

The Class Divide Within American Protestantism

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Forty years ago American Protestants' denominational affiliations reflected their class positions. Members of mainline denominations had more money, prestige, and education than members of conservative denominations. Politics followed. Most mainline Protestants were Republicans; most conservative Protestants were Democrats. Since then upward mobility has improved the class position of conservative Protestants and nearly erased the differences between mainline and conservative Protestants' class positions. The conservative movement has also helped conservative denominations retain their upwardly mobile members, hastening class convergence among denominations. Meanwhile a political class divide opened within the conservative denominations. Now middle class and upwardly mobile conservative Protestants are more likely to identify with the Republican party while working and lower class conservative Protestants still identify with Democrats and act as swing voters in elections. Income differences are particularly sharp. Conservative Protestants are more politically divided on income than any other large socio-demographic group in America. This paper documents these trends and explores what they mean for contemporary discussions about the possible competition between values and interests in voting behavior.