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2016 Campaign Strategy

Memo on the

White Working Class

To: Democratic presidential candidates

From: The Democratic Strategist
& Washington Monthly
White Working Class Roundtable

Subject: How to win white working class votes without compromising a progressive platform or alienating the Obama coalition.

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Democratic Candidates:

We know that you have received a lot of advice about white working class voters from political commentators recently.

Some have told you to forget about trying to win support from the white working class and to totally focus on energizing the “Obama coalition” of minorities, youth, women, liberals and educated professionals. Others have advised you that the only thing you need to do in order to win white working class votes is to passionately and energetically embrace the full-throated populism of Elizabeth Warren.

Two months ago a number of progressives who are part of a group called the TDS White Working Class Roundtable gathered under the auspices of *The Democratic Strategist* and the *Washington Monthly* to discuss a new strategy paper by leading pollster and strategist Stan Greenberg. The group, moderated by Ed Kilgore, included Ruy Teixeira, John Judis, Mark Schmidt, Joan Walsh and Karen Nussbaum, as well as a number of other respected political strategists. It built on work of the first 2014 White Working Class Roundtable which also included individuals like Harold Meyerson and Theda Skocpol as well as those above and many others.

The members of this roundtable group share two central convictions: first, that Democrats urgently need to win more white working class votes if Democrats are going to create a stable Democratic majority in America and second that this goal can be sought without having to compromise a solid progressive agenda or alienate members of the Obama coalition.

This may sound like an “impossible dream” but Stan Greenberg’s discussion paper proposed a specific, poll tested strategy for taking a significant step in this direction. Based on Democracy Corps massive database of poll results and focus group research, Stan and his associate James Carville have found that a substantial group of white working class people—and white working class women in particular—would be open to an impressive range of progressive policies if the massive suspicion and hostility toward government that many white working class people feel could be overcome.

These doubts about government take several different forms. Some perceive government as utterly corrupted by big money and corporate lobbyists and therefore indifferent and unresponsive to ordinary people's needs. Others feel alienated from government because it appears to them to be acting only on behalf of liberal groups and ideologies. For others, their suspicion of government is rooted in the belief that it is inescapably distant, bureaucratic and inefficient. What unites all these groups is the belief that government does not genuinely represent their needs and interests and this hostility toward government is extended to Democratic candidates who are seen as unthinking knee-jerk champions of government, champions who ignore all its shortcomings.

Recommendations:

In the course of its discussions, members of the Roundtable group made the following specific recommendations about how you and other Democratic candidates in 2016 can overcome these obstacles and reach white working class Americans:

1. **An agenda of government reform has to come before, not after, the presentation of a progressive platform.** As Stan Greenberg says:

White working class voters are open to an expansive Democratic economic agenda—to more benefits for child care and higher education, to tax hikes on the wealthy, to investment in infrastructure spending, and to economic policies that lead employers to boost salaries for middle- and working-class Americans, especially women. Yet they are only ready to listen when they think that Democrats understand their deeply held belief that politics has been corrupted and government has failed. Championing reform of government and the political process is the price of admission with these voters.

In recent years, too many Democrats have presumed that the white working class is out of the party's reach and that talk of reforming government and the political process simply does not move voters. *My contention is that both of those presumptions are wrong.* The white working-class and downscale voters in our surveys do support major parts of a progressive, activist agenda, particularly when a Democratic candidate boldly attacks the role of money and special interests dominating government and aggressively promotes reforms to ensure that average citizens get both their say and their money's worth

2. **A government reform agenda must include not only populist measures to reduce the control of big money and corruption but also improvements in government systems and structures to actually make government more genuinely representative of the average citizen.** As Mark Schmitt said:

Reform of government should mean more than just getting money out: It should involve specific, plausible reforms that would reengage citizens in the process of government, creating new ways to make all our voices matter. It should include high-profile efforts to show that government can be innovative, accessible and responsive.

3. **Progressive policies must be “Loud and Clear” and not get bogged down in details.** As Theda Skocpol noted:

The only way Democrats are going to make headway with white working class men and women is to champion straightforward, easy to understand measures like big minimum wage hikes and equal pay for equal work rules. Calls to fund obvious job-creating projects like weatherizing buildings, repairing bridges, and spreading high-speed Internet services to all communities make sense too. And so do calls for paid family leave, which create a vital new family benefit for all employees.

4. **Progressive proposals must show that Democrats understand the complex reality of today’s new economy.** In scores of personal interviews Stan Greenberg’s research in his “New Economy” project has revealed the way the traditional picture of “the unemployed” as a distinct minority completely without work has been replaced by pervasive economic insecurity that afflicts a far larger group of Americans with a complex combination of part-time jobs, low wage jobs, jobs without benefits, work in the “informal economy” and short-term work that provides no possibility for advancement. As Karen Nussbaum noted:

Today’s members of the working class are confronted with the realities of the emerging precarious economy, which has unstable, erratic work as one of its centerpieces. Unpredictable scheduling demands, relentless low pay, nonexistent benefits and part-time work are for working people today’s normal.

5. **Democrats must recognize the political implications of the changing social values of young workers** As Ruy Teixeira and John Halpin have argued, changing attitudes among the young are steadily reducing—but have not entirely eliminated—the problem that “social issues” present for Democrats. Young workers are simply not inspired in the way previous generations were by calls to fight a “culture war.” As a result, the policy of moving to the right as a strategy for winning white working class votes is fundamentally obsolete. As Ruy and John note:

White working class Millennials are substantially more liberal on social issues. For example 54 percent of white working class Millennials think gay and lesbian couples should be allowed to legally marry, compared to just 34 percent of older white working class cohorts. They are also more likely than older cohorts to be secular in religious orientation, which strongly correlates with liberalism. And perhaps most important, today’s young white working-class voters are significantly more open to rising diversity than the white working class as a whole and notably more liberal on issues concerning the role of government.

6. **Racial attitudes do present a significant obstacle to Democrats in winning the support of white working class voters—but not enough to prevent Democratic candidates from winning the number of votes that they really need.** Negative attitudes toward the Democrats because of the belief that they continually direct government benefits to minorities rather than white working people and other similar views are indeed widespread. As Jamelle Bouie noted:

Teixeira and Halpin argue that Democrats can capitalize on the generational divide in the white working class [because] today's young white working-class voters are notably more liberal on issues concerning the role of government than their older counterparts

But implicit in this optimistic view is the assumption white working class voters will believe the Democrats "pitch." That they'll hear the case for stronger programs, higher minimum wages, and higher taxes on the rich, and believe Democrats are advocating for them, and not some other group.

The problem is I don't think we can make that assumption. After all, working-class whites didn't leave the Democratic Party over insufficiently populist policy and rhetoric. The liberal economic reforms of 1960's—and Medicare in particular—paid benefits to white working-class families throughout the 1970's and '80's, even as the group moved to a decisive break with the Democrats. No, the proximate cause of the break was the Democratic Party's close identification with black Americans, who—after the riots of the late '60's and '70's—became identified with urban disorder and welfare.

Bouie's reservations are recognized and shared by the participants in the roundtable but with one vitally important qualification. *Democratic candidates do not need—and indeed, should not seek—the votes of white working class voters who are genuinely prejudiced against minorities.* There is instead a large enough segment of the white working class that is sufficiently open-minded to make the critical difference in many elections—including the presidential race in 2016. These voters share the broad cultural traditionalism and sense of identity as "real Americans" that rigidly conservative white working class voters feel but at the same time they are sufficiently tolerant on social issues and "populist" on many economic issues to be willing to vote for Democratic candidates when such candidates seem genuinely responsive to their needs. And there are enough of these voters to make a critical difference. As Ruy Teixeira and Andrew Levison noted:

If just 10 percent of the white working class group that currently votes for Republicans is persuadable, a successful appeal for their votes would produce a 2 percentage-point pro-Democratic shift in the electorate. This would have meant a 53 percent Democratic presidential tally in 2012, not 51 percent. This could be the critical margin of safety in presidential elections in 2016 and 2020.

The type of white working class Americans to whom Democrats can successfully appeal are the kind who gave Obama 40 percent of their votes in 2008, when they were deeply infuriated with the GOP, but who very frequently don't bother to vote because of a cynicism about politics in general. To win these voters, the challenge is not so much to change their social and economic views as it is to overcome their cynicism about politics and convince them that it is worth their time to vote in 2016. This is particularly true for white working class women and younger voters.

And it is vital to remember that a Democrat does not have to win a majority of the white working class vote in order to win in 2016. Just increasing the 33 percent of the white working class vote that Democrats received in 2014 to the 36 percent Obama got in 2012 or the 40 percent he received in 2008 will not only give Hillary a tremendous boost toward the presidency but will also change the results in a number of key state races.

The 2016 Campaign So Far

In many respects it appears that Democratic candidates have all adopted versions of a strategy that reflects these ideas. They all firmly base their campaign on mobilizing the Obama coalition with a solid progressive agenda while at the same time also planning to reach out to a larger electorate by offering economic policy appeals that contain many “populist” elements in common despite some important differences.

But in recent days candidates discussing their economic policy views are not generally integrating those issues with the need for systemic reform—reform in the campaign finance system, in how lobbyists operate in Washington, or in how government can avoid capture by powerful interests or incompetence in defending the public interest. If Greenberg and our roundtable participants are right, this could seriously dampen the positive effects of even the most energetically “populist” economic agenda.

As Greenberg says:

What really strengthens and empowers the progressive economic narrative, however, is a commitment to reform politics and government. That may seem ironic or contradictory, since the narrative calls for a period of government activism. But, of course, it does make sense: Why would you expect government to act on behalf of the ordinary citizen when it is clearly dominated by special interests? Why would you expect people who are financially on the edge, earning flat or falling wages and paying a fair amount of taxes and fees, not to be upset about tax money being wasted or channeled to individuals and corporations vastly more wealthy and powerful than themselves?

We have arrived at a tipping point at the outset of the 2016 election cycle, where the demand to reform government is equal to or stronger than the demand to reform the economy. More accurately, reform can make it possible to use governmental policies to help the middle class. In short, it is reform first.

The Democratic politician who most eloquently exemplifies this approach is Elizabeth Warren who consistently frames her progressive outlook and agenda with the basic concept that “the game in Washington is rigged” against ordinary workers.

[Here is how she expresses it:](#)¹

¹http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/elizabeth-to-speak-at-netroots-nation-rally_55a938f8e4b03f76c5ee2be2

...Money and influence peddling is strangling our country. Insider Washington is calling the shots. They have spent millions of hours and billions of dollars to help create an Insider Washington—a Washington where everything works wonderfully for those with money and power. They have built the ultimate cozy, comfy game that is rigged for the insiders.

...How do they keep the game rigged? A big part of it is money. Money for campaigns and PACs. But money for so much more. Money to hire armies of lobbyists and lawyers. Money for PR firms and trade associations to sell your message. Money for think tanks to give the cover of respectability for genuinely ugly ideas. Money that flows like a river through Washington...

It is only after Warren establishes the need for fundamentally changing the “Washington insider” system that she then turns to discuss the range of progressive policies and programs that she supports. In her approach, reform always comes first.

It is still early enough in the 2016 election cycle for Democratic candidates to incorporate this perspective and political strategy into their campaign—and particularly into their appeal to white working class Americans. But time is short and the stakes are high. This approach and strategy could spell the difference between Democratic victory and defeat.

Ed Kilgore
Andrew Levison
Coordinators of the White Working Class Roundtable