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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.

The **Democratic Strategist** has three editorial goals—(1) to provide an explicitly and unapologetically partisan platform for the discussion of Democratic political strategy, (2) to insist upon greater use of data and greater reliance on empirical evidence in strategic thinking and (3) to act as a neutral forum and center of discussion for all sectors of the Democratic community.

As **The Democratic Strategists'** editorial philosophy states, the publication will be "proudly partisan, firmly and insistently based on facts and data and emphatically open to all sectors and currents of opinion within the Democratic community".

**THE  
DEMOCRATIC STRATEGIST  
STRATEGY WHITE PAPER**

**THE DEMOCRATS' MAJOR PROBLEM  
IS NOT THE TEA PARTY MINORITY;  
IT'S THE NON-TEA PARTY  
WHITE WORKING CLASS.**

**THE KEY STRATEGIC QUESTION IS  
WHETHER AN AGGRESSIVE POPULIST APPEAL  
IS ACTUALLY THE BEST WAY  
TO SEEK THEIR SUPPORT.**

*BY ANDREW LEVISON*

## SUMMARY:

1. The current recommendation of an aggressive “populism” as the way to regain support from white working class voters is based on two models of how workers actually think about political issues—“cubbyhole” or “bin” models on the one hand and “media framing” models on the other. Neither of these models provides an adequate guide for the formulation of Democratic political strategy.
2. A more sociologically grounded model—one that is based on the interaction of the basic social value systems working people internalize as they grow up and the individual experiences they have in their lives—leads to the conclusion that white working class voters are actually split between two groups—a quite substantial group of conservative “true believers” and smaller but politically pivotal “open minded” or “common sense” group. This split can be clearly detected in survey data derived from last years’ CAP study of political ideology as well in as recent D-Corps focus groups.
3. Unlike the “true believers”, the more “open-minded” group can be influenced on a wide range of issues and values by appeals based on “using common sense” and “seeing both sides”.
4. On the critical issue of anti-government sentiment among white working class voters, both the “cubbyhole” and “framing” models suggest this attitude essentially reflects an organized conservative ideology imposed by elite framing. A more sociologically oriented approach identifies significant sources of this view in the social life and experiences of many white working class voters. This suggests the inescapable necessity for Democrats to champion serious, progressive government reform.

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**TDS WHITE PAPER – THE DEMOCRATS’ MAJOR PROBLEM IS NOT THE TEA PARTY MINORITY; IT’S THE NON-TEA PARTY WHITE WORKING CLASS. THE KEY STRATEGIC QUESTION IS WHETHER AN AGGRESSIVE POPULIST APPEAL IS ACTUALLY THE BEST WAY TO SEEK THEIR SUPPORT.**

*By Andrew Levison*

## **INTRODUCTION**

In recent days a consensus on Democratic strategy for 2010 appears to be emerging. As Stan Greenberg says in the latest D-Corps memo:

Democrats face a strategic choice in the 2010 elections. Winning swing voters will be a hard grind and is not certain to succeed in the next six months, although it is essential to any long-term progressive project.... Groups such as blue collar whites and white seniors are lopsided in their pro-Republican preferences. More competitive margins are possible with these groups but could come too late and there are more immediate places to make up the numbers... [low-enthusiasm base voters] offer more immediate opportunities for increased participation and support.

This is undeniably true, but there is one important counterargument: whites without a college degree now support Republicans by a ratio of two to one—58 to 32 percent. Because of their very substantial size as an electoral group, the simple fact is that Obama simply will not be able to win re-election in 2012 without significantly increasing his support among these voters.

The 2010 elections will offer the only opportunity Democrats will have to test narratives, refine their policies and proposals and generally lay the foundations for a major communications campaign to reach these voters in 2012. Without any serious investment in communication efforts in this cycle, we will have no useful data or experience to work with and will basically enter the 2012 campaign flying blind. A certain basic level of effort and investment in this area therefore remains vital.

### **Why the white working class matters:**

The Massachusetts election in January focused attention on the deep—and potentially disastrous—decline in white working class support\* for Barack Obama, his agenda and the Democratic Party. Ron Brownstein, who had been warning since July that a dramatic decline in support among white, high school educated working Americans was clearly evident in the polls, summarized the implications in a National Journal column.

*\*This analysis follows Ruy Teixeira in defining “working class” by education. Wherever possible, opinion and other data are quoted using his “narrow” definition – High School or less – rather than his “broad” definition -- less than 4 years of college.*

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Of all the electoral dangers confronting Democrats in 2010, the most acute may be their full scale collapse among blue collar whites...In the New Jersey and Virginia gubernatorial races the Democratic nominee carried fewer than three in ten votes cast by whites without a college education...[in Massachusetts] Cookley narrowly won well educated whites and led among minorities. But Brown motored past her by capturing more than three fifths of blue-collar white voters.

For Democrats, these results should trigger an ominous sense of déjà vu. The 1994 landslide that swept Republicans to their House and Senate majorities was powered almost entirely by another revolt among whites who work with their hands.

The threat was strongly underlined by John Judis in the New Republic

Since the Democratic Party split in the 1960's, the white working class has been a key vote.... In Northern and Midwestern states like Ohio, Pennsylvania and Michigan it's been the swing vote. It's fair to say that if a Democrat can get about 45% of the white working class vote he can carry Ohio (Obama got about 44%) but if he gets 40% or less, he will lose the state—and the national race.

At the present time, D-Corps reports:

There is clearly a problem with white non-college and blue-collar voters, particularly the men. The more conservative blue-collar voters trend heavily in favor of the Republicans, coming in against Democrats on the economy and jobs by 35 and 14 points, respectively. The gap on the economy exceeds the margin McCain got among those voters in 2008.

The trend away from the Democrats in these marginalized groups is stunning. In combined Democracy Corps data over the past two years, white non-college voters have moved from a 3-point advantage preferring the Democrats on the economy to a 25-point deficit...

There is hope that if the economy continues to recover and jobs become more available this trend will moderate, but this is by no means certain. As political demographer Ruy Teixeira put it, "the potential for an anti-government backlash is very real. You could see Obama's support really crater out among these non-college whites in 2010"

**The Democrats basic problem is not the white workers who support the tea party movement; it's the ones who don't.**

Two recent polls indicate the level of white working class support for the tea parties. An April 18th Pew poll<sup>1</sup> which reported results for "white, high-school educated" voters and a March 24th Quinnipiac poll<sup>2</sup> that reported results for "all high-school educated" voters both found that only 27% of their samples sympathized with or supported the tea parties. In the Quinnipiac poll, moreover, only 14 % described themselves as "part" of the tea party movement. A majority either did not know what the tea party movement was or had no opinion about it.

<sup>1</sup> <http://people-press.org/report/606/trust-in-government>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.quinnipiac.edu/x1295.xml?ReleaseID=1436>

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This may seem surprising until it is remembered that very large numbers of American workers have traditionally been extremely cynical or indifferent toward politics, seeing it as something that “has nothing to do with me.”

What these two polls also reveal, however, is that—along with the 27% of the white working class who were tea party supporters—there was an additional 26% who did not consider themselves sympathetic to the movement but were nonetheless leaning Republican and conservative. A total of 53% on the Pew survey agreed with a “small government” rather than “big government” position and 53% of the working class respondents on the Quinnipiac survey indicated that they were leaning toward voting Republican.

An October, 2009 D-Corps focus group provided the best analysis of the difference between these two groups:

Republican base voters are not part of the continuum leading to the center of the electorate: they truly stand apart...they identify themselves as part of a ‘mocked’ minority with a set of shared beliefs and knowledge.... 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.

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, and they demonstrated a wholly different worldview from Republican base voters by dismissing the fear of “socialism” and evaluating Obama in very different terms... 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.

It is these “non tea-party” white working class voters who have voted democratic at various times in the past and who are the reasonable targets for a Democratic communications campaign. They do tend to consider themselves generally conservative and traditional, but they are also capable of voting for moderate Democrats and passively “going along with”, if not agreeing with, the major policies of the Obama administration.

But the key question that this group raises is the following: is an aggressive populism the right strategy and appeal to use in seeking their support?

## IS POPULISM THE ANSWER?

For most progressive Democrats it seems completely obvious that Dems have no choice except to adopt a firmly “populist” approach and strategy if they want to have any hope of regaining the support of white working class America. While some affluent “soccer moms” and white-collar “office park dads” might conceivably be attracted to a Democratic platform based on a mixture of “Republican-lite” economic conservatism and mild social liberalism, no faction within the Democratic coalition has ever seriously suggested that a political platform of this kind would have much appeal to ordinary working people.

And within the Democratic coalition as a whole there is a growing consensus on the urgent need to adopt a series of essentially “populist” approaches—taking a much stronger stance against outrageous payouts for bankers and wall street, emphatically shifting to make jobs the top legislative and political priority and displaying greater concern and empathy for the difficulties facing ordinary Americans. There is, in fact, relatively little disagreement any longer among Democrats about the need for these particular aspects of a “populist” appeal

But in the debate over Democratic political strategy many advocates of a populist strategy propose something substantially more than these measures. As they describe it, a populist strategy would energetically embrace and champion the profound sense of anger and frustration that is revealed in white working class support for right-wing populism today and try to redirect it from hostility toward liberalism and government over to anger at business, corporations, Wall Street and the wealthy. It is, in effect, a strategy to adopt the angry political style of the conservative “politics of resentment,” but change the villains in the narrative from left-wing university professors, government bureaucrats and Democratic politicians to corporations, highly-paid executives, Wall Street and the banking system.

There are two specific recommendations for Democratic strategy that flow from this general approach. First, there should be absolutely no compromise with conservative ideas and concerns. A populist strategy must be clear and categorical in rejecting any search for a middle ground. Second, in regard to style, a populist approach should be militant, combative and indeed “rabble-rousing” in order to demonstrate authentic and genuine concern for working Americans.

### **The argument for a populist approach**

To many progressives under 30 the necessity for this kind of strategy seems self-evident. The Democratic political victories in 2006 and 2008 have been widely—and convincingly—credited to the more aggressive stance Dems took after their cautious, “Republican-lite” strategy in 2000 and 2002. In addition, both Al Gore and John Kerry’s failure to win white working class support is generally attributed to their seemingly aloof and condescending manner, one which stood in marked contrast to George Bush’s clumsy but ultimately successful impersonation of an “aw-shucks” Texan. Today, an identical frustration has emerged with Obama because he is seen by many as too cerebral and detached to create an emotional connection with white working class Americans.

Beyond this recent history there are two additional reasons why it seems extremely plausible to assume that an aggressively “populist” approach ought to be effective in appealing to

white working class voters. First, there is the Depression-era tradition of the tough-talking, “rabble-rousing” union organizer—the gruff and pugnacious defender of the average working stiff exemplified by CIO president John L. Lewis in the 1930’s and Teamster leader Jimmy Hoffa in the 1950’s. In popular memory, it was men like these who won the respect and support of industrial workers and built the American trade union movement. It therefore seems plausible to think that a similar approach might still work today. Second, there is the repeated success of right-wing populists in winning substantial white working class support—a parade of right-wing populist politicians that includes George Wallace and Spiro Agnew in the 70’s, Ross Perot and Pat Buchanan in the 90’s and Sarah Palin today as well as the many radio and TV commentators like Rush Limbaugh, Bill O’ Reilly, Glen Beck, Lou Dobbs and their imitators.

Yet, simply citing these two cultural models suggests that important limitations exist on Democrats’ ability to replicate them. For one thing, no major national labor leader or other progressive spokesman for working people in the rough-hewn Lewis-Hoffa mode has appeared in the last 40 years. Equally, although many progressive politicians have tried, none have been able to replicate the success of the long line of conservative populists who have achieved national prominence. Progressives will frequently cite radio commentator Jim Hightower and the late Senator Paul Wellstone of Minnesota as illustrations that progressive populists can and do exist. But unlike the conservative populists noted above, neither of these men achieved any major following or influence outside their home state or radio market. In fact, the best known progressive who expresses a solidly and consistently populist point of view today, filmmaker Michael Moore, although nationally known, is popular among liberals and progressives rather than among white working class Americans. As such, these figures indicate the limits of progressive populism at the same time that they demonstrate its existence.

## **PART I – MENTAL MODELS OF HOW WORKING PEOPLE THINK**

In order to seriously evaluate the potential of either a populist political strategy or some alternative approach to win the support of ordinary working Americans it is necessary to begin by recognizing that any political strategy aimed at this objective must inevitably be based on some underlying model of how ordinary workers think—of how they process, store and organize political ideas and opinions.

In the current political discussion among Democrats, there are essentially two major “folk-models” of how ordinary voters process political information—the “cubbyhole” model and the “media framing” model. Each has significant implications for political strategy.

### **The “cubbyhole” model**

The “cubbyhole” or “bin” model of the mind pictures each individual opinion as stored in a separate mental compartment from which it is accessed and recalled whenever needed—a model that is actually not unreasonable as a model of the mind of a professional politician like a congressman or political commentator. Most national politicians have dozens or even hundreds of perfectly memorized statements expressing opinions on specific issues that they can recall from memory and recite even in their sleep. Political commentators and other people deeply involved in politics have similarly organized mental filing systems. In the case of

ordinary working people on the other hand, it is obvious that the model does not really reflect the way that they normally process political information.

Nonetheless, there are two practical implications for political strategy that are commonly drawn from this view.

First, the cubbyhole model tends to suggest that the individual opinions stored in the mental bins are clear, stable and meaningful. If a person says he favors a particular program or policy on an opinion survey, the implicit assumption that is suggested by the bin model is that that opinion will very strongly influence and even possibly determine the persons' vote and other political activity in regard to the issue.

This assumption has at times led progressives to overestimate how much real and reliable support—support that does not evaporate the moment it is seriously challenged—is really available for various initiatives. In the case of health care reform, for example, the initial polling on the major planks of the proposed reform showed they were all solidly popular and fostered the expectation that—even after the inevitable Republican criticism and attack—the bill as a whole would remain substantially more popular with most Americans than has turned out to be the case. The early polls were not wrong, they just could not predict where those specific opinions fit within voters overall conceptual framework or how they would be processed and combined with other considerations as time went on.

The second implication of the bin model for political strategy is that, if an average voter encounters a conflict between two of his or her opinions, he or she will resolve the conflict by simply making a direct comparison between the two opinions and choosing the one he or she judges more important. In the case of an election, a voter is visualized as ranking all of his opinions from most important to least and voting for the candidate who advocates the views he considers most important.

This second concept underlies one of the most enduring progressive notions about the white working class—that economic issues represent (or at any rate ought to represent) the “real” issues for working Americans and that, as a result, white workers should be willing to vote for progressives based on the economic policies they advocate while dismissing as secondary social or values issues on which working people and progressives tend to disagree.

This conception can be traced from the argument over Scammon and Wattenberg's 1970 *The Real Majority*—a book which presented the idea that Democrats had to moderate their positions on the new “social issues” to accommodate working class opinion—to the debates between traditional liberals and New Democrats in the early 90's. During the mid-2000's, a particularly lyrical updating of this “*economic issues are the real issues and cultural issues are a distraction*” perspective was provided by Thomas Frank in *What's the Matter with Kansas*.

In the last half-century no major progressive populist candidate within the Democratic Party has ever built a major national base of support among white working class voters by taking this traditional “*run on the real issues*” approach. But the perspective remains powerful within the progressive community because it validates the use of a consistent and uncompromised progressive political platform. The degree to which the “run on the real issues” approach is based on a rather limited conceptual model of how working Americans actually think about political issues is not, however, generally recognized as a significant limitation.



## The media framing model

The second major ‘folk-model’ of how working people think is the “media framing” model. In this conception, media organizations and other interest groups like advertising agencies or political organizations create organized narratives that provide a unified framework for visualizing and understanding an issue.

There are a wide variety of both academic and popular interpretations of how media framing works and these analyses must be evaluated on their own merits. But in the daily political discourse among Democrats in the major American newspapers, weekly opinion magazines and websites there are several basic implicit assumptions about the framing process that are widespread:

1. Frames are internalized as complete units, not as a collection of bits and pieces.
2. It is either the first frame to be invoked, the most frequently repeated frame or the most dramatic and memorable frame that finally becomes the conceptual filter and framework within which an issue is subsequently contemplated and analyzed.
3. When forced to choose between two alternative frames, people choose either one frame or another, they do not “mix and match” elements from both.

When applied to politics, this popular folk-model has two important implications:

First, with the massive growth of Fox News many working Americans are now trapped in an “echo chamber” or “media bubble” in which Fox presents a unified, conservative frame for all political events. These voters simply do not have access to any facts or opinions that might disconfirm the conservative framing presented by the Fox media and cease to even recognize that they are seeing a systematically crafted conservative world-view.

Second, during political campaigns, when voters are inevitably exposed to competing frames, conservative frames must be challenged with equal and opposite progressive frames rather than with isolated facts or opinions. Frames can only be replaced by alternative frames, not by piecemeal information.

Interestingly, both the cubbyhole and the media framing models support the main elements of a traditional populist approach – (1) that a progressive populist candidate should push his priority issues and ignore or categorically refute the issues favored by his opponent (2) that he or she should make clear distinctions and reject any compromising and (3) that he or she should project an aggressive and militant attitude and image.

It is also notable that in both these models the average person is pictured in isolation from his social and cultural environment. A voter’s thought process is basically visualized at the moment that he or she is answering polling questions on the phone or sitting in a living room watching political ads on TV.

## The social dimension

Yet no-one really doubts that the social and cultural environment in which working Americans live is central to the way they develop and organize their political attitudes. At the most basic level, working Americans political opinions are deeply shaped by the four basic value systems into which they are socialized beginning in childhood. These value systems are rooted in the major social institutions of working class life—the church, the military, small business and the school system—and 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.

Individual life experiences, however, profoundly modulate and shape the way these value systems are internalized and understood. In some cases life experiences reinforce and intensify identification with the basic value systems—serving in the armed forces, working a father’s small business, being home schooled by conservative parents or engaging in evangelical proselytizing all increase a person’s sense of belief and commitment. On the other hand, seeing one’s family crushed by medical bills, searching fruitlessly for a job, being dishonorably discharged from the military or dealing with a friend or sisters’ unplanned pregnancy leads other individuals to modify or reject various components of those value systems.

While some life experiences are entirely unique, others affect vast groups of people. In the 1930’s, unemployment and conditions in the factories and mills of industrial America led millions of working people to join trade unions, a choice which provided not only material benefits but a new value system that modified the traditional faith in “the free market” and created the hybrid political ideology of the “mixed economy” or “welfare state” in the period after World War II. In the 1950’s unionized workers saw the traditional American value systems and their new trade union inspired values of solidarity, economic security and full employment as entirely compatible.

The generation of white working class Americans that came of age after 1970, on the other hand, had a very different kind of widely shared life experience. There was widespread anger and bitterness among the largely working class veterans of the Vietnam War over the way they had been treated—by both the government and the society as a whole. There was pervasive resentment of liberal social policies like school bussing and quotas. There was profound frustration—particularly among construction workers and others who ran small businesses—with new health, safety, and environmental regulations and there was a barely contained fury at the failure of the government to control runaway inflation.

The result was the growth of a widely shared and deeply felt anti-government perspective—a general sense of alienation from government and hostility to taxes, deficits, government programs, regulations, bureaucrats and almost anything connected to government activity.

## PART II – HOW WORKING PEOPLE THINK ABOUT POLITICS

### Using Common Sense

It is the combination of an individual's unique life experiences and the historical experiences he or she shares with others of the same generation that forms a distinct mental filter or perspective through which the basic social value systems learned in childhood are understood.

As a result, when ordinary working Americans are confronted with a completely new political issue they generally consider it in terms of both their basic value systems and also their life experiences. In the case of the “morning after” birth control pill, for example, they will consider their basic religious beliefs, their personal experience with birth control and pregnancy and also a variety of other individual considerations before deciding their opinion.

Working people generally refer to this process of thought as using “*common sense*” or applying “*my personal philosophy*” to a question and it is familiar, indeed almost universal, in both the sociological and anthropological ethnographic field literature and also in popular and journalistic accounts of how working class people think about political issues.

(People with more advanced education also use a similar “common sense” process of thought in some situations, but for political opinions they rely far more heavily on various kinds of formal recognized authorities—scientific research and information, the views of specialists and experts, the opinions of elite publications and so on).

### Two kinds of working class conservatives— true believers and the “open-minded”

As a result of this way of thinking about political issues—comparing basic value systems with personal experience—there are two characteristic kinds of groups that regularly form in white working class political life.

The first is composed of people whose personal experience is completely compatible with the basic value systems they internalized while growing up. This congruity powerfully intensifies their confidence in those values and makes those value systems seem absolutely “right” and completely unchallengeable. If they further perceive that these values are under attack and being undermined they become passionate defenders. It is this group that comprises the “conservative base” and—when politically mobilized—becomes the “religious right”, the “tea party patriots” “minutemen” and “militiamen”

The second group is those whose personal experience has led them to have some doubt or to reach alternative conclusions to those that follow from the basic value systems. In most cases they do not completely reject the basic social values but rather balance them with other considerations to reach a personal conclusion.

The typical pattern of thought for someone in this circumstance is an “on the one hand, on the other hand” kind of ambivalence or “open-minded” approach. The usual way it is expressed in popular speech is in formulations like “*Now don't get me wrong. I believe a man has the right to make as much money as he can. But I don't know, there's just something wrong when a guy*

*can get a 100 million dollar bonus for screwing up” or “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.”*

Conventional opinion polls generally do not try to distinguish between “true believer” and “open-minded” forms of political thinking, but they can actually be clearly observed when a sufficient range of data are available. For example, the Center for American Progress’s *2009 State of American Political Ideology* survey<sup>3</sup> collected opinions on an unusually wide range of issues, making it possible to see patterns that are usually obscured. The survey was completed in early 2009, before the Republican attacks on Obama took hold, so it provides a useful “baseline” picture of public opinion.

Not surprisingly there was very strong support among white working class Americans for many of the core propositions of the major social value systems:

The Military	Agree	Disagree	Neutral
Military force is the most effective way to combat terrorism and make America safer.	68	19	17
Small Business			
Free market solutions are better than government at creating jobs and economic growth	57	9	34
Limited government is always better than big government	60	13	26
Religion			
Do you have a favorable opinion of Christians (Pew research/all voters)	87	19	10
Our country has [not] gone too far in mixing politics and religion and forcing religious values on people	40	42	18

(Data for white respondents with a high school degree or less. A forthcoming white paper in this series will discuss the relationship of education and social class in detail.)

At the same time, however, this same sample of white working class individuals also supported a wide range of “progressive” programs and views. 72% endorsed a “transition to renewable energy” and 64% supported “guaranteed affordable health care for every American.” 52% agreed that “Iraq proved that America cannot impose democracy on other nations”.

This combination of a broad “ideological conservatism” and more specific “operational liberalism” is a well-known and constant feature of American public opinion. Traditionally Progressives have argued that the support expressed for specific programs represents the “real” opinions of working Americans and that support for the general conservative propositions

<sup>3</sup> [http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/2009/03/political\\_ideology.html](http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/2009/03/political_ideology.html)

merely represents the recitation of rote memorized cliché's. Unfortunately, however, this assumption has not proved a reliable guide to how Americans' actually vote when forced to choose between the two.

### **Estimating the balance between “true believers and the “open-minded”**

More interesting data which emerges from the CAP survey relates to the way white working Americans balance their support for the basic value systems in American society with other considerations. For example, a key question for Democratic political strategy is how much of white working class support for the basic social value systems is intense and passionate—resembling the attitudes of the tea party protesters—and what proportion reflects a more moderate and restrained, “open-minded” commitment to those values.

An extremely insightful Democracy Corp series of focus groups,<sup>4</sup> quoted in the introduction, captured the profound gap that has now emerged between these two groups:

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.

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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 CAP survey asked its respondents to indicate on a scale of 1-10 the intensity of their agreement with the basic values noted above, making it possible to get a sense of the balance between the more extreme or passionate and more moderate currents of opinion within white working class America.

The Military	Strongly Agree	Mildly Agree	Neutral	Mildly Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Military force is the most effective way to combat terrorism and make America safer.	50	18	17	5	10
Small Business					
Free market solutions are better than government at creating jobs and economic growth	40	15	33	5	4
Limited government is always better than big government	46	13	26	6	7
Religion					
Our country has [not] gone too far in mixing politics and religion and forcing religious values on people	34	7	18	10	30

What this shows is that the strong majority support ( averaging around 55-60%) for the propositions reflecting the basic value systems is actually divided into two parts—a substantial but less than 50% majority group who support those propositions emphatically and passionately and a smaller group of about 15% who show some degree of reserve or ambivalence.

This has clear implications for Democratic strategy. The first, passionate group is almost certainly closed to Democratic candidates and messages while the more ambivalent group is likely to be more open to persuasion. Democrats need to clearly distinguish between the two sectors of white working class America and target their messages and efforts accordingly.

## A closer look at the “open-minded”

The CAP survey also rather dramatically reveals the ambivalent “on the one hand, on the other hand” kind of thinking that characterizes the second, more moderate group. The chart below shows the number of respondents who asserted their agreement with both progressive and conservative views that—on the surface—were logically incompatible.

Ideologically incompatible statements	Percent agreeing with both statements
Military	
Military force is the most effective way to combat terrorism and make America safer <b>And</b> America’s security is best promoted by working through diplomacy, alliances and international institutions.	41%
Small Business	
Government regulation of business does more harm than good <b>And</b> Government regulations are necessary to keep business in check and protect workers and consumers	31%
Government spending is almost always wasteful and inefficient <b>And</b> Government investments in education, infrastructure and science are necessary to insure America’s long-term economic growth	52%
Religion	
Homosexuality is unnatural and should not be accepted by society <b>And</b> Religious faith should focus more on promoting tolerance, social justice and peace in society and less on opposing abortion or gay rights	20%
Human life begins at conception and must be protected from that moment onward. <b>And</b> Religious faith should focus more on promoting tolerance, social justice and peace in society and less on opposing abortion or gay rights	38%

What this shows is that a very significant percentage of the white working class people in this survey hold a mixture of both progressive and conservative views. Focusing on just the economic issues above, the quite remarkable fact is that between one-third and one-half of American workers do not hold consistently conservative ideological views but rather entertain a mixture of both progressive and conservative ideas that they balance with an “one the one hand, on the other hand” approach based on “common sense” or “personal philosophy”

On the pressing issue of health care reform, this same pattern is evident. A July Pew survey found that 66% of high school educated, white respondents agreed that “Government needs to do more to make health care affordable and accessible”. Yet, on the very same survey, 60% also asserted that “I am concerned that the government is becoming too involved in health care”.

(Note: Using an entirely different, linguistic-based approach, George Lakoff recently estimated<sup>5</sup> that about 18% of the respondents on a series of California polls he studied were in broad terms “bi-conceptuals” who had both liberal and conservative mental schemas stored in their memories and between which they shifted depending on the situation.)

### **How the different mental models explain “open-minded” thinking**

To consider what this implies for Democratic political strategy, it is necessary to begin by considering the how the different “folk” mental models interpret this ambivalent kind of thinking.

In the cubbyhole or bin model, individuals who take political issues at all seriously should resolve directly contradictory views like these in favor of one view or the other. If they do not do so, it is generally taken to mean that the person simply does not think seriously or systematically about political issues—in political science jargon, they hold “non-attitudes”; in common language, they are described as too “scatterbrained” or “spaced out” to have a serious opinion.

In the media framing view, incompatible propositions like those above represent elements of basically incompatible conservative and progressive frames about health care reform, one or the other of which will dominate depending on which is first or most effectively invoked.

In the sociological view, seemingly incompatible propositions like these usually represent conflicts between attitudes drawn from basic value systems on the one hand and personal experience on the other, the decision regarding which one to favor in a particular case being decided by a person’s “common sense” or “personal philosophy”

These views lead to different conclusions for Democratic political and communications strategy to respond to the current wave of anti-government sentiment in white working class America.

- The cubbyhole model tends to suggest the strategy of defining concrete economic issues such as “making health care affordable” as the “real” issues and dismissing anti-government sentiment as a “distraction”.
- The Media Framing model tends to suggest the strategy of boldly asserting a coherent progressive frame that categorically and uncompromisingly challenges the conservative anti-government frame.
- The Sociological model tends to suggest the strategy of appealing to the “fair-minded” sector of working Americans with an approach based on using “common sense” to strike a reasonable balance between basic social values and real-world problems that demand active government solution.

In order to decide which of these strategies to employ, it is necessary to more closely consider the sociological sources of the current reaction against government.

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<sup>5</sup> [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/george-lakoff/the-poll-democrats-need-t\\_b\\_537993.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/george-lakoff/the-poll-democrats-need-t_b_537993.html)



## **PART III – THE SOCIOLOGICAL CAUSES OF ANTI-GOVERNMENT SENTIMENT**

In much of the recent Democratic discussion of the Tea Parties and the Massachusetts vote the dominant tendency has been to view the rapid growth of anti-government sentiment as the product of a well-established conservative media frame energetically updated and promulgated by Glen Beck, Fox News, the grass-roots conservative movement and the Republican Party.

This is undeniably true, but a more robust understanding of the problem must also take account of the underlying sociological trends that began to generate white working class hostility to government in the early 1970's – Vietnam, inflation, school bussing, quotas and regulations—and also the decline of the Democratic political machine in the northern industrial cities.

### **The fall of the Democratic machine and the rise of TV politics**

In fact, what had happened was the collapse of two unique community institutions that had emerged in a new form after the New Deal—the big city political machines and the trade unions. In the 1950's, every major northern city had a network of local union halls and local Democratic Party offices, which many blue-collar workers and other non-affluent democrats saw as an important and integral part of their community.

These institutions offered average citizens a real and distinct sense of inclusion and representation. Big city democratic voters knew that local union representatives and neighborhood party workers—men who they knew personally—sat around the table with the local politicians who then played an important role in the selection of candidates for city and state offices and participated in the definition of the positions that were taken on issues. The complex local apparatus of political patronage and the provision of municipal jobs and minor services to constituents by the Democratic Party political machine was, to ordinary Democrats, evidence of their recognized role and position, however small, in the party as a whole.

But, beginning in the mid-1960's, this system gradually disintegrated. The giant manufacturing plants of the northern and Midwestern cities gradually began to shrink, and the continual growth of the suburbs meant more and more Americans worked in jobs and moved to neighborhoods where there were no unions or union halls and no block captains or political clubhouses.

What replaced those institutions was TV. Political candidates and political campaigns became distant images on a screen with which an average voter never had any meaningful personal contact.

The system was inherently ripe for corruption. Increasingly large sums of money were needed to run for office and Democratic politicians no longer had an organization that linked them directly with individual voters and neighborhoods and which could build support for them without massive TV advertising. Running for office became a multi-million dollar business venture and a politicians' "job" became increasingly defined as successfully delivering benefits to his major financial contributors. The outgrowth was a burgeoning cynicism about Congress and government among ordinary Americans.

## A new form of class consciousness

Thus, by 1995, when political scientists John Hibbing and Elizabeth Theis-Morse began an in-depth series of focus groups to study the details of public attitudes toward the political system, research published under the title, “Congress as Public Enemy”<sup>5</sup>, they were not surprised to find that anger at the political system was focused on politicians as a group and what they called the “Washington system” of campaign finance and special interest groups. What they did not expect, however, was the powerful and very clearly articulated expression of what they said had to be described as a form of “class consciousness” among the people they studied.

Hibbing and Theis-Morse noted two distinct ways this attitude was expressed by their subjects.

First, the huge sums of money needed for major campaigns had increasingly made politics a “rich man’s sport” basically insuring that only the wealthy could participate. As one respondent in their focus group noted “the wealthy put their own in office. And as long as it’s like that we are not going to get represented... They might go back to their community, but it’s the rich community they go visit”. Another added: “forget about the poor person. The poor person doesn’t stand a chance. . the congress is, they’re all those people who were born with a silver spoon in their mouths, where they’ve got it made.”

Second, the need for large sums of money provided an obvious and almost irresistible pressure toward influence peddling and corruption. As one focus group member stated: “Why would [a member of congress] want to come and talk to us this morning. Could we get a pot of money together? So why would he want to waste his time. But you let a bunch of executives or corporations sit around, he knows there is going to be millions of dollars thrown in his pot.” Another added: “I think there is too much influence in the congress on the congressmen by, not the people, but by the special interest groups and the PAC’s that put them in office”. Another concluded simply: “Big money has bought them (congress) out.”

After presenting their findings, Hibbing and Theis-Morse concluded that “The American people have come to believe that the political system is run by a powerful professional political class (cut off from ordinary people) and that votes no longer make much difference because money rules...People believe the Washington system runs on greed and special privilege”

In fact, the connection between this new anti-government sentiment and the previous pro-union, New Deal era “class consciousness” was underlined by the fact that for most ordinary working class Americans, the popular Roosevelt era caricature of the immoral top-hated millionaire, swilling champagne while orphans starved had been completely replaced by the vision of the venal and corrupt politician, making back room deals with cynical lobbyists who allow faceless corporations to poison the drinking water of ordinary Americans in return for fat campaign contributions.

Overt white working class hostility to government declined during the Bush years because Republicans were in control and Fox and the other conservative media without exception enthusiastically supported the administration. It was quite clear, however, that if the Democrats regained the presidency and control of congress anti-government sentiment would emerge

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<sup>6</sup> <http://www.amazon.com/Congress-Public-Enemy-Institutions-Psychology/dp/0521483360>

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with redoubled force. In a 2007 article in *The American Prospect*<sup>6</sup> Stan Greenberg clearly described the problem on the horizon:

There is a new reality that Democrats must deal with if they are to be successful going forward. In their breathtaking incompetence and comprehensive failure in government, Republicans have undermined Americans' confidence in the ability of government to play a role in solving America's problems. Democrats will not make sustainable gains unless they are able to restore the public's confidence in its capacity to act through government.

...“the scale of damage done to people's belief in government is enormous...62% in a Pew study said they believe that whenever something is run by the government it is probably inefficient and wasteful. By 57% to 29% Americans believe that government makes it harder for people to get ahead in life rather than helping people. 85% say that if the government had more money it would waste it rather than spend it well.

Although people may favor government action on critical issues like health care, education and energy their lack of trust in governments capacity to spend money properly means that *their first priority is to cut wasteful spending and make government more accountable*. People are desperate to see accountability from Washington, not just in the spending of tax dollars with no discernible results but also in politicians' behavior...

To have any chance of getting heard on their agenda, Democrats need to stand up and take on the government—not its size or scope, but its failure to be accountable—and deliver the results that people expect for the taxes they pay.

The most recent strategy memo by Greenberg's Democracy Corp<sup>7</sup> describes the problem in even more dramatic terms:

Voters are disgusted with 'business as usual' in Washington. There is a deep and pervasive belief, particularly among independents, that special interests are running things and Members of Congress listen more to those that fund their campaigns than the voters that they are supposed to be representing. Three quarters believe that special interests hold too much influence over Washington today while fewer than a quarter believe that ordinary citizens can still influence what happens in politics. Similarly, nearly 80 percent say that Members of Congress are trolled by the groups that help fund their political campaigns while fewer than a fifth believe that Members listen more to the voters.

It is possible to suggest that—despite the scope and vehemence of these attitudes—Democrats should categorically reject this perspective and oppose it with a comprehensive and uncompromising defense of ambitious liberal programs and initiatives. But a more promising alternative is for Democrats to recognize that many of these grievances are legitimate and valid to seek to genuinely address them. In his 2007 article, Stan Greenberg suggested a number of specific ways that Democrats could follow this strategy:

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<sup>7</sup> [http://www.prospect.org/cs/articles?article=democrats\\_are\\_back\\_but](http://www.prospect.org/cs/articles?article=democrats_are_back_but)

<sup>8</sup> [http://www.democracycorps.com/wp-content/files/Political-Framing-Memo-012610.FINAL\\_.pdf](http://www.democracycorps.com/wp-content/files/Political-Framing-Memo-012610.FINAL_.pdf)

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Here are several things that Democrats need to do if they want to restore faith in government and turn to their advantage the dangerous situation they find themselves in now:

- Resist the temptation to remain the protector and defender of the federal government. Instead, seize the mantle of change and accountability. Demand that government performs and produces results that improve people's everyday lives.
- Establish accountability as a core element in everything you propose by always including a specific set of performance measures. Voters will not, for a second, listen to what Democrats want to do on health care, education, or energy if you do not demonstrate that these proposals have tough accountability measures to ensure results.
- Advance a strong fiscal-accountability agenda to cut waste and make government more efficient and results-oriented. That includes auditing every federal department and agency to make sure funding is going to meaningful projects and to people, not the bureaucracy;
- Go much further on anti-corruption, ethics, and lobbying reform. Institute new whistleblower legislation to protect government employees from retribution if they report waste or corruption. Create a permanent independent commission outside of Congress to investigate and enforce ethics rules for members of Congress and their staffs, rather than continuing to allow Congress to police itself.

A wide variety of recent opinion polls reveal absolutely unprecedented levels of support for substantial reforms of the political system and profound resistance to further progressive initiatives that ignore the corrupt character of congress and the current system for passing legislation. Under these circumstances, there is virtually no viable political strategy for enacting major progressive reforms that does not place major reforms of the political system as an indispensable first order goal.

## CONCLUSION

There are seven major conclusions that flow from this analysis:

1. The recommendation of a traditional, aggressive “populism” as the only possible approach to regain support from white working class voters is based on two popular “folk models” of how workers actually think about political issues—“cubbyhole” or “bin” models on the one hand and “media framing” models on the other. These folk models tend to suggest a relatively narrow and inflexible approach to political strategy.
2. A more sociologically grounded model—one that is based on the interaction of the basic social value systems workers internalize as they grow up and the individual experiences they have in their lives—leads to the conclusion that white working class voters are in fact significantly split between two groups—a quite substantial group of rigid “true believers” and a smaller but politically pivotal “open minded” or “common sense” group. This split can be clearly detected in survey data derived from last years’ CAP study of political ideology as well in as recent D-Corps focus groups.
3. Unlike the “true believers”, the more “open-minded” group can be influenced on a wide range of issues and values by appeals based on “common sense” and “seeing both sides”. They can be convinced by Democratic proposals and candidates if Democratic proposals are presented in a framework that argues *“there are reasonable arguments on both sides of this issue, but this particular idea is a good “common sense” compromise.”*
4. In cases where political issues involve questions of basic social values, these individuals’ explicitly compare and balance the injunctions of their core value systems with their practical life experience. Democrats can successfully appeal to this group if their ideas and candidates are presented as sincerely rooted in and respectful of basic American values but as also facing up to real-world needs and challenges that ideologically rigid Republicans simply refuse to face.
5. These individuals can be reached with a “populist” style that is distinct from the traditional “angry populist”—a “reasonable, down to earth” style that stresses “common sense” rather than just a visceral and bitter “us vs. them” antagonism.
6. On the critical issue of anti-government sentiment among white working class voters, both the “cubbyhole” and “media framing” models suggest this attitude essentially reflects an organized conservative ideology imposed by elite framing. A more sociologically oriented approach identifies significant sources of this view in the social life and experiences of many working class voters. This suggests the absolute necessity for Democrats to champion serious, progressive government reform along the lines Stan Greenberg, among others, has proposed in various articles and analyses.
7. *Postscript:* Political science is limited by its methodology from directly studying the “on the one hand, on the other hand” form of cognitive processing that is characteristic of ambivalence. The necessary research tools are found in disciplines that conduct ethnographic field studies.

It must be emphasized as forcefully as possible that these conclusions do not imply a rejection of a traditional populist approach but rather an extension of it. There is no question that indignation and genuine outrage at Wall Street and the banking system are an entirely legitimate part of any genuine populist appeal and are sentiments shared by millions of white working class Americans—including even many who hold generally pro-business views. There are a wide variety of issues and problems where the opinion data clearly show that Democrats can and should proudly embrace traditional populist rhetoric and attitudes.

But, at the same time, there is also a legitimate role for a “populist” appeal that employs a “down-to-earth”, “honest”, “common sense” form of outreach to working Americans—one that respects the importance of basic American social values in white working class political thinking and that recognizes that government corruption and serious government reform is a central issue for working Americans, one that Democrats must sincerely and authentically champion if they wish to win the support of working class Americans for any other progressive goals.

These two kinds of “populist” approach are not incompatible. On the contrary, they are complementary and can be combined to produce a more robust and inclusive populist appeal to working class Americans than can be achieved by either one alone.

## **A NOTE ON POLITICAL SCIENCE RESEARCH REGARDING AMBIVALENCE**

There is a very substantial literature within political science that studies political ambivalence. One particularly comprehensive recent example of this research is R. Michael Alvarez and John Brehm’s 2002 *Hard Choices, Easy Answers: Values, Information and American Public Opinion*.

When one attempts to apply this body of research to the challenge of increasing the level of white working class support for Democrats and the Democratic Party, however a substantial methodological limitation becomes apparent. The limitation arises because public opinion research within political science is entirely based on the mathematical analysis of polling data and does not also employ the kinds of structured interview techniques that are utilized in cognitive anthropology and other disciplines that conduct ethnographic field studies. As a consequence political science research generally does not try to directly study and understand the “*on the one hand, on the other hand*” method of cognitive processing that is characteristically employed when people deal with ambivalence.

A clear illustration of where this methodological limitation comes into play can be seen in a recent study by political scientist William Jacoby. As part of a 2005 analysis, “Public Opinion toward Government Spending”, (published in the collection *Ambivalence and the Structure of Political Opinion* by Steven Craig and Machael D. Martinez) Jacoby constructed a summary measure of attitudes toward the size and power of government. He did this by combining individual answers to the following three separate survey items on the 1992 American Nation Election Study (ANES):

Choose which of the two statements comes closer to your own opinion

- One, the less government the better; or two, there are more things that government should be doing.
- One, we need a strong government to handle today's complex economic problems; or two, the free market can handle these problems without the government being involved.
- One, the main reason government has become bigger over the years is because it has gotten involved in things that people should do for themselves; or two, government has become bigger because the problems we face have become bigger.

On the one hand, it is immediately evident that, in a normal conversation, a person who is ambivalent about these choices would naturally tend to employ an “*on the one hand, on the other hand*” style of reasoning in order to resolve his ambivalence. In order to make the data mathematically tractable for statistical analysis, however, Jacoby reduces the responses to these conflicting views into one summary index number for use in his subsequent analysis. This is a standard approach in political science research of this kind.

Jacoby is entirely clear and straightforward in acknowledging the trade-off that necessarily results from this approach. As he says:

“...[In the current study] the presence or absence of ambivalence has not been observed directly but rather inferred from patterns that appear in the empirical data. [As a result] is impossible to know for sure what mental processes actually generated the contradictory responses noted in the 1992 ANES.

The mental processes that are involved in the “*on the one hand, on the other hand*” reasoning of ordinary voters can however actually be directly studied by using the kinds of structured interview techniques that are employed in other social science disciplines. For example, a 30-45 minute interview protocol to examine this question can be structured as follows:

- The first segment can probe the overall “*personal philosophy*” or “*way of thinking*” of the interview subject on four major subjects – patriotism and the military, business and government, religion and moral values and the American system of government. These four topic areas correspond to the major value systems inculcated by the basic social institutions in working class life (the military, business, the church and the school system). A series of questions on these topics can directly extract and map an individual's strongest and most immediately accessible mental constructs in each of these four major areas.
- The second segment can ask the subject to explain how he or she applies his or her “*personal philosophy*” to a specific social or political issue such as health care reform. The responses to questions of this kind can reveal any additional concepts that the person needs to invoke and bring into play in order to cognitively process this specific topic and also indicate which core values, schemas and ideas play the largest role in the person's reasoning about the subject.
- The final segment can ask the subject to directly describe how they balance and decide between specific values and ideas that they find to be in conflict in the particular area in question (e.g. a concern about big government on the one hand and support for

affordable health care on the other). This can provide direct empirical information on how these individuals cognitively process and resolve such conflicting considerations.

It is likely that a relatively modest number of interviews of this kind (perhaps as few as 20 or 25) could be sufficient to begin revealing trends and patterns that could usefully inform Democratic communication and persuasion strategy.

The major difficulty in conducting structured interviews of this kind is the need for skilled interviewers. This is not insurmountable, however. The actual interview techniques are not substantially different from the structured discussion points that are commonly employed by focus group leaders in managing focus groups and there is an active research community within cognitive anthropology that works on developing methodologies for this kind of structured interview research (see, for example, cognitive Anthropologist Naomi Quinn's *Finding Culture in Talk: A collection of methods*).

For further discussion of this issue, see the following TDS Strategy Memos by Andrew Levison

1. How Democrats can keep and expand the support of younger white working class voters who voted for Obama in 2008<sup>9</sup>
2. The new Center for American Progress report "The State of American Political Ideology 2009 reveals the existence of a substantial group of "ambivalent" or "inconsistent" voters – Here's what Democrats need to know in order to understand them<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> [http://www.thedemocraticstrategist.org/\\_memos/levison\\_whtpaper.pdf](http://www.thedemocraticstrategist.org/_memos/levison_whtpaper.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> [http://www.thedemocraticstrategist.org/\\_memos/tds\\_levison\\_CAP\\_entire.pdf](http://www.thedemocraticstrategist.org/_memos/tds_levison_CAP_entire.pdf)