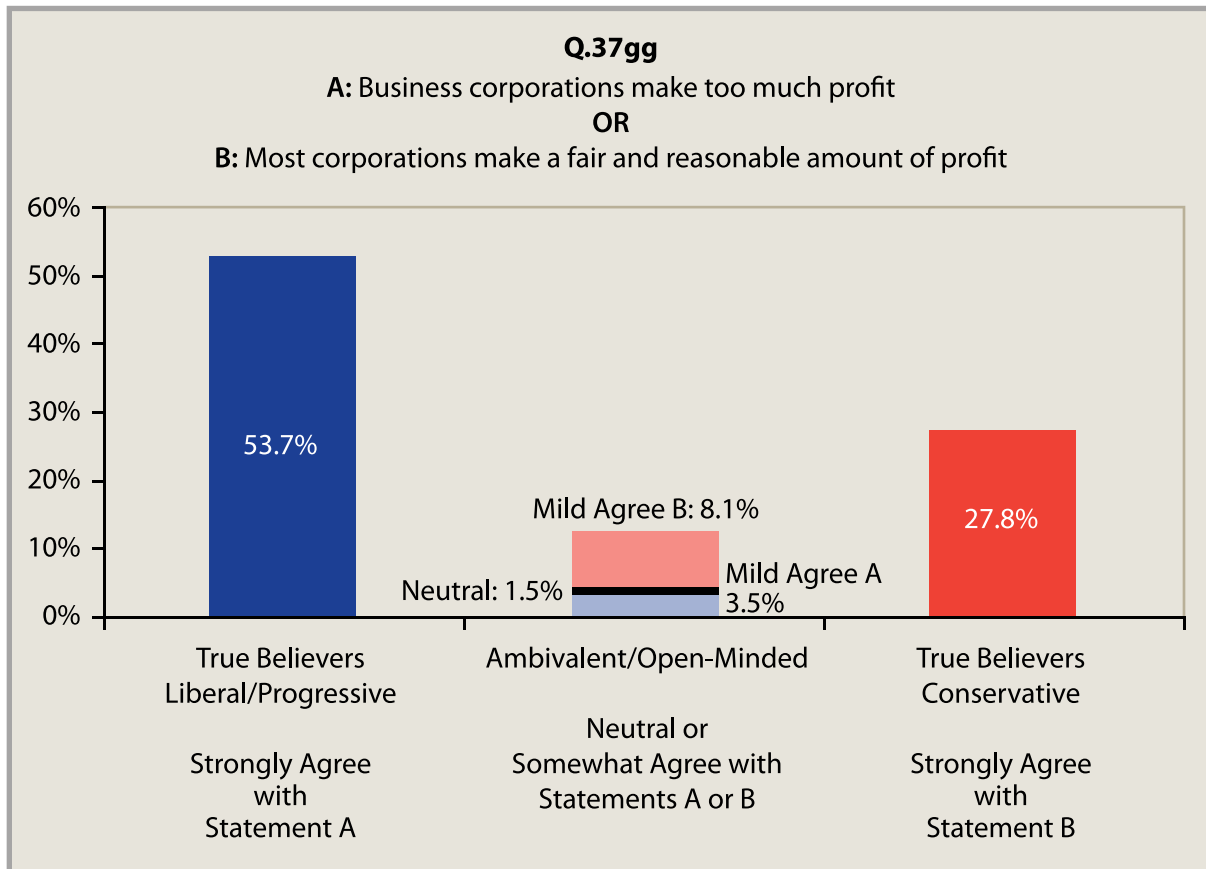


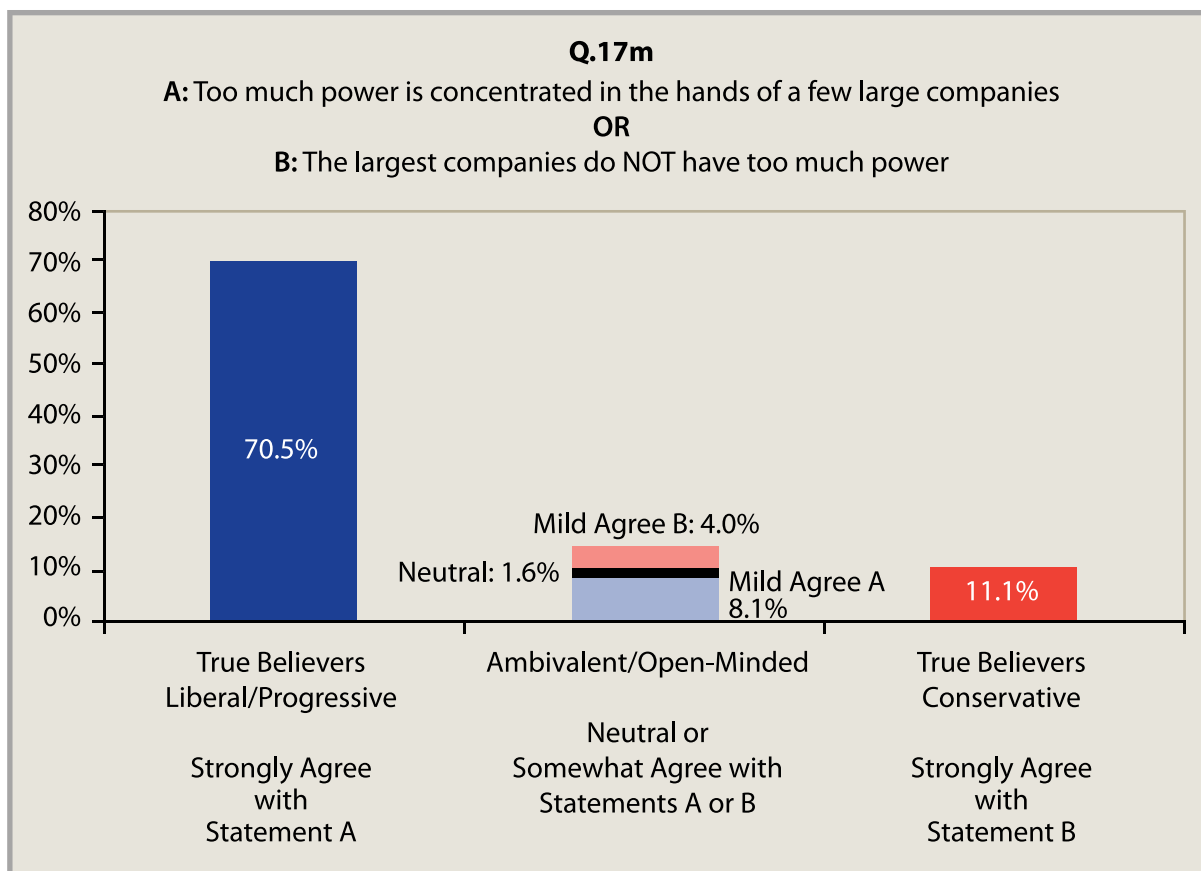


## Economic Issues: Wall Street and Big Business

Regarding white working class attitudes toward big business, even the most conservative analysts of public opinion do not hesitate to acknowledge that there is a strong and deeply enduring strand of suspicion and hostility. This cluster of views, which is usually labeled “populist” in journalistic accounts, has remained quite stable since the 1960’s, even though attitudes on a vast number of other subjects have changed dramatically since that time.

As the two charts below reveal, these “populist” sentiments remain quite strong in white working class America today. 54% of the white working class respondents in the Pew survey strongly felt that business corporations “*make too much profit*” and 70% strongly felt that they have “*too much power*”. On this topic, even when the ambivalent or open-minded respondents are added to the defenders of corporate profits and power, the combined group still remains a minority.





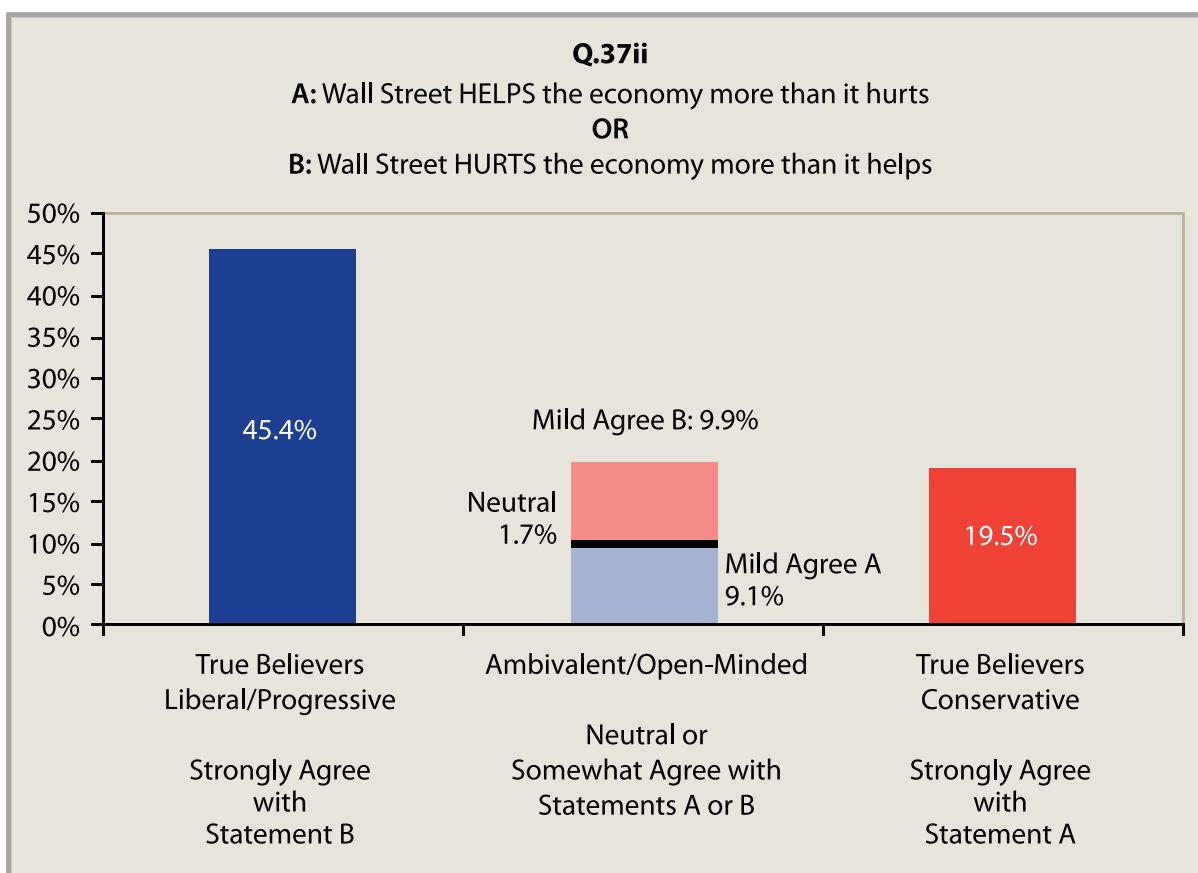
One reason why attitudes of this general kind have remained relatively stable for many years is that they are broad and abstract enough that they have not become the subject of intense, continuous and specific conservative attack. Until this year they have not been “hot button” issues in most election campaigns nor are they the kind of opinions that are energetically refuted on a literally a daily basis by talk radio hosts and commentators on Fox News.

However, one specific topic that has indeed been widely and fiercely debated in the last several years is the role of Wall Street in the economy. In the immediate aftermath of the 2008 Wall Street and bank “bailouts,” the financial community was genuinely shocked by the intensity of the popular backlash against the financial sector in general. In response, business, the financial industry, conservatives and the Republican Party all joined in an energetic effort to “push back” against this backlash and mounted an energetic defense of Wall Street, banks and the financial sector.

These widely circulated defenses (which now form the basis of Mitt Romney’s presidential campaign rhetoric) argued that the executives and traders on Wall Street and in the financial industry are the only real “job-creators” in the American economy, people without whom not a single job could ever be created at all. The extravagant bonuses and lavish lifestyles common in the financial industry were and are similarly justified on the grounds that they are the indispensable reward for the vast risk-taking and effort that is required to channel capital to job-creating ventures. The passionately pro-free market writings of Ayn Rand, previously popular among only a tiny audience of libertarians and free-market ideologues, suddenly became national best sellers and a serious ideological view in the national debate.

Given the substantial extent of this business “pushback” against all criticism of Wall Street and the financial industry in the last three years, it is reasonable to wonder if the attitudes of white working class people might actually have become less hostile on this particular subject than they are on the more abstract issues of corporate profit and power.

In fact, however, white working class antagonism to Wall Street still remains high. Over 45% of white working class respondents on the Pew survey “strongly” agreed that Wall Street “hurts the American economy more than it helps.” When those who “mildly” agree are added, the percentage rises to 55%. In contrast, only 19% of the sample strongly supports the view that Wall Street “helps” the American economy more than it hurts it. Even when all the ambivalent or open-minded are added in, the total barely rises above 40%.



The Pew survey provides therefore quite strong evidence for the persistence and strength of a powerful “populist” element in white working class thought, one that has not been reversed even by the extensive efforts at persuasion mounted by Wall Street and the business community.

Ever since the early 1970’s, however, the most important response of business, conservatives and Republicans to white working class populism has not been the direct ideological defense of business and Wall Street but rather a broad attempt to displace the anger that is expressed in working class populism away from the business and financial communities and onto a variety of other targets.

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Three groups and institutions are very specifically targeted in this ideological campaign:

First, white working class people are encouraged to blame liberal policies aimed at helping the poor for many of the problems faced by working Americans. Since the 1970's the poor have been described by conservatives as a separate class of the lazy and immoral who, unlike honest working class people, live on government benefits paid for by the taxes of white working class Americans. In the 1970's and 1980's it was the cliché of “welfare queens;” in the aftermath of the housing collapse, it was widely argued that it was “irresponsible” borrowers (and particularly minorities unfairly favored by government) rather than predatory lenders and financial institutions who were ultimately to blame for the housing crisis.

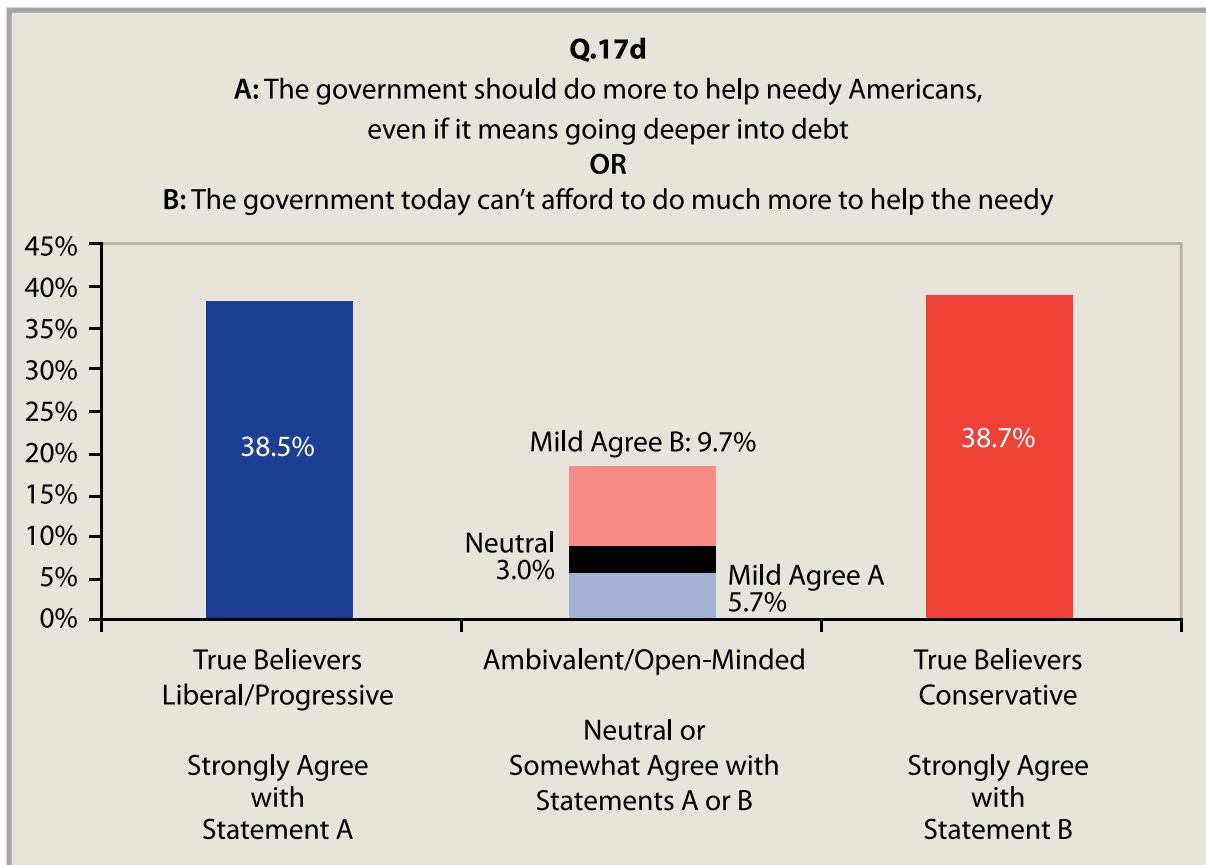
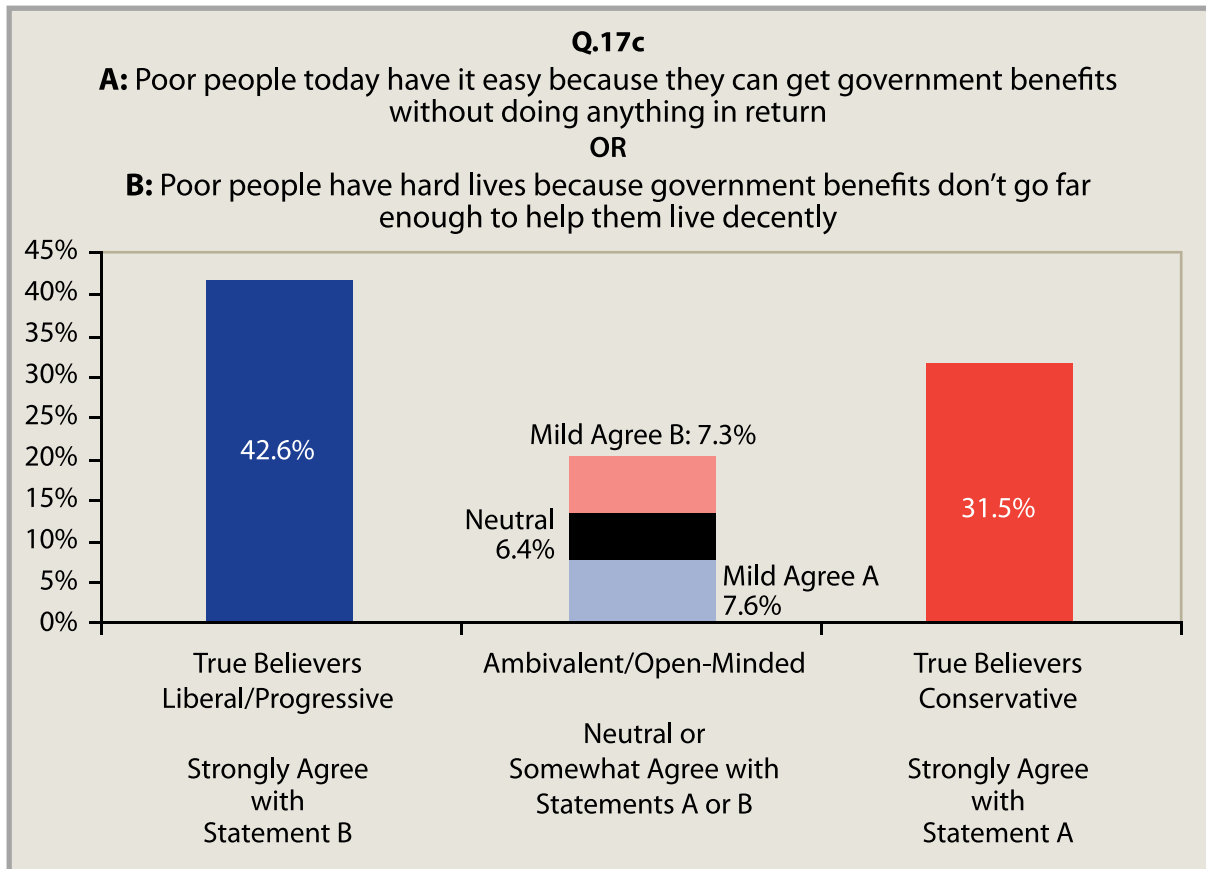
Second, working people are encouraged to blame educated middle class liberals for promoting policies that deprive working class people of jobs and prosperity in order to advance elitist social agendas. Most centrally, environmental rules and policies are described as destructive and unnecessary interventions in the free market that eliminate working class jobs and suffocate economic growth.

Third—and most important—the approach encourages working people to blame government itself for the economic problems of working Americans. Government, it is argued, imposes unnecessary taxes on working class people and distributes the proceeds to other, undeserving groups and programs while it also issues useless and overbearing regulations.

The Pew survey provides data that indicates to what degree working Americans have come to agree with these three perspectives.

## Economic Issues: Poverty

The two charts below display the findings of the Pew survey on this issue:



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As can be seen, only 31% of white working class people strongly agreed that the poor “have it easy” because they can get government benefits without working. In contrast, 43% strongly believe that government benefits don’t go far enough to help them live decently.

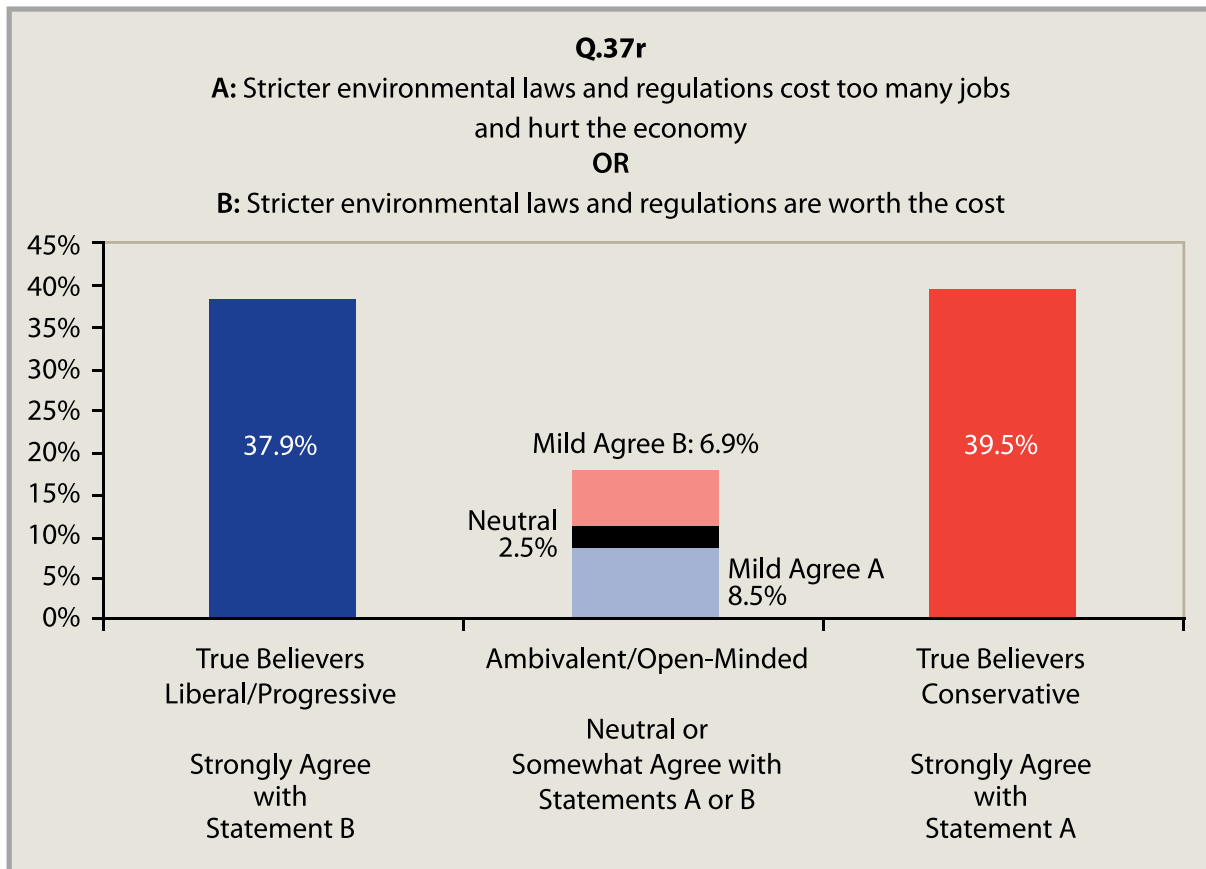
It is reasonable to suspect that these responses would be different if the question made a clear distinction between unemployment compensation, upon which many working people depend and “welfare” or unspecified “government handouts” which have historically been associated with minorities. But nonetheless, this is a significant result, and it is supported by the fact that just as many white working class Americans strongly support doing more to help the “needy”—even if it means going deeper into debt—as reject the idea.

Thus, on this issue the general pattern seen in the Pew survey appears once again. Only a minority of white working class Americans “strongly” agree with the conservative position. A larger group disagrees and the balance of opinion lies among the ambivalent or open-minded.

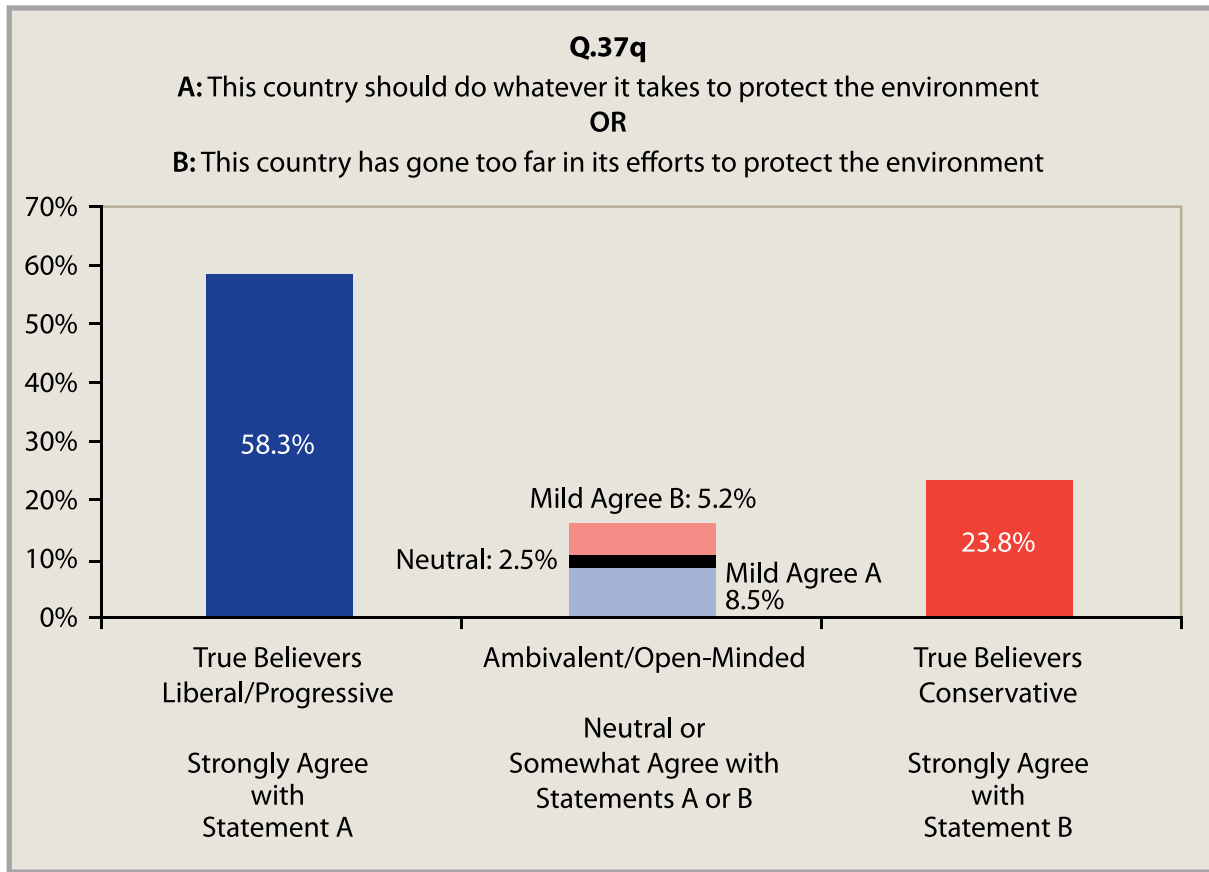


## Economic Issues: The Environment

The chart below shows that 38% of white working class Americans feel strongly that environmental laws and regulations are “worth the cost” while an almost exactly equal number feel strongly that they “cost too many jobs and hurt the economy.” The pivotal swing group of the ambivalent or open minded, in contrast, constitutes about 18% of the total.



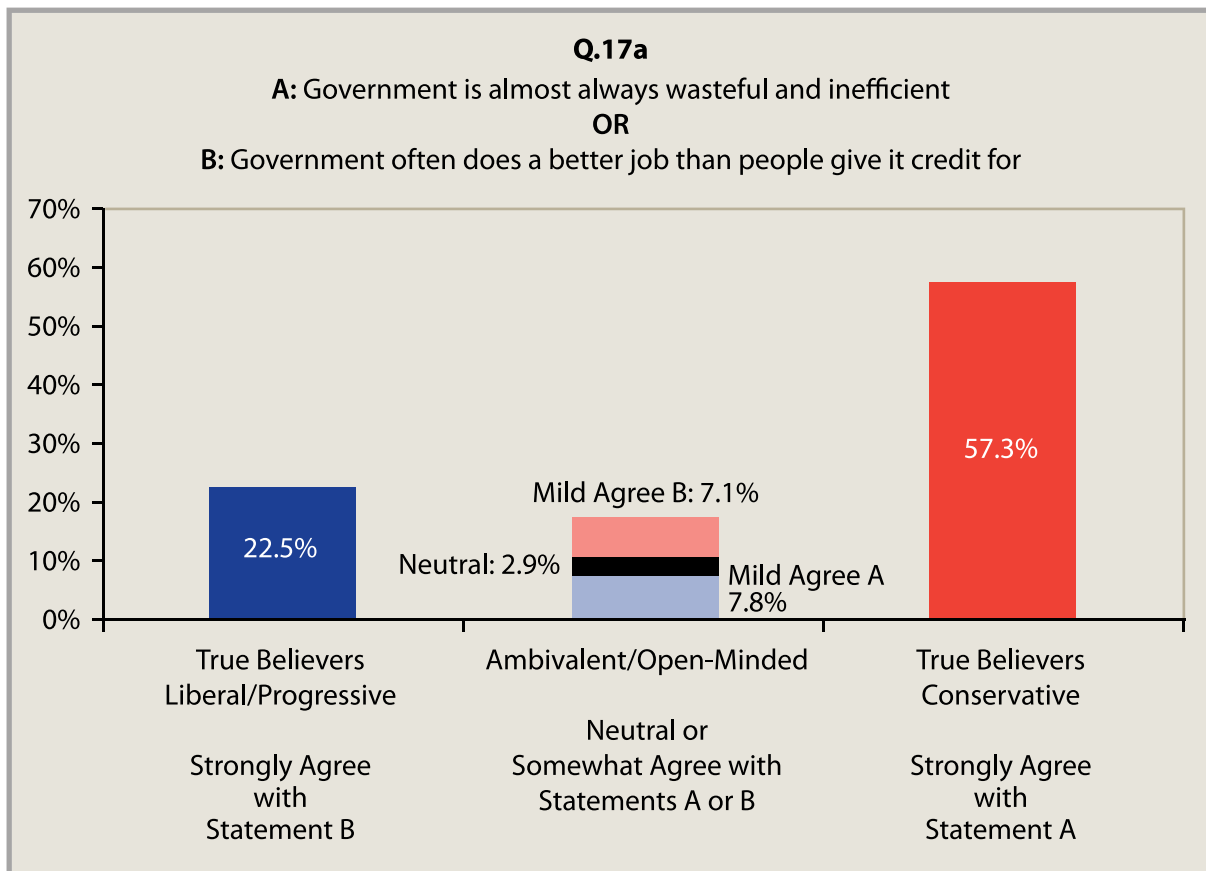
Equally significant, when the question is posed in a more general way, essentially asking if the respondents generally support government action to “protect the environment,” the results are quite dramatically lopsided in support of environmental protection. 58% of white working class Americans strongly support the proposition that the nation must “protect the environment.”



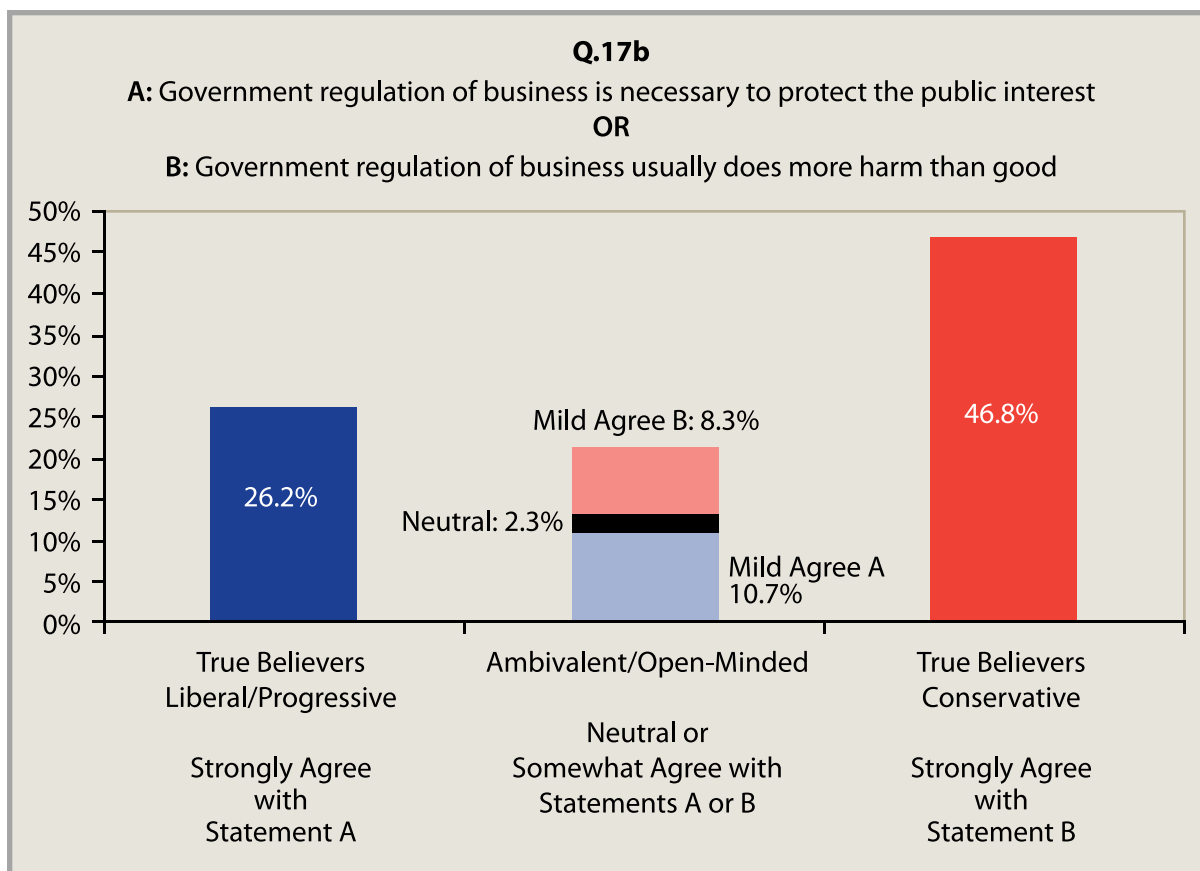
## Economic Issues: The Role of Government

Given the fact that hostility and opposition to “big government” has been the central plank of the Republican platform since the Reagan era and the most consistently, intensely and ferociously asserted view across the entire conservative media it would be remarkable if it did not find a substantial degree of support within white working class America.

As the chart below shows, when opposition to government is stated as an abstract proposition, there is indeed widespread agreement with anti-government views in white working class America. When the defense of government is expressed with the rather weak proposition that it “does a better job than people give it credit for”, only 22% of white workers strongly agree while 57% of white workers strongly assert the opposite view—that government is “almost always wasteful and inefficient.” This is the highest level of support for a “strong” conservative view in any of the questions reviewed thus far.



The level of opposition to government does decline significantly, however, when the question is posed at a more specific level—as support for the proposition that “government regulation of business is necessary to protect the public interest.” In this case, while 47% of the respondents on the Pew survey strongly agreed that regulation of business “usually does more harm than good,” the percent that disagreed or are ambivalent about this proposition was exactly the same.



The Pew survey discussed here did not ask questions about support for particular government programs, but it is a well-known generalization that on a very wide range of such specific topics, white working class voters generally express favorable views. Ever since the 1960's a cliché of political science has been that the American people and the white working class in particular are “ideological conservatives” regarding big government in the abstract but are also “operational liberals” who support a wide range of specific government programs.

### The Overall Picture

In order to summarize the wide range of data that has been presented thus far, consider the following chart:

Average – All Pew Questions Above	Liberal/ Progressive True Believers	Ambivalent/ Open-Minded	Conservative True Believers
	38.5	18.3	37.9

This chart simply averages the percentages presented in all the charts shown in the preceding pages.\*

*\*Note: These calculations also include the results from several additional, largely similar questions on the Pew survey that have not been presented in the preceding pages. The full set of questions on which these aggregate percentages are based can be found at [http://www.thedemocraticstrategist.org/\\_memos/Charts-and-Data-for-Almost-everything-you-read-about-the-white-working-class.doc](http://www.thedemocraticstrategist.org/_memos/Charts-and-Data-for-Almost-everything-you-read-about-the-white-working-class.doc)*

What this chart shows is that an average of 38% of the respondents to the various Pew questions can be classed as conservative "true believers" who express strong support for conservative views while an almost exactly identical number can be classed as "true believers" in a liberal/progressive perspective. In contrast, about 18% of the white working class respondents in the Pew survey turn out to be ambivalent or open-minded.

The conclusion is unavoidable. The majority of white working class Americans are simply not firm, deeply committed conservatives. Those who express "strong" support for conservative propositions represent slightly less than 40% of the total. The critical swing group within white working class America is composed of the ambivalent or open minded.

This is an extremely surprising result since virtually all political commentary about the white working class today is based on the assumption that these voters are generally quite deeply conservative and that conservatives very substantially outnumber liberal/progressives in white working class America.

One reason for the strength of this preconception among political analysts lies in the fact that most discussions of white working class opinion actually only focus on a subset of "values" or "social" issues and set aside all the "populist" issues regarding big business.

In fact, when the overall data from the Pew survey are broken out into several major subcategories or "clusters" of political issues, two distinct patterns appear. As the chart below shows, attitudes about "populist" issues regarding big business and profits weight the overall average in one direction while views about other domestic issues including morality, immigration and attitudes toward the poor, educated elites and government weight the overall average in the opposite direction.

<b>Averages for Key Issue Clusters</b>	Liberal/ Progressive True Believers	Ambivalent/ Open-Minded	Conservative True Believers
Domestic Issues	34.6	18.3	42.8
"Populist" Issues	53.7	17.0	19.5
Military Issues	35.4	21.8	35.5
<b>Grand Total</b>	38.5	18.3	37.9

As can be seen, on the distinct subset of "populist" issues about corporate profits, power and the role of wall street a majority of white American workers—54%—strongly agree with a liberal/progressive view. In contrast, only 20% strongly agree with the conservative, pro-business perspective. At the same time, however, on the range of other domestic issues about 43% of the Pew sample appear as conservative "true believers" who strongly agree with the conservative position in contrast to only 35% who strongly agree with the progressive view.

This rough split—conservatives constituting a percentage in the low 40's and liberal/progressives a percentage in the mid-30's—will feel oddly familiar to most political observers. But this is a coincidence that arises simply because it corresponds to the percentages commonly seen within the general population (rather than among white working class individuals in particular) on polling questions about domestic “social” or “values” issues other than those regarding big business. The lower percentage of liberals compared to conservatives also corresponds with the widely repeated generalizations about the ideological self-identification of the American people as a whole—that on Pew and Gallup polls<sup>3</sup> 36 to 40% describe themselves as conservative and 18 to 21% as liberals.

However, these familiar statistics are actually not at all relevant to the present discussion because they describe the U.S. population as a whole and not specifically white working class voters. But, if anything, the common stereotypes of the white working class would strongly suggest that conservatives should constitute an even larger proportion of the white working class total than they do of the general population and that liberal/progressive individuals should be an even smaller percentage of white working class people than of the general population.

But the quite unique data from the Pew Political Typology Report simply do not support this deduction. The questions on the Pew survey are specifically designed to map a uniquely wide range of ideological views in a way that most opinion surveys are not and the sample size is vastly larger than the white high school subsample that is available on virtually all other opinion studies. As a result the data provides strong evidence that the common clichés are wrong—that the majority of white workers are not strong conservatives and there is a distinct group of ambivalent or open minded white working class Americans who represent the critical swing group in working class politics.

This alone is a quite substantial challenge to the conventional view. Yet a deeper analysis of the Pew numbers provides results that are even more surprising. When a more sophisticated method of calculation is used, the number of genuinely consistent conservative ideologues —“Fox News/Talk Radio” true believers—in white working class America actually turns out to be significantly lower than the 38% suggested by the simple and straightforward average of all the percents on the various Pew questions.

Looking at the percentages in the initial chart in this section, it is easy to unconsciously make the assumption that the 38% of conservative true believers (or the equal number of their liberal/progressive counterparts) represent two stable groups of ideologically consistent conservatives or liberal/progressives—the kinds of consistent and committed ideological partisans one would expect to find attending the annual meetings of the Campaign for America's Future on the left or the Conservative Political Action Council on the right and loudly cheering the remarks of every single one of the speakers.

But this is not necessarily the case. If a particular Pew chart shows that 38% of the sample strongly agrees with the conservative view on one particular survey question (regarding immigrants, for example) and an identical 38 percent agrees with the conservative view on a second survey question (about military force, for example), even though the two percentages are the same, the two groups may be composed of quite different individuals.

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<sup>3</sup> <http://pewresearch.org/pubs/1042/winds-of-political-change-havent--shifted-publics-ideology-balance>  
<http://www.gallup.com/poll/152021/conservatives-remain-largest-ideological-group.aspx>



The obvious real world example of this kind of situation is the existence of many “single issue” conservative (or liberal/progressive) groups and individuals. The person who is a passionate anti-abortion activist may not also be firmly opposed to higher taxes on millionaires or to exclusive reliance on overwhelming military force. On a multi-issue opinion poll, a person of this sort will be counted among the 38% of conservative “true believers” on some questions but not on others.

To estimate the size of the ideologically consistent true believers—the “Fox News/Talk Radio” ideologues who accept a wide range of conservative views (or the “Rachael Maddow/MSNBC” ideologues who embrace a similar range of liberal/progressive views)—requires a distinct method of summarizing the Pew data. In essence, the question that needs to be answered is “what percent of the white working class respondents on the Pew survey are people who strongly support a *very wide range* of either conservative or liberal/progressive positions.”

One way to calculate this is to score each individual respondents’ position on each one of the questions in the charts on the preceding pages on a scale of 1 to 5 (with 1 being equal to “*strongly agree with the liberal/progressive view*”, 2 being equal to “*somewhat agree with the liberal/progressive view*” and so on). Once this is done, averaging an individual’s scores on all of the questions above makes it possible to derive a single summary “ideological” average for each individual survey respondent.

Individuals whose overall average is in the range between 1 and 2 are those who strongly agreed with a very wide range of liberal/progressive propositions. Those whose overall average ranges from 4 to 5 are those who strongly agree with a wide range of conservative propositions.\*

The following chart shows the results:

	<b>Liberal/ Progressive True believers</b>	<b>Ambivalent/ Open-Minded</b>	<b>Conservative True believers</b>
	(Score on a 1 to 5 liberal-con- servative scale = 1 to 2.5	(Score on a 1 to 5 liberal-con- servative scale = 2.5 to 3.5)	(Score on a 1 to 5 liberal- conservative scale = 3.5 to 5)
<b>Percent of Respondents: All Issues</b>	25.9	46.6	27.5

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*\*Notes: Since the averaging process creates decimal scores that range between whole numbers, this approach also makes it possible to cautiously widen the categories of the “true believers” slightly by making the range from 1 to 2.5 for liberal/progressive true believers (instead of just from 1 to 2), from 2.5 to 3.5 for the ambivalent/open-minded and from 3.5 to 5 for the conservative true believers. This essentially includes half of the “slightly agree” respondents in the “strongly agree/True Believer” category. This provides an extra “cushion” in the calculation to insure that the results will, if anything, overestimate the number of “true believers” rather than underestimate them.*

These totals for conservative and liberal/progressive true believers are about 10% lower than they appear in the simpler calculation. The conservative true believers are 28% instead of 38%, the liberal/progressive true believers are 26% of the total rather than 38%. Rather than being about 18% of the total, the ambivalent/open-minded represent 47%—almost half—of the total.

There are two qualifications that can be noted. As with the simple calculation, the percentage of conservative true believers does indeed expand when one only looks at domestic social and values issues and sets aside the “populist” aspects of white working class opinion. On non-populist domestic issues the conservative true believers constitute 38% of the sample rather than 28% and liberal/progressives only constitute 22% rather than 25%.

And it is also important to keep in mind that these results are for both men and women. On a substantial number of issues the opinions of white working class men alone would indeed be more conservative. For many kinds of sociological analyses this is an extremely important qualification. For analyzing likely voting behavior, where the votes of both sexes count exactly equally, it is less so.

But regardless of these two qualifications, three overall conclusions are essentially inescapable.

1. The majority of white working people are not strong conservatives. Those who express “strong agreement” with conservative propositions are distinctly less than 50%.
2. The ambivalent or open-minded are the key swing group in working class America. They represent a minimum of 20% of white working class respondents across wide range of survey questions using the most restrictive possible definition and substantially more using less restrictive definitions.
3. The genuinely consistent white working class conservatives—the “Fox News/Talk Radio” hard-line ideologues—represent only about one fourth of the white working class total.

This is a very surprising and disruptive set of conclusions for those who passively accept the popular clichés. But they do, in fact, correspond quite well with the “real world” conclusions of people who actually have face-to-face daily contact with this segment of the electorate.

For example, as noted at the beginning of this analysis, Working America, the community affiliate of the AFL-CIO, describes the persuadable voters within working class America that its door to door canvassing has revealed as “the 35-40% in the middle—working class moderates whose personal ambivalences make them swing voices in the public policy debates.”

Equally, Democracy Corps, the progressive polling and focus group organization that has done the most in-depth opinion studies of white working class voters, summarized **a series of focus groups**<sup>4</sup> studying the difference between working class “true believers” and the more open-minded in the following way:

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<sup>4</sup> [http://www.greenbergresearch.com/articles/2398/5488\\_TheVerySeparateWorldofConservativeRepublicans101609.pdf](http://www.greenbergresearch.com/articles/2398/5488_TheVerySeparateWorldofConservativeRepublicans101609.pdf)

The self-identifying conservative Republicans who make up the base of the Republican Party stand a world apart from the rest of America... these voters identify themselves as part of a 'mocked' minority with a set of shared beliefs and knowledge, and commitment to oppose Obama that sets them apart from the majority in the country. They believe Obama is ruthlessly advancing a 'secret agenda' to bankrupt the United States and dramatically expand government control to an extent nothing short of socialism... they overwhelmingly view a successful Obama presidency as the destruction of this country's founding principles....

...The Republican base voters are not part of a continuum leading to the center of the electorate: they truly stand apart. For additional perspective, Democracy Corps conducted a parallel set of groups in suburban Cleveland. These groups, comprised of older, white, non-college independents and weak partisans, represent some of the most conservative swing voters in the electorate.... Though we kept discussion points constant between the two sets of groups, on virtually every point of discussion around President Obama and the major issues facing our country, these two audiences simply saw the world in fundamentally different ways.... Conservative Republicans fully embrace the 'socialism' attacks on Obama and believe it is the best, most accurate way to describe him and his agenda. Independents largely dismiss these attacks as partisan rhetoric detracting from a legitimate debate about what many of them do see as excessive government control and spending.

Finally, it is notable that the results of this analysis—while they are completely opposed to the common wisdom—are actually strikingly in accord with the basic realities that journalists as well as many liberals and progressives encounter in their own personal experiences.

- In group interviews on construction sites and in diners or coffee shops, journalists and reporters generally report that not all the workers in the group are hard-core conservatives but that the group is split between conservatives and more ambivalent or open minded individuals.
- That hostility to illegal immigration and government in general are the most intensely felt "conservative" opinions among working class Americans. On other subjects, in contrast, opinions vary much more widely.
- That there are very distinct and dramatic "pockets" of populist views where white workers (particularly in the North and rust belt Mid-West) express deeply anti-corporate and anti-big business views.

In short, the conclusion is simple. The majority of America's white working class voters are not small-scale replicas of Sean Hannity, Rush Limbaugh or Glen Beck. The majority of white working class Americans are cultural traditionalists but not firm conservatives. They are deeply suspicious of progressives and the Democratic Party, but they are not irrevocably committed to the political right and the GOP.

## The Political Implications

There are four major implications of this analysis:

First, Democratic political strategists should forget—no, indeed, actively reject—the notion that “the typical conservative white worker” is in any possible way a useful political concept. It is empirically false, politically destructive, psychologically misleading and morally corrosive. It needs to be put on the same dusty shelf for outmoded political concepts as “welfare queens” and “Midwestern Republican moderate politicians” The “typical conservative white worker” notion simply does not provide an adequate mental framework for trying to understand white working class America.

Second, using the term “moderate” to describe the substantial group of workers who are not conservative true believers does not in any way imply that they actually conceptualize their philosophy as seeking some sort of abstract “middle of the road,” centrism along the lines promoted by beltway commentators who endlessly dream of finding some magical policy agenda that is exquisitely balanced precisely midway between left and right. Quite the contrary, working class people often have very firm and uncompromising, gut-level commitments to their views which is the exact opposite of a philosophical commitment to “find the middle on everything” centrism. On the contrary, what distinguishes the ambivalent or open-minded white workers from the true believers is their distinct “on the one hand but on the other hand” method of analysis and their reliance on “common sense” rather than ideology for political decision-making.

The political implication of this is simple: these voters will listen to progressive arguments that respect their open-minded, “there may be some truth on both sides” mode of thought. They will simply ignore or flatly reject stale 1950’s rhetoric and traditional Democratic stump-speech clichés.

Third, an obvious approach that at first glance seems suggested by this data is for Democratic messaging to relentlessly appeal to the cluster of populist views of white workers in the hope that constant repetition will eventually “overwrite” or replace the conservative framing with which white working people are more familiar. Traditional advertising strategy has long relied on the consistent, heavy handed repetition of a single, simple ad message as an effective way of convincing consumers to buy product X instead of product Y.

But the problem with this approach is that the “populist” views that white workers do indeed quite undeniably hold are not stored in a neat and separate cognitive compartment where they can be invoked and appealed to in isolation. White workers views about corporations, banks and profits are embedded in a series of larger cognitive frameworks that also contain their views about work, fairness, taxes, debt, corruption, distrust of government and alienation from the political system.

The most insightful and systematic study that has been done of these larger cognitive frameworks has been by [Stan Greenberg’s Democracy Corps in its “economy project.”](#)<sup>5</sup> What their research has revealed is that there are at least five interconnected clusters

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<sup>5</sup> [http://www.thedemocraticstrategist.org/strategist/2011/10/progressives\\_there\\_are\\_two\\_pro.php](http://www.thedemocraticstrategist.org/strategist/2011/10/progressives_there_are_two_pro.php)

of ideas about the economy that all play a part in the political decision-making of white workers. In consequence no simplistic “*Just keep hammering em’ over the head with the populist stuff until it sinks in*” approach will be successful.

Finally, the Democracy Corps research also confirms the grass-roots insight of Working America that, above all else, what ambivalent or open-minded white working class Americans want is *representation*. White working class Americans feel, entirely correctly, that “no-one is looking out for them” and that they can no longer trust the traditional political system.

Here’s how a Working America memo expresses it:

While the working class swing voters that make up our constituency are confused and angry, they are not ideological. They aren’t thinking about the Constitution and the Founding Fathers, or eliminating all government agencies. They want economic solutions and a sense that their civic participation can make a difference up against powerful special interests.

To put it simply, until the Democratic Party seriously comes to terms with its failure to genuinely represent white working class Americans, it will not be able to win their firm political support.

Taken together, what these four conclusions suggest is a dramatically—indeed fundamentally—different approach to winning the support of white working class voters. The first step, however, is quite simple: Democrats must put aside the useless fiction of “the typical conservative white worker” and to begin to deal with the complexity of white working class political opinion as it actually exists in America today.